

# Reading the Bible Again for the First Time

## Session 9 – Reading Revelation Again

Text

Notes

### THE FUTURIST INTERPRETATION

The central claim of a futurist reading is simple: Revelation tells us about what will happen some time in the future. It has three premises:

- ? What Revelation describes has not yet happened.
- ? As the inspired Word of God, the Bible cannot be wrong.
- ? Therefore, what Revelation describes must still be future.

(p. 273)

**What limitations are inherent in a “futuristic interpretation” of Scripture?**

### THE PAST-HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

The past-historical reading, which grows out of the belief that we understand the message of Revelation only by setting the text in the *historical context* in which it was written, emphasizes what Revelation would have meant in *the past*. In this reading, Revelation tells us what the author believed would happen in his time. This approach takes seriously that the visions of Revelation are found in a letter addressed to specific Christian communities in Asia Minor late in the first century. As such, the text was meant to be a message to *them*, not a message to people thousands of years later. (p. 276)

**“In this reading, Revelation tells us what the author believed would happen in his time.” How do we hear the voice of God in our historical context?**

For all of these reasons, the past-historical reading of Revelation affirms that John was writing about realities of his time. Of course, John was also writing about the future, but it was a future that he expected to happen soon, not a future that is still future from our point in time. His message to the communities to which he was writing was a mixture of warning (especially in the letters in chapters two and three) and encouragement. About his message, I will soon say more. For now, I summarize it very compactly as threefold:

- ? Despite appearances to the contrary, Christ is Lord; Caesar and the beast are not.
- ? God will soon act to overthrow the rule of the beast and its incarnation in Caesar.
- ? Therefore, persevere, endure, be confident, take heart, have faith.

(p. 278)

**Caird's influence on Borg is evident. The Christian Way is a part of endurance in the midst of struggle. Discuss.**

The past-historical reading of Revelation also raises the question of what to think about the second coming of Jesus. Not just John of Patmos, but other early Christians as well, believed that it would be soon. The authors of Mark and Matthew, for example, refer to the imminent coming of "the Son of Man," presumably referring to the second coming of Jesus. The gospel of John also refers to the imminent second coming, though it is not clear that the author accepts the notion literally. Passages in Paul point to the same expectation.

Obviously, these early Christians were wrong. What are we to do with this? Do we say that they got the expectation right and that Jesus really will come again, but their timing was off? For a variety of reasons, I do not think that it makes sense to expect a visible future second coming of Christ. The belief can be understood metaphorically, however, as an affirmation that Jesus comes again and again in the lives of Christians: in the Eucharist, in the celebration of Christmas each year, in the experience of the Spirit as the presence of Christ, and perhaps in other ways as well. (p. 279)

**"From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead," we affirm in the Creed.**

**What is the truth of this historic statement of faith?**

**The early Christians were wrong in their expectation. What do we do with this? What is our authentic voice of faith?**

### ENDURING CONTRAST

Ever since the emperor Augustus had brought the devastating civil wars that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar to an end, ushering in the Pax Romana (the peace of Rome) and a "golden age," the emperors of Rome had been given divine titles. They were known as *filius deus* (son of god), *dominus* (lord), and even *deus* (god). Augustus was heralded as the savior who had brought peace on earth. As an inscription from 9 BCE in Asia Minor puts it:

*The most divine Caesar ... we should consider equal to the Beginning of all things ... Whereas the Providence which has regulated our whole existence ... has brought our life to the climax of perfection in giving to us the emperor Augustus ... who being sent to us as a Savior, has put an end to war... The birthday of the god Augustus has been for the whole world the beginning of good news (the Greek word is euaggelion, commonly translated "gospel").*

Throughout the empire, in temples of the imperial cult, worship was offered to the emperors. Such worship did not preclude the inhabitants from following their own religion as well. But it did have the effect of providing religious legitimation to the rule of Caesar and empire.

Against this, John proclaims the exclusive lordship of God and “the Lamb” – that is, God as known in Jesus. John’s first description of Jesus speaks of him as “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and *the ruler of the kings of the earth.*” As “the faithful witness,” he is the Lamb that was slain, executed by the power of Rome. As “the firstborn of the dead,” he has been vindicated and exalted by God, disclosing Rome as a false pretender lord. Now he rules upon the throne with God and has become “*the ruler of the kings of the earth.*”

**What is the contrast between Caesar and Jesus?**

**The Revelation of John preceded Constantine.**

**What endures of the contrast between Caesar and Jesus today?**

### CAESAR AND JESUS

Throughout the book, the honor and praise demanded by Caesar is offered to God and Jesus instead. Much of Revelation is doxology, and its hymns of praise have been a fountainhead for Christian hymn-writers ever since:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty.

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom  
and might and honor and glory and blessing.

Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honor  
and power and might  
be to our God forever and ever.

The kingdom *of* the world has  
become the kingdom *of* our Lord  
and of his Christ,  
and he will reign forever and ever.

Hallelujah!  
For the Lord our God  
the Almighty reigns.

Jesus is Lord; Caesar is not. John shares this affirmation in common with the whole of the New Testament. (p. 280f.)

**What is the *gospel* of the Revelation of John?**

### NEW JERUSALEM

Rome and the beast have an ancient lineage. “Babylon the Great” is not simply a symbolic name for Rome, but for domination systems organized around power, wealth, seduction, intimidation, and violence. In whatever ancient or modern forms they take, domination systems are the

opposite of the lordship and kingdom of God as disclosed in Jesus. Thus John's indictment of empire sounds the same theme as the central voices of the biblical tradition. As with Moses, the prophets, Jesus, the gospel writers, and Paul, his claim is stark and compelling: God is Lord; the kingdoms and cultures of this world are not.

John's vision of the New Jerusalem has both historical and trans-historical elements. Indeed, its power as a trans-historical vision may be the primary reason that Revelation ultimately made it into the Bible. It speaks of the reunion of God with humankind, thereby overcoming the exile that began in Eden. There every tear shall be wiped away. The river of life flows through it and the tree of life is in it. There we will see God. It is difficult to imagine a more powerful ending to the Bible. (p. 292)

**“John's indictment of empire sounds the same theme as the central voices of the biblical tradition.”**

**What echoes of this indictment have we heard in our study?**

**How is this indictment heard today?**

**What is the enduring relevance of Revelation?**