

Notes on Introduction to Revelation

Introduction: What evidence helps know what the book is all about? There are some key passages that seem to help us with this problem.

The time frame:

What is the relation of these events to the time John wrote them?

"Things which must shortly come to pass"--1:1, 4; 22:10

The Greek word for "shortly" is "tachos". Found 7 times in the N.T. and translated "quickly", "shortly", or "speedily".

"He is coming quickly!" (2:16, 3:11; 22:12,20)

The Greek word here for "quickly" is "tachu". It is related to the word for "shortly". Translated quickly (once lightly). It is found in 13 texts in the N.T. always conveying the idea of haste.

The time is "at hand"! (1:3; 22:10)

"At hand" translates "eggus" found in 30 N.T. passages and translated "near", "near at hand", "nigh", or "at hand".

If Revelation describe events that do not began to be fulfilled until the last 7 years before Christ's coming, how could these be called "at hand"? 1900 years have passed since their announcement!

John is instructed to write down (1:19) "the things you have seen (the past), "the things that are" referring to the letters to the churches (the present), "the things that shall be hereafter" (the future). Those "things that shall be hereafter " began to be described in 4:1. The letters to the churches are "the things that are", not future eras of time. The futurist view is eliminated.

The theme verse of the epistle: "Behold, he is coming in the clouds". To what does it refer?

A coming on the clouds to judge all men? (Ac. 1:11). This is not the judgment described in these passages. It was not "at hand" or "near" the revelation. The "second" coming of Christ occurs on the last day. But in Revelation the "coming" of Christ of 19:11-21 against his enemies is followed by a symbolic "millenium" of time before the end of all things and the final judgment of the wicked (the second coming). But if not the second coming, what kind of coming?

A coming on the clouds to judge the physical nation of Israel (Jerusalem)?

Mt. 16:28 Those living would see Jesus "coming in His kingdom". Cf. Mk. 9:1 Mt. 24:29-31 (Mk. 13:24-27; Lk. 21:25-28) Clearly this "coming" is in judgment against the wicked Jews who crucified him and killed and persecuted his people in the great tribulation before the destruction of Jerusalem. It would come in that generation (Lk. 21:32).

This "coming" would be in vengeance to fulfill the prophecies of the O.T. (Lk. 21:22).

A coming on the clouds to judge all of the enemies of Christ, beginning with the Jewish nation but continuing with all other enemies (the Roman empire, its supporting paganism, Satan and his followers, death itself) and culminating in the "second" coming.

Just as God came "riding a cloud" to punish ancient Egypt (Is. 19:1ff), so Christ would punish the Roman empire for its wickedness. It was only an agent in God's hand to punish the Jewish nation and would also fall. Cf. Assyria (Is. 10:5-19). Revelation reveals the judgment of Christ against not only the Roman empire and its paganism but also Satan and all his followers and even death itself (20:11-15). In one sense all of these enemies were working together. Both Jerusalem and Rome were joint enemies of Christ. Satan used both in his attempts to destroy the church. The Jews made use of the power of Rome to kill Christ and persecute his church. They were also in part also responsible for the Roman persecutions of Christians as well.

A statement of content is found in Rev. 10:5-7. Revelation concerns the fulfillment of those things found written in the prophets.

But what are those things? What did the prophets say would happen after the coming of Christ and the establishment of his kingdom?

Specifically, Jerusalem would be destroyed.

Dan. 9:26-27.

Rome would wage war with the saints (Dan. 7) and prevail for a time.

Specifically, the Roman empire would be brought to an end, resulting in the kingdom being given to the saints.

Dan. 2:44

Dan 7:26

Christ would destroy all of his enemies including death itself, Satan, and all who would follow Him (Psalm 110:1-7, Gen. 3:15).

The kingdom of Christ would bring an end to all world kingdoms, enduring forever (Dan. 2:44). The saints would receive the kingdom and possess it forever (Dan. 7:18)

Which of these enemies Revelation addresses depends a great deal on how we define certain key characters in the book and what date is chosen for the book.

Identification of the characters

Who are the players in the spiritual drama symbolized in Revelation?

The sea beast of 13:1 seems very similar to the beast of Daniel 7. It is the Roman empire acting through its caesars, the heads the beasts.

The land beast of 13:11 seems to symbolize the false religions that supported the empire, especially the pagan temples that worshipped the emperor.

The "great harlot" who rides the beast is more difficult. She is described with several details in chapter 17. Many interpreters see her as Rome. Others see her as Jerusalem. Our decision on the identification of the "harlot" is critical to our interpretation of the book.

Two dates are usually given for the book (During reign of Nero, c. 66-68 A.D. or Domitian, c. 95 A.D.). This decision is difficult.

If early date is chosen we may conclude the book deals both with the destruction of the Jewish nation as well as the Roman empire, its supporting paganism, the wicked, death, and Satan himself. If the late date is chosen we may conclude the book deals with destruction of all of these except Jerusalem.

Arguments for the late date (95 A.D.). It is contended that:

Some early church fathers testified that Revelation was seen at the end of Domitian's reign.

Domitian waged a more general persecution against Christians than Nero's persecutions in Rome and that Cseasar worship was more predominant during his reign.

The condition of the seven churches described in chapters 2-3 favors a longer period from their establishment than the 60's date would allow.

Evidence for the early date (66-68 A.D.) It is contended that:

Some manuscripts of the Syriac version (an early translation) indicate that Revelation was written in the 60's, during the reign of Nero, indicating that an early date was accepted by early Christians.

The number of the beast, 666, is the calculated sum of the latters in the Hebrew form of Nero's name. (Also in connection with this an alternative number, 616, (found in some manuscripts) may be attained by dropping the final consonant of Nero's name.

The clue of Rev. 17:9-10 indicates that the fifth king of Rome, Nero, was in power at the time of writing.

Conclusion: Where does the balance of the evidence lie? Sincere students reach differnt conclusions. Some conclude that Revelation was written during the reign of Nero, shortly before a severe period of persecution at the hands of the Jews working with and through the Romans. The purpose of the book is to reveal the fulfillment of all prophesies concerning Christ's kingdom including the defeat of every enemy of his cause (wicked Jerusalem, the Roman empire, death, Satan and his followers) and the expanse of the kingdom (rule) of Christ among men. With each victory, there was the further advance in the kingdom of God and the establishment of "a new heavens and a new earth" and "the new Jerusalem" where only righteousness would dwell. The testimony of Jesus, his coming, death, resurrection and victory over all who reject Him and the salvation of all who believe in him is the spirit of all O.T. prophecy (19:10). Such a message would encourage Christans to be faithful to the Lord come what may, since He would at last prevail.

Another view commonly held by Christians today would be that Revelation was written during the reign of Domitian, shortly before the outbreak of severe persecutions at his hands. The purpose of the book would be to reveal the downfall not only of the Roman Empire and its supporting paganism but also the ultimate defeat of all who opposed the Lamb and his followers. This too is the fulfillment of O.T. prophecies like Daniel 7 and Psalm 110. Such a message would give comfort to the people of the day in which it was written.

As our study unfolds we will look for evidence that will help us decide which of these views holds the most merit.