

Revelation

Frank A. Nemecek, Jr.
November 18, 2017

See also my companion works on the gospels and the history of Israel.

Introduction

Author and Date

The work is attributed to a John, who recounts a vision. John was a common name of the day. It's very unlikely it was the same John after which the canonical gospel is named. There are far too many differences in style, content, and doctrine.

Some claim the author was the disciple John, based purely on tradition. Around 180 CE, Irenaeus said this John was the author of both Revelation and the fourth gospel. Only Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp, said that Polycarp knew John personally. That's a very thin thread of testimony. I think Irenaeus's true objective was to claim apostolic succession for himself, through Polycarp, to John. Irenaeus was the first to use apostolic succession as an argument for authority. We can't follow the money, but we can follow the power. He became the second bishop of Lyon.

Revelation was most likely written around 90-95 CE. Early church tradition has it written during the reign of Domitian. These dates in power are relevant:

54-68 CE	Nero
69-79 CE	Vespasian
81-96 CE	Domitian

The language is the classical Greek of the day, by a well-educated and literate author, though of significantly less quality than the gospel of John. Greek was the original language of writing. It's not a translation from some other language.

Apocalypticism

Judaism began with the Covenantal worldview. If Israel worshiped and obeyed YHWH alone, he would be their god, and they would be his people. He didn't claim to be the only god, just the god of Israel. It was monolatrous (henotheistic), but that meant worshiping only one god, not that there was only one god.

People wondered why they were defeated by their enemies. That opened the way to the Prophetic worldview. You get defeated if you don't obey. If you got defeated, you must not have obeyed. People eventually noticed that even when they obeyed, they often got defeated anyway.

That led to the decline of the Prophetic worldview, and the rise of the Apocalyptic worldview, Apocalypticism. It incorporated dualism, and explained away the defeats as a conflict between the cosmic powers of good and of evil. It tried to give hope and consolation by saying that

someday, evil will be defeated. Apocalyptic literature expressed that worldview by telling stories showing that in the end, evil is defeated and punished, and good prevails. An apocalyptic text isn't really trying to predict the future, only that eventually good prevails.

Both of these genres were efforts to defend their Covenantal worldview, the Mosaic Covenant. That has always been the foundation of Jewish religious philosophy.

There were plenty of apocalypses besides the Apocalypse of John ("Revelation") in the early first century, as well as the previous couple of centuries. By the end of the first century, nearly everyone recognized and admitted that the apocalypse didn't happen. Then they spiritualized it in various ways. Thus it's a little surprising that a sect of the Johannine community was still promoting the apocalyptic worldview. But not too surprising. Many Christians still hold that worldview today.

Christianity incorporated that apocalyptic worldview, which predated Christianity by centuries. This author seems to concede that some Jews (144,000 over the course of history) qualified to be good, worthy of reward rather than punishment. Since the text, like all apocalyptic writing before the second century, portrays the apocalypse as happening on earth, it shows these good Jews as being brought back from the place of the dead and brought back to life on earth, along with martyred Christians, to receive their reward.

Revelation

The book itself is an anomaly. It's a collection of epistles with an apocalypse tacked on to the end. The chain of custody is anomalous. In the prophecy genre, the message is generally given by God to the prophet, with instructions to tell it to the people. Someone else writes the account. In this case, from God to Jesus to an angel (messenger) to a John, who was also to do the writing.

The scene of the story is the ancient three-level universe. The revelation happens in the realm above, the place of the gods. The apocalyptic action happens on the surface of the earth, the earthly realm. The dead are removed from the realm below, the place of the dead. Some of the scene changes seem ambiguous to us, though the direct audience, steeped in the apocalyptic worldview, would have no trouble figuring out where things were happening.

Why 7 churches? As we will see, this author is obsessed with sevens, considered a number of completeness. Why just Asia Minor? Perhaps that was the scope of his following. Indeed, Asia Minor was the geographic scope of the Johannine Community, as well as a major center of Gnostic philosophy. Palestine is conspicuously absent. His audience was expected to know the meanings of the arcane [to us] allusions. For example, the seven stars of 1:16 would be the seven stars of the Gnostic Ogdoad (Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the moon). Each archon (angel) presided over one of the seven stars. He sees one of those as assigned to each church. These archons are likely the principalities and powers (KJV) or rulers and authorities or rulers and powers that Paul talks about. They are the lowest emanations of the Godhead, responsible for physical creation, which most Gnostics considered evil and inferior.

The Nicolaitans of Rev 3 are most likely a Gnostic sect the author didn't like. The other

suggestions of who they were are scant and tortuous. This article expresses some interesting ideas. <http://www.renner.org/false-doctrine/who-were-nicolaitans-what-was-doctrine-deeds/> Nicolas seemed to be a thinker. He converted from polytheism to Judaism to Christianity, but may then have flitted onto something else.

Each devastation of Revelation 8 is applied to a third of the earth. This was the decimation practice of the Roman army, but carried to an even greater extreme. It was applied to a large unit of the Roman army guilty of a capital offense like mutiny or desertion. From Wikipedia,

“A cohort (roughly 480 soldiers) selected for punishment by decimation was divided into groups of ten. Each group drew lots (sortition), and the soldier on whom the lot fell was executed by his nine comrades, often by stoning or clubbing. The remaining soldiers were often given rations of barley instead of wheat (the latter being the standard soldier's diet) for a few days, and required to camp outside the fortified security of the camp.

As the punishment fell by lot, all soldiers in a group sentenced to decimation were potentially liable for execution, regardless of individual degrees of fault, rank, or distinction.”

Rev 13:3 may be http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nero_Redivivus_legend

Rev 22 healing of the nations. Context doesn't suggest that it's talking about Gentiles. I think it's just part of the Utopian vision. We won't need to worry about food or medicine. Both will be available. That phrase is used only here. 22:4 See his face, cf Moses.

Mark of the Beast

In Greek isopsephy and Hebrew gematria (both forms of numerology), the number of the beast is nearly always shown as referring to Nero. To say the least, Nero controlled commerce of the day. See Deuteronomy 6:8.

Some have claimed that the UPC (Universal Product Code) is the New Testament mark of the beast. The creator of the UPC categorically denies this. See www.laurerupc.com and <http://204.13.85.155/laurergj/upc/666quest.html>

References

1. Ehrman, Bart D., History of the Bible (audiobook). The Teaching Company, 2005.