

Reading Prophetic Literature in the Bible

Material in the Holy Scriptures that seeks to give insight into future, yet-to-unfold events, has to be read with a bite of caution because of the nature of that type of literature. Unlike the New Testament epistles, prophetic literature has a poetic tone; it is also Hebraic in nuance meaning its design is to paint a picture, provide an impression. Before we approach the Book of Revelation, it seems, perhaps, helpful to reflect on the nature of prophetic material in the Bible. There are three categories of this prophetic literature in the Scriptures.

1. There is **predictive material that has been fulfilled within the Hebrew Scriptures** such as the deportation of unfaithful Israel among the nations, the return of the nation under the Persians, the opening of the hearts of Gentiles to the blessings of God, or the advent of a redeemer for the nations.
 - a. When prophetic material is given and fulfilled in the Old Testament, it is often in metaphor and figure of speech; it is in the literary mode of poetry. For example, the prophet Isaiah predicts the future deliverance of Israel.

“You will drink the milk of nations
and be nurtured at royal breasts” (Isa. 60:16).

- b. When prophetic literature is fulfilled in the Old Testament, it is frequently not what the original reader would have thought; it is not strictly fulfilled literally. The intent of the prophet is to create an impression, a mental picture; it is meant to be graphic, emotional, and persuasive!

“I am about to punish the house of Eli for the iniquity he knew because his sons were blaspheming God.... The house of Eli will not be expiated...forever” (I Sam. 3:11-14).

When Samuel received the message, you would have no clue what this meant other than a pronouncement of judgment on

- Eli's house. Eli died on news of his two son's death and pregnant daughter-in-law died birthing a son. Three descendants survived to be priests under Saul until he killed two of them. One escaped, Abiathar, and served many years under David and Solomon until he deposed him for joining in the plot of Adonijah. Then, the line of Eli ceased. The prophecy is true, but the details could never have been guessed!
2. When an Old Testament prophetic utterance is fulfilled in the New Testament, it would have been unclear to the prophets that delivered them. Prophecy is clear when it has been fulfilled, not so when originally given or read by contemporary readers in such cases. The prophets did not understand the congruity of the reigning-yet-suffering aspects of the promised messiah/king. After the promises were fulfilled, things become suddenly clearer. *Prophetic meaning is clear when fulfilled, but not until that time.*

“Throw to the potter that magnificent price
at which I was valued by them” (Zech. 11:12).

Zechariah 11 is a passage that foretells the rejection of the Messiah. The text says that Messiah would be sold for the price of a slave and the money given to a potter. Without its fulfillment in Matt. 27:9-10, the reader in Zechariah's day would have not understood the meaning of the text. Since it has been fulfilled in Judas' betrayal fee, having purchased a field for the burial of the poor, we understand what the original readers could not. *Prophecy is clear only after it is fulfilled!*

“Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet
before the great and terrible day of the Lord” (Mal. 4:5).

A normal use of language would lead the readers in Malachi's day to think that Elijah would come before the Messiah. However, Jesus (Matt 11:14) makes it clear that Elijah is John the Baptist. Jesus (Mark 9:13) also says that Elijah has come. Clearly, the fulfillment of Malachi 4:5 is found in John, not Elijah.

Summary: Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in the Old Testament are frequently surprising in that the original reader would not have been able to envision the actual fulfillment. *Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in the New Testament operate in the same fashion.* It would be surprising to the original reader.

- c. How does all of this work in New Testament unfulfilled prophetic literature? My answer is that it functions the same way. What God says is certainly true, never to be doubted. We should expect that such texts become clearest in fulfillment. It is picturesque in function. It is judgmental, using images to create a sense of seriousness, danger, and horror; it is meant to shock! Here is an example.

“...and behold a red dragon...the dragon stood before the women who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child... the women fled to the wilderness...” (Rev. 12:1-6).

It states that a pregnant woman about to give birth is accosted by a great red dragon, seeking to destroy the child she bares (this sounds like something from Star Wars or Jurassic Park). The woman refuses to give up her son and, at the last moment, he is rescued, being caught up to heaven. The woman flees for her life and is protected by God (12:1-6) for 1, 260 days.

General Thoughts on the *Revelation* as a Whole: Its Purpose and Function

In one sense, the *Revelation* is the conclusion to the grand story of God's quest for divine recognition; it is the end of the story of a vast redemptive drama that has taken place through the centuries, culminating in a new city, a new paradise, all things being made new.

To the readers of the first century, and to us in the twenty-first, the *Revelation* tells us another story, not only how history will be consummated, but how we are to live in whatever century we find

ourselves. The message of *Revelation* consists of hope, warnings, and grounds for consolation. It is about hope through the knowledge that Christ will reign victoriously, gathering all His people and casting away all the rebellious. The message of the book concerns the propriety of not pursuing the beckoning of the earthly values and appetites even though there are temporary advantages. The wisdom of the world, apart from natural revelation (that may be possessed in greater quantities than among Christians at times) is empty and ultimately disappointing.

General Introductory Comments on the *Revelation*

A. Authorship

While the author of the book identifies himself as John (1:4), he does not specifically indicate that he is the son of Zebedee, the brother of James, the apostle of Christ. The basis for some who doubt are two-fold: the difficulties in interpreting the book and literary differences between the gospel and the epistles by John the apostle with *Revelation* (these are likely accounted for by the fact that John wrote in haste as well as the literary differences between historical narrative and letters in contrast to apocalyptic literature).

1. Many words and phrases bind it with John's Gospel ("little lamb", "truth", "conquer", "tabernacle"). Also, "keep out" only occurs in Rev. 3:10 and the gospel. Zech. 12:10 is quoted in John 19:37 and Rev. 1:7 in the same form from the LXX.
2. The correspondence of ideas between the gospel and the Revelation suggest a common author.
3. The knowledge of the seven churches and their needs fits the tradition that John resided in Ephesus in his later years. Tradition indicates that he spent his days in the city; this accounts for his knowledge of the seven churches.

B. The Place and Date of Writing

While the date of the writing has essentially divided the scholars, the place of writing is specifically stated by John (1:9) to be on the Aegean Isle of Patmos, a Roman penal colony where he was sent for his witness to Christ (he had committed a capital offense).

As to the date, some argue that it was written in the 60s and fulfilled in the conquest of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. (suggesting that *Revelation* is fulfilled, predictive prophecy and not to be fulfilled, the past not the future). It seems that the evidence, however, better conforms to having been composed in the 90s, during the rule of Domitian (81-96), and is yet to be fulfilled.

1. Patristic evidence is strong.
2. The date agrees with the situation in the churches in Asia. Forced participation in the Roman cult of emperor worship seems to have begun during the reign of Emperor Domitian (2:19, 13-14; 3:15). The Jews were exempt from such participation which seems to have caused many Christians to revert to their Jewish heritage for protection.

Among the Roman emperors, Caligula (37-41) encouraged his worship, but did not enforce it. Claudius (41-54) reversed the policy. It was during the reign of Domitian (81-96) that he was accorded reverence as a god, particularly in the provinces, as his reign brought considerable peace and prosperity. The rise of popular demand for emperor worship would have placed Christians in an awkward position (the power and lure of cultural affirmation).

3. Laodicea is seen as prosperous in chapter 3, but was desolate in Nero's time, having been destroyed by earthquakes in 61-62. The Church at Ephesus was founded about 52, which does not seem to allow enough time for their spiritual default in Nero's time (54-68).

C. Occasion and Purpose

The occasion that prompted the book was a direct command of the Lord, apparently from Christ Himself through an angel to John (1:10-13). The purposes for which the book was written are several:

1. To show the final outcome of world powers.
2. To confront Domitian who crowned himself "Lord of Lords". Thus, the book is a polemic to show that Christ is Lord, not the emperor.
3. To add details and complete the Old Testament prophetic picture.

4. To reveal Christ in His glory in the consummation of God's program.
5. To comfort those in affliction to persevere in the faith in the midst of increasing opposition.

D. Destination

The book was originally intended for the seven churches of Asia (1:4, 10, 11; 2:1,8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14).

E. Outline

It is quite common among recent commentators to outline the book following Rev. 1:19.

- I. The things which you have seen, 1:1-20
- II. The things which are, 2:1-3:14
- III. The things which shall be, 4:1-22:21

This type of outlining the book accepts a linear approach to the development of its contents that you would expect in epistolary literature, but not so in apocalyptic/prophetic/ visionary literature. Further, chapters 4-19 are not linear, but are cyclical, rehearsing themes and returning to themes already broached and concludes with a declaration of the above leads me to qualify the third major division with a repeated now as "not yet" shadows of final judgment in the advent of Christ. I have adopted this outline structure, however, realizing that the points made of an ultimate fulfillment, that which the "not yet" points is the reader's ultimate hope and the ground of John's exhortation to perseverance.

A structural outline based on the content of the book would, perhaps, look like this (though with slight modification).

Prologue, 1:1-20

The Seven Churches, 2:1-3:22

The Seven Seal Judgments, 4:1-8:1

The Seven Trumpet Judgments, 8:2-11:19

The Seven Visions, 12:1-15:4

The Seven Bowls, 15:5-16:21

The Final Judgments, 17:1-19:21
The Millennium, 20:1-15
The Final Rest, The Eternal State, 21:1-22:5
Epilogue, 22:6-21

Commentary on the Revelation

I. Prologue, 1:1-20

Some scholars see the entire first chapter of Revelation as a prologue to the book, observing parallels in style here and with the gospel (1:1-18). Clearly, the Lord is the great judge who sits majestically upon His throne with the right to judge his people, as well as His adversaries.

A. The Introduction, vv. 1-3

These initial three verses provide a summary of the entire book.

1. The revelation, vv. 1-2

The book begins (v. 1) by describing its subject and nature; it is a disclosure, a revealing, *of* or *about* Jesus Christ in the capacity of an authoritative figure, a judge (I take it that it is the testimony that Christ revealed [*of*], but also in content *about* Jesus Christ]). The point seems to be that Jesus came to reveal and consequently has been revealed to us.

The terms “revelation (1:1)” and “prophecy (1:3)” are used to describe the book’s contents (the Greek term, “revelation,” means “to uncover something hidden,” an unveiling). As stated above, the former is a heightened form of the latter. Prophecy is both foretelling and foretelling; revelation expresses these concepts through the medium of non-literal symbolism. The term “prophecy” describes the book in 22:7. The purpose of these literary forms is found in the verb “to show” or “to communicate.” John’s intent is to reveal future events; such events shed perspective upon contemporary events.

The key qualifying-term is “shortly,” which is more properly rendered “quickly, “without delay,” and “the time is near (1:3), yet the complete fulfillment for John’s readers would be centuries away. Clearly, this is written from the perspective of heaven!

The verse tells us that the message was conveyed from God to Christ, Christ to an angel, and an angel to John, which, in turn, is communicated to the churches, the centuries of believers, and to us. John describes his relationship to Jesus as a “bondservant.” Though the Greek word is frequently translated as “slave,” the former describes a voluntary servitude, the latter involuntary. *We are “bond slaves;” we willingly accepted the role in response to unmerited, unimaginable mercy!*

2. The blessing, v. 3

The term “blessing” occurs seven times in the book (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). For those who “read” (the term refers to a person designated to read from the Scriptures in the public assembly of the believers), as well as those who “hear,” and “take to heart” its content, the book promises a blessing indicating that it has relevance for all people in every century.

This verse tells us the purpose of the book; it is to bless the people of God with the comfort of the knowledge of His control, purpose, and victorious consummation of history when evil will be extinguished, the effects of the fall reversed, and a new paradise established forever.

The book ends (22:7) with the same promise of blessing through obedience; therefore, it can be concluded that John’s aim ultimately is moral and the means to that end is to understand that what appears to be so permanent is merely temporal; we have no reason to fear that tragedy will in any way abort the promises of God from actualization!

“Time is near” does not so much indicate chronology (i.e., soon), as fitness or appropriateness for it happening.

Teaching Points:

1. The *Revelation* is the end of a story that began centuries ago in Gen. 12. It tells us that through faith we are a people of hope. Hope is only as realistic as the quality of its object. This book tells us that trust in any other than Jesus Christ (whether it be the dominant geo-political power of the day, conformity to prevailing cultural values, or the proverbial ostrich-in-the-sand approach to life [apathy that surrenders to self-indulgence]) will prove empty. Are you finding significance in something other than the Lord? Is your “star” a mere shooting star?
2. The book is actually a defense of a moral argument. The moral argument, revealed to the seven churches, is that biblically unwarranted behavior that dishonors God is incongruous with being a member of the family of God. The defense essentially is a visionary description of how Christ will conquer all his foes and reign as the only potentate. How does John’s point impact your life? Are you finding your peace in other than Christ? Do you really believe that this world is only a shadow of the real world that is to come in the divine restoration of all things?
3. The Bible is an amazing book. It is composed of a variety of smaller books, written over the centuries, and in several literary fashions (narrative, poetry, prophecy), yet it has a single story. That story is simply that of creation, destitution, and reclamation! God created a habitant to live among His people, they proved neglectful and rebellious, and God is gathering a new people. That is the story of the Bible! Is that your story?
4. The centerpiece of the Bible is Jesus Christ, God’s incarnate Son. He is the creator of all things; He is the redeemer of all that has become blighted and He is the king who will reign without opposition in triumph forever and ever. Do you live your life with this as your perspective? How does this understanding of life alter your values and desires? Are you living to build His kingdom, which shall never fall, or your own that will fade as the flower after it has blossomed?

The hope we have reminds me of a line from J.R.R. Tolkien in the *Lord of the Rings*. Our hope is not in temporal matters!

When Aragorn arose all that beheld him gazed in silence, for it seemed to them that he was revealed to them now for the first time. Tall as the sea-kings of old, he stood above all that were near; ancient of days he seemed and yet in the flower of manhood; and wisdom sat upon his brow and strength and healing were in his hands, and a light was about him. And then Faramir cried: 'Behold the King.'

5. The predictive elements in the Bible give abundant testimony that its author was not a mere person or a collectivity of persons; the Bible is the Word of God. What it says is true; what it predicted has come true; and what is yet unfulfilled will come true. Its warnings are as valid as its promises! Do you cling to the promises of God as your strength and joy while taking God's warnings as serious instruction from one altogether truthful and trustworthy?
6. The point of *Revelation* is that we should live our lives from the divine perspective. Things only appear to be one way to us because we see life from an earthly vantage. There is another way to look at life that is more real and enduring than this one. Disappointment and tragedy often are our portion, but that will not be the end of our story. Life will not end in defeat for us anymore than it did for Christ. Because of Christ's death for us, there will also be triumph for us. This is the message of the book. Is it yours as well?
7. While it is easy to seek to understand the details of John's vision in light of contemporary events, there must be a word of caution. The Bible is relevant to every generation because there are many shadowed fulfillments of the text which points to one, final fulfillment. You will not know if you are living in another shadowed anticipation or the final fulfillment until the consummation of time. Further, while the *Revelation* is a book that offers hope through final outcomes (the defeat of God's adversaries, the gathering of all of God's people), it has the immediate purpose of helping people to understand how to live their lives in their immediate context. The disclosure of future events is given to help us live today. As you study the book, keep asking yourself these questions: How does what I am

learning help me to live now for God? What comfort does this book give me to live life today?