

The Revelation of John: a Parody of an Apocalypse

By Scott Carter

Introduction

I could have titled this “How I learned to stop hating and love Revelation.” I grew up in the 70s and 80s in suburban-edging-into-rural Alabama. Everyone was sure the world was going to end, probably because of the Commies. The only topics in church more popular than the end of the world were getting saved and how to get other people saved. And we ate it up.

We had classes on Hal Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth*, and then when that didn’t quite go as expected we covered his *88 Reasons in 88*. We talked about events in the news and tried to match them up with verses. We were, in the parlance, Pretrib PreMills. We were just waiting for the Rapture.

Then I grew up. I got a degree in religion and then a Master’s of Divinity. By that point I had heard all of it, and I just didn’t care anymore. Revelation was the one topic that I would not teach nor tolerate. No Rapture, Tribulation, or Antichrist talk from me. I avoided the subject with the best of my ability. I became adept at changing the subject.

Then, one day, I was prepping to teach a New Testament survey at a community college and I figured it out. I realized that there was indeed a secret to understanding Revelation. A simple shift of perspective that made it all so easy to figure out. I got to looking around and realized I was not the only one who saw it. It was really simple.

It is a joke.

Or, more accurately, the Revelation of John is a parody. A parody of the apocalyptic genre. It twists expectations, it turns things on their head, and it does it to make a very clear theological point.

But like all parody, if you don’t know the context you are not going to get it. Everyone thinks *Gulliver’s Travels* is a kids’ adventure book, not the biting political commentary it really is. Worse, everyone thinks Machiavelli actually meant what he said in *The Prince* when a cursory reading of his other works, like *Discourses on Livy*, reveals that it’s satire. Worst of all, people unfamiliar with apocalypses or the politics of the day totally miss what Revelation is all about.

But not you, friend, not after you read this.

It is not my intent to go through the whole of Revelation verse by verse and chapter by chapter. I don’t care who wrote it, but we will call him John because the text does. I only want to give you the tools to look at it and then focus on a few key passages that illustrate the point. First you need to know what an apocalypse is and how well known they were. Then we can get to unpacking the symbols and codes

What is an Apocalypse?

First thing we have to establish is that Revelation fits into a certain genre of literature. Genres have expectations. You go to see a romantic comedy and you know that in the end, through

various misadventures, Boy gets Girl, or vice versa. The guy in the white hat is the good guy, the unremarkable farm boy is the chosen one, the secret agent gets out of the death trap, and that after an apparent defeat the bad guy is going to come back one more time just to prove how bad he really was. Apocalypse is a genre, and it has certain expectations. How many characteristics it has, like any other academic topic, is debatable but we are going to go with these, which in one form or another are pretty standard.

1. The work claims to be a secret revelation (apocalypse means “revelation”) given to some seer or prophet, who is usually given as some famous figure of the past (Moses, Enoch, Adam, Daniel, etc.).
2. It is in the form of a dream, a vision, or transportation to heaven – or all three in one.
3. The revelation is guided by a heavenly figure –usually an angel but occasionally some other famous figure of the past.
4. The revelation is not self-explanatory but is characterized by code, mythic imagery, and cosmic events.
5. There is a specific view of history at work: namely that the present age is evil and getting worse. God will act to change things. The future age will be dominated by good. This sort of cosmic dualism is backed up by all manner of moral dualism.

Number 4 is the most obvious, and number 5 is why we mistakenly think that “apocalypse” means “end of the world.”

There are tons of apocalypses out there. They develop in the post-Exilic Jewish community, but are probably influenced heavily by Zoroastrianism, which has some of its own. In the Bible alone the most obvious, besides our subject matter, is Daniel 7-12. Second Thessalonians, Mark 13, Matthew 24-25, and Luke 21 also fit enough of the above to be apocalyptic. Add to that Isaiah 24–27; 33; 34–35, Jeremiah 33:14–26, Ezekiel 38–39, Joel 3:9–17, and Zechariah 12–14, which are sometimes called proto-apocalyptic (representing an earlier form of the genre before it was solidified), and you have lots of examples readily available. Depending on whether or not you include the Apocrypha in your Bible you might also add 2 Esdras. A short list of non-canonical (that is to say: outside the Bible) apocalyptic works which you can find more about and read at least portions includes: *Ascension of Isaiah*, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Apocalypse of Adam*, *Apocalypse of Baruch* (Greek and Syriac respectively), two *Apocalypses of Daniel*, *Apocalypse of Elijah*, *Apocalypse of Ezra* (Greek), *Gabriel's Revelation*, *Apocalypse of Lamech*, *Apocalypse of Metatron*, *Apocalypse of Moses*, *Apocalypse of Sedrach*, *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, *Apocalypse of Zerubbabel*, *Aramaic Apocalypse*, *1 Enoch*, *2 Enoch*, and the *War Scroll of Qumran*. Nominally Christian apocalypses include: *1st Apocalypse of James*, *2nd Apocalypse of James*, *Apocalypse of Golias*, *Apocalypse of Methodius*, *Apocalypse of Paul*, *Apocalypse of Paul* (Coptic), *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Apocalypse of Peter* (Gnostic), *Apocalypse of Samuel of Kalamoun*, *Apocalypse of Stephen*, *Apocalypse of Thomas*, and the *Apocalypse of the Seven Heavens*. Not all of these are available online, but many of them are. You should pick a few of the less familiar ones and given them a look. They tend to be shorter than Revelation at least.

The real key to understanding all of this is getting the symbols. To do that we have to do two hard things. First, we need to acknowledge that the associations we have with things are not

necessarily the same ones that people had in the first and second century Mediterranean world. Second, and perhaps even harder, is we need to try and remove the familiarity we have with the symbols so we can see them in the light of that first audience. We have already equated certain images in our head, but when the author of Revelation does them it was new, it had an impact. We will miss the point of the book if we miss that simple fact.

There are a lot of symbols in Revelation. Some of them are loaners from other works. In fact, it is the way those symbols are used in other works and then changed by John that will help us understand the book. Some of them we will talk about with specific passages, some he explains himself. Numbers and colors tend to have fixed meanings. Three is spiritual order, four is created order, therefore seven (3+4) is perfection. In contrast to that six is imperfection, lacking that last little bit; it is also the number of the day humans were made in Genesis 1. God's people are 12 (3x4). Anything repeated is intensification. Numbers also have an ancient way of coding. It is called gematria.

This is how it works: both the Romans and the Jews used letters for numbers. Therefore every word is also a number. By comparing the value of words, which you can honestly add up in different ways, you compare the essential nature of things. Suetonius, the great biographer of the Emperors, said that on a wall in Rome was the following: "Count the values: Nero has the same number as 'murdered his mother.'" By this method you can get almost anything you want, depending on how you do it. Take my name. Am I Scott for this purpose? Scott Carter? Scott Gray Carter? Reverend Carter? Brother Scott? Mister Carter? Depending on which one you choose you get a different value, and thus a different comparison. Add into this the propensity to translate to a seemingly better language (say Greek into Hebrew) and you can make almost anything equal anything else.

So what value is it? Not much, unless you are of a particular and particularly mystical bent. Except for this: if you and your audience know the means at which you arrive at your values you can talk about people and things in numerical code without anyone being the wiser. Thus the whole "Mark of the Beast" thing is either meant to be a specific ruler whom John did not want to name in print but who was well known to his audience or, less likely, 666 is an exaltation of human nature that magnifies itself but never reaches the perfection of God.

Colors are where we are likely to run into trouble. White stands for victory, not purity or peace. Black is famine; Red is war; and that gray-yellowish green color that rotting meat gets is what sometimes gets rendered as Pale and stands for Death. Believe it or not this too is really important.

Now, I think, we are ready to start making our case for the meaning of Revelation.

Getting Started

One of the first symbols used in Revelation is found 1:12 through 16 and is explained for us in 1:20.

“As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

So churches are sources of earthly light, angels are sources of heavenly light. Angels are messengers, which is literally what the word *angelos* means. If both churches and angels are sources of light, and if angels are messengers, then the churches are also messengers. This is an example of the “as above so below” idea common in apocalyptic and occult writings. Heavenly reality is reflected in earthly reality. Chapter 8 continues this imagery by making the prayers of the saints the very incense offered up by an angel before God’s throne. We will get more of the “angels = churches” or more accurately “angels = believers” as we progress.

We also have a hint of the real meaning of Revelation in that description in v. 16: “from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword.” That cutting sword that comes from the mouth is the word the messengers carry. It is the whole point of the book.

Those seven churches listed in the text, by the way, represent a circuit in what is modern day Turkey. I think they are meant to represent all churches. Sometimes we are Ephesus, sometimes Laodicea.

John has started us off by linking images, and now we will see how he makes his point by twisting expectations.

Chapter 5

Our scene is the court of heaven. John has been brought here by an angel to witness the opening of the Book of Life. Imagine a scene of splendor and eye-watering beauty. Here arrayed in judgement is God Himself, high and exalted and suitably distant. On a lower dais are His representatives, twenty-four elders (12 tribes+12 apostles?) who oversee the proceedings. Around the throne of God Isaiah’s imagery is repeated in the creatures that look in all directions, fly in all directions, and remind us that God is not just Holy, but Holy to the third power. An angel takes a sealed book from the Most High.

Who is worthy? Who is worthy? None. No one in heaven or on earth is worthy.

John weeps.

But wait! Someone is worthy? Who could it be?

It is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah! The Root of David!

Why is he worthy? He has conquered.

So what do we expect to see emerge onto the stage? A warrior prince like David. A Lion of a man. A kingly figure. The military messiah long sought.

But is that who shows up? No.

Instead we get “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.” Here we have a perfect Lamb (all of those 7s hammer that home) who has been slaughtered. Slain. Killed.

John denies expectations. He equated the Lion, a symbol of royal strength, with the Lamb, a symbol of innocence and weakness. He equates conquest with being slaughtered.

It is difficult for us to see the enormity of this equation for we have had nearly two millennia, give or take a few hundred years, to get used to it.

Think about it this way. The bad guys are in town, shooting up the place and making free with the women-folk. Everyone is scared and wondering when the sheriff is going to show up. Then things get quiet. We hear spurs jingle on the wooden boards outside. A hand reaches out to the door. The bad guys look nervous. Whispers of “It’s him!” circulate. The door swings open.

It’s Barney Fife, or Festus, or Jack Elam, or Screech, or Jar Jar Binks or whatever pathetic comedy relief sidekick you care to imagine. It is the last person you would expect.

And he wins.

Up to that point, and for the next several chapters, John writes a fairly standard apocalypse. All the images of seals being broken and horrible things coming out, all of those are typical. The audience of Revelation had likely heard it all before. Only one thing makes it different: the voluntary sacrifice of the Lamb is the source of victory.

John, like a stage magician’s sleight of hand, holds out the Lion and presents the Lamb.

Chapter 12

By Chapter 12 the seven trumpets have blown and the seven seals are opened and there is War. In fact, we have a set piece of Apocalyptic Literature: Michael goes to War against the Dragon.

Imagine it. On one side the forces of heaven are arrayed. Gleaming warriors, shining weapons. Thunder and lightning roll. The wind blows their perfect hair. Banners flutter and light shines from their faces. On the other side is darkness, deep clouds that cast the reddish glow of reflected firelight. A great dragon snarls and paws at the ground. Around him are men and beasts clad in black armor, covered in spikes no doubt, with victims bleeding underfoot or held captive by thick iron chains.

With the sound of a hurricane battle is joined. Victory is won, as we always knew it would be, by the forces of Heaven.

But how and by whom, exactly?

No praise goes to Michael or the Host of Heaven. No credit is given to their battle might. No, instead victory is achieved thus:

But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death. (12: 11)

That slain Lamb again and now we have a new equation to add to the mix. The sacrifice of the Lamb is equal to the word of their testimony. Whose testimony? Those willing to be a witness even unto death.

So it is not angelic might that wins the day, but rather the testimony of believers.

Chapter 19

So now we can skip to the end, or close enough to it.

Final Battle time. This is it, the War for Heaven and Earth rests on this last engagement. Now is the time for the kingly Warrior promised to us in Chapter 5 to make an appearance, and behold the Rider on the White Horse appears. White for victory, remember, not purity.

He is battle-clad and ready for the fight. His eyes burn with fire and a crown shines on his head. His cape is dipped in blood. Whose blood? We are apt to think his enemies' but we would not be right. He is the Word of God. King of kings. Lord of lords.

He wins the battle! The Dragon and the False Prophet and all those that sided with evil are brought down in chains. The enemy is defeated.

But how?

Remember the sword in Chapter 1?

Verse 15: *"From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations."*

Again, it is not battle might that wins the day. It is the word spoken by the rider on the white horse. The word of God. The same word that was invested in the messengers of God, the angels and the churches.

Putting it all together

Just in case we missed it, one of the last things recorded is John falling down to worship at the feet of his guide, who responds (in 22:9) *"You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!"*

John and the Angel are equals. John's comrades who speak the word of God and the angels are equals.

We are the angels.

Thus the entire thread of the narrative, hidden in the depths of apocalyptic hyperbole, is simple. The Word of God is this: The Lamb died for you. The Word of God is the Sword of God that brings victory. You carry the Word. You carry the Sword. You are the servants of God. You have the victory.

That's it. John is writing to Christians being persecuted and even killed for their beliefs. These are the people who gave us the sign of the Ichthis ("Jesus Fish") so they could hide who they are but let fellow believers know where safe havens were. These were the people who invented crossing your fingers as a secret sign that means "I am praying to him who died on the Cross." The Greek word for witness that John uses throughout is *martyr*, a word we have taken to mean "one who is willing to witness unto death." It is their blood that covers the Rider's cloak. They share in his victory, and even in a way help bring it about.

John's message is to remind believers to stay faithful in the face of opposition, for they have already won.