

Some Thoughts Concerning *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*

The Revelation of Jesus Christ is apocalyptic literature. John said he was in the Spirit and said he was told to write in a book the things he sees. (See Revelation 1:10-11.) Similar things are recorded in other parts of the Bible: *The vision which Isaiah saw (Isa 1:1), the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God (Ezek 1:1), the book of the vision of Nahum (Nahum 1:1)*. Though John does not start out stating that his book is a vision, it certainly fits that category, especially since he was told to write in a book the things **he sees**.

What is a vision? In some sense, it is like a dream but the analogy is not perfect because most dreams contain some things that seem real while at the same time some things that seem very unreal and completely unrelated to the rest of the dream. But since the visions recorded in the Bible are “God-breathed,” we know that every single word written was written under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit and was meant to convey exactly what He wanted conveyed.

Visions contain many things that are symbolic and must be interpreted with that in mind. For example, Daniel spoke of beasts fighting each other; goats, leopards, lions with eagle’s wings, etc. What is the reader to understand about these beasts? Well, in his book, Daniel tells us that they represent specific countries that would exist in subsequent times. So, on the one hand, we know that these were not literal beasts. But on the other hand, they represented literal countries and Daniel wanted to convey something about each country that was characterized by the beast he selected for that country.

The point I make here is that while apocalyptic literature tends to use many symbols, the author purposely uses the symbols to convey very specific ideas. At the same time, because there is so much symbolism, it is often very difficult to know for sure what the author meant to convey with each symbol or expression. Such is the case with John’s *Revelation of Jesus Christ*. Because this is true, Christians are well advised to hold their interpretation of this book while at the same time realize that they are most likely not understanding accurately many things that the author intended to communicate. Therefore, we have great reason to be patient with each other as we discuss our views concerning this book with our fellow Christians. Following are some things that I currently believe concerning this book.

Currently, I reject the partial preterist view which suggests that this book describes things that took place already prior to 100 A.D. One foundational proof text for this view is Rev 1:1 which says, “*The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His Servants- things which must shortly take place.*” While this expression, “*things which must shortly take place,*” may be somewhat compelling support for the preterist view, it is definitely not conclusive proof because in the Bible, God is presented as eternal and outside of time. “*With the Lord, one day is as a thousand years.*” So you might say, from God’s eternal perspective, it has only been like two days since John wrote the book. The Bible conveys the life span of a man as if it is but mere moments. Besides this, the book seems to conclude with the end of this age as we know it. As it concludes, John sees a new heaven and a new earth for the first earth had passed away. The events in the earlier part of this book seem to take place on the first earth. The new heaven and new earth are part of the vision of things that which must shortly take place and unless I have been in a dream all of my life, my observations suggest that those things have not yet taken place. Is there a possibility that some of things that are described in this book already took place before 100 A.D.? Yes. But when taken as a whole, the things which must shortly take place seem to include the end of this present age and the beginning of the next age which includes a new heaven and a new earth.

I also tend to resist interpretations which seem to ignore the fact that this book is apocalyptic and filled with things that are obviously symbolic. There are some people who claim they know for certain what each symbol means even though they cannot prove for certain some of the things they posit from the Scriptures. Many who call themselves “dispensationalist” seem to do this at times. One example is the interpretation which suggests that there is a definite 7-year period called the great tribulation and that the “rapture” described in I Thessalonians 4 takes place immediately before this 7-year period. Some of the terms found in the verses used to support this interpretation are ambiguous such as the seventieth week mentioned in Daniel 9. I understand that it might mean a 7-year period but I don’t understand how anyone can say this with 100% certainty. Also, if it is a definite 7-year

period, I don't see how anyone can say with 100% certainty that the I Thessalonians 4 rapture takes place before that period rather than after it.¹ It seems to me that if it is a literal 7-year period, there is more support for the I Thessalonians 4 rapture taking place after it rather than before it.

I do not claim to have all of the answers concerning the proper interpretation of the Book of Revelation of Jesus Christ. On the one hand, I believe that John had specific concepts in mind that he wanted to convey. On the other hand, I don't feel comfortable insisting what John had in mind for each of the symbols he used. So, my approach to this book attempts to identify concepts in the book that seem clear and applicable to our lives. And I do this believing that John had definite concepts in mind that he believed were very important for our lives.

The following verses express a sense of urgency about this book that should cause us to pay attention to it and to be careful how we represent it to others.

"And he said to me, "These words are faithful and true"; and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to His bond-servants the things which must shortly take place. "And behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book" (Revelation 22:6-7)

"I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book. He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming quickly." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:18-20).

Though it is difficult to know how to understand all of its symbolism, it seems obvious that God wants us to pay special attention to it rather than shy away from it. At the same time, it seems to be teaching us to be careful how we represent it to others. It seems safest to tell people when we are conveying our opinions and not try to present our opinions as if they are authoritative.

Because of these guiding principles, I like to stress first that this book, when viewed as a whole, seems to have some obvious purposes God intended for His people.

- We should be anticipating and waiting faithfully for Jesus to come back.
- We should be on guard so that we do not fall into the errors of some mentioned in chapter 2 and 3.
- We should prepare ourselves for persecution and abuse while we wait for Jesus to come back.
- We should be on high alert so that we don't end up being one of those who fail to persevere.

While there are undoubtedly other purposes God intends, I mention these because they are so obvious just from reading it. These things should be obvious to every serious believer no matter what they think about end times.

¹ On behalf of those who hold to this view, let me say that I appreciate the stated intention of many dispensational theologians to interpret scripture literally. I think that their intentions are noble in that there is a respect for God's Word. They believe that God's Word must be regarded as authoritative from cover to cover and therefore interpreted and applied with all diligence. To do that, one must be able to know what it says and believe God wants us to study it and know it with certainty. Though I am not on board with all of his views on eschatology, John MacArthur is one who holds to these views who teaches that all of the Bible remains relevant today making his teachings on the subject more consistent with good hermeneutics. (There are some who call themselves dispensationalist with extreme views that suggest that since we are "in the age of grace," only a small portion of the New Testament and none of the Old Testament should be applied to our lives and any teaching that includes the Lordship of Jesus in the gospel is a gospel of works. Even Jesus' teachings are said to be not applicable in this age. Obviously, we must reject such teaching as heretical.

These types of things are made out to be so important in this book that they should dominate our thoughts, feelings and also our conversations about it. Conversely, if most of our time is spent debating what each symbol means or the exact sequence of events that may unfold in the future, we are failing to get out of this book that main thing God intended. In other words, God intends this book to create in us a sense of urgency and sober-mindedness. If on the other hand, our focus is on debating this book from merely an intellectual standpoint, perhaps we have left our first love (Rev. 2:4) or are lukewarm and ready to be vomited out by Jesus (Rev. 3:16).

With these principles guiding me (hopefully), let me give an example of how I make observations in one short passage.

“And I saw another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spoke as a dragon. ¹² And he exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence. And he makes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose fatal wound was healed. ¹³ And he performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down out of heaven to the earth in the presence of men. ¹⁴ And he deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who had the wound of the sword and has come to life. ¹⁵ And there was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast might even speak and cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed. ¹⁶ And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand, or on their forehead, ¹⁷ and he provides that no one should be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark, either the name of the beast or the number of his name” (Revelation 13:11-17).

It seems to me that verse 11 contains many symbols. Again, I believe the Holy Spirit had purpose for using these symbols to convey things about the “beast” He is talking about. It seems like this “beast” is some sort of created being but I can’t rule out other possibilities. But the use of the personal pronouns and the things that he is said to do in the following verses seem to support the idea that this beast is a created being with a personality and intelligence. If he is a created being, does he come up out of the ground? I don’t know. Does he have two horns coming out of his head? I tend to doubt it. And I am especially confused as to how those two horns could be like a lamb. And how does a dragon speak?

What are some things I take away from this verse? From the overall context, we know that this beast seems to be evil and have very evil intentions for the people in the world and he is obviously hostile and opposed to God. Horns often symbolize authority in the Bible. Perhaps the lamb-like quality suggests that he might appear gentle. Yet, his dragon-like speech might suggest that pure evil gushes forth in the things he says. (Even more slimy than today’s politicians if that can be imagined.)

Verse 12 may be a symbolic expression but should we assume that is the case? I don’t think that we should automatically assume that verse 12 is a symbolic expression. Just because this is apocalyptic does not mean that everything said here is symbolic.

¹²And he exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence. And he makes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose fatal wound was healed.

While I cannot say this with all authority, based upon the nature of what is being said it seems that verse 12 here is talking about something very literal. If this is a created being which the context seems to support, this “beast” is working in tandem with a beast that was mentioned earlier in the book. Both beasts are said to exercise authority and this second beast somehow makes the people of the earth worship the first beast. Perhaps his special dragon-like speech enables him to deceive and motivate people to do this.

While it is difficult to know how he does it, it seems like this second beast performs mighty signs.
¹³ *And he performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down out of heaven to the earth in the presence of men.*

Assuming this is a created being as the context seems to suggest, I see no reason to take this symbolically. At the same time, I don't speculate what is meant by fire coming down out of heaven. But he seems to have special powers to perform great signs that wow the people of earth.

And he deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who had the wound of the sword and has come to life.

Again, while we might not understand all the particulars, the wording here leads me to think that the Holy Spirit is saying something very concrete. This beast "tells" those on the earth to make an image to the first beast which had the fatal wound. I don't think we can know for sure what is meant by the word "image." But the word "tells" is very finite and it is difficult to read symbolism into the straightforward idea of telling.

The point I am trying to demonstrate with this passage is that while apocalyptic literature tends to include many symbols that might be difficult to understand with certainty, it also includes some things that were meant to be understood literally and clearly. The combination of these things that are written were meant to convey some ideas that are very specific. So, while we may not understand every symbol used, we can and should look for those specific things being communicated so that the words produce their intended results in our hearts.

Verses 15 – 18 contain some symbolical things but at the same time, certain specific concepts are also being conveyed.

¹⁵ *And there was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast might even speak and cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed. ¹⁶ And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand, or on their forehead, ¹⁷ and he provides that no one should be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark, either the name of the beast or the number of his name"*

Two such symbolical expressions include the giving of breath to the image of the beast and the causing of the mark on the right hand or forehead. There is no way to know for certain how these things will be fulfilled. The word for breath is the Greek word *pneuma* which means spirit. But what is this image and in what way is "spirit" given to it? I cannot say for sure how, but somehow, this image communicates and somehow this image causes as many as do not worship the beast to be killed. This seems to be very specific and concrete even though the details of how these things take place are not spelled out.

Even though we cannot know what is meant by the mark, we should recognize from this passage that there seems to be a concrete cause and effect idea being conveyed. There are certain people who do not worship the beast and as a result, they are killed. That is very real. And it seems that the other people avoid being killed by going along with the push to become identified as those who are compliant and go along with the program. It does not really matter at this point in time what is specifically meant by the mark. But clearly, people will be identified somehow. And clearly, those who do not become identified as compliant will not be able to buy or sell. That is very concrete and should not be taken as symbolic or

ambiguous. But exactly when these things take place or how it all gets implemented is not spelled out clearly.

At the same time, we do know that Jesus said that knowledge would increase in the last days. And we know also that technology has advanced exponentially making the concepts expressed here seem easy to implement globally.

So, even though there are many symbolic expressions in this Revelation 13 passage, some expressions convey very concrete concepts that are best interpreted as such. This passage teaches at least the following concrete things:

-Pressure will come upon the inhabitants of the earth to become compliant with the objectives of a certain created being which the book calls "the beast."

-The inhabitants of the earth will be expected to worship this created being.

-All those who are compliant will be identified as such and be allowed to buy and sell.

-All those who refuse to comply will not be able to buy and sell and will end up being killed.

Any interpretation that does not teach these things about this passage causes those who hold to that interpretation to miss out on certain truth that the Holy Spirit intends to use to make us soberminded and to produce a sense of urgency that is spiritually helpful towards our persevering.

Hopefully, by my discussion of this passage, I have demonstrated that while the book contains many symbols, it uses them to convey specific, concrete concepts. These concepts are intended to make us soberminded. Even though the events may be in the future, we must be prepared in case they unfold now. Reading about them now can cause us to examine ourselves ahead of time so that we assess whether we will be one of the compliant ones or one of those who persevere until Jesus returns.