

Revelation 4 (Week 1)

Today we begin our series on the Book of Revelations, a difficult book to read and understand, even more than other Scriptures. The wild imagery and language require background and interpretation and lots of it.

There are four popular ways of interpreting Revelations that can be summarized as: Preterism, which claims that the prophecies were fulfilled before 400 C.E.; Historicism which claims that the prophecies are being fulfilled; Idealism claims no historical fulfilment; and Futurism which claims that the fulfilment is still to come.

Before we turn attention to today's and the following weeks' assigned readings, it might be helpful to consider the book as a whole and try to answer some questions: Who wrote Revelations? When was it written? How did it become part of the canon? Who was responsible for its inclusion in the New Testament and when was it added? What is the genre? What role did politics play in its writing and inclusion in the New Testament? How did the disciples and apostles fit into the story? What part did the discovery of the buried "secret writings" in 1945 at Nag Hammadi play in helping to understand the Book of Revelations? What was in those secret writings? I hope these questions piqued your curiosity and maybe even excited you a little. However, we won't answer them all today, but will try over the next few weeks to uncover most of the answers.

This book opens as John tells how he was "in the spirit" - in an ecstatic trance - one Sunday when suddenly he heard a loud voice speaking to him. Turning, John

says he saw a divine being announce “what is going to happen soon” to bring on the end of time. John, a Jewish follower of Jesus of Nazareth, believed that this divine being who spoke to him was Jesus, alive after his death, now appearing not in ordinary human form but as a glorious and terrifying presence whose “face was like the sun shining with full force”. John says that Jesus announced that God is about to make war on the evil powers that have taken over the world and that, although the coming cosmic war will destroy the entire universe, ultimately God will prevail, throw evildoers into a lake of eternal fire, and welcome the righteous into his kingdom.

John says that he heard a voice telling him to “come up here!” - apparently a summons to ascend into heaven through a door he saw standing open before him. John says that “at once I was in the spirit,” allowed to glimpse the throne of God in heaven, looking just as the prophet Ezekiel, writing six hundred years earlier, said he had seen it: blazing with fire as flashes of lightning and peals of thunder burst around it; brilliantly gleaming like emeralds, rainbows, sapphires; glorious light flowing into a sea of glittering crystal.

Now, what kind of man was writing these prophecies? John was a Jewish prophet writing visions he claimed to have received on the island of Patmos, about seventy miles from the city of Ephesus, off the coast of Asia Minor in present-day Turkey. John of Patmos was not the son of Zebedee nor the brother of James, nor the Evangelist who wrote the Gospel according to John. We begin to understand what he wrote only when we see that this book is *wartime literature*. John probably began to write around 90 C.E., having likely fled from a war that had ravaged Judea,

his homeland. John may actually have witnessed the outbreak of war in Jerusalem in 66 C.E., when militant Jews, fired with religious fervour, sporadically attacked groups of Roman soldiers and stockpiled weapons to fight an all-out war against Rome's occupation of Judea in the name of "God and our common liberty".

After four years of desperate fighting, Rome sent sixty thousand troops to besiege Jerusalem, starve its inhabitants, and break the revolutionaries' ferocious resistance. When Roman soldiers, led first by the future emperor Vespasian and later by his son Titus, finally defeated the Jews, they desecrated the sacred precincts of the Great Temple, burned it to the ground, and left the inner city of Jerusalem completely in ruins.

Twenty years later, the prophet John was living on Patmos, where tradition says he was forcibly sent "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ". We might imagine him pacing restlessly along the sea by day and lying awake at night, watching the constellations as they moved across the sky. Horrified by the slaughter of so many of his people by Rome, John put his own cry of anguish into the mouths of the souls he says he saw in heaven, pleading for God's justice.

Other Jews among his contemporaries asked similar questions, but John was not a traditional Jew, since he had joined the radical sect devoted to Jesus of Nazareth. John of Patmos belonged to the second generation of Jesus' followers, who had heard what the early disciples reported Jesus secretly telling them: that he himself was God's messiah, the chosen future king of Israel. Many first-generation

followers of Jesus had expected him to lead Israel to victory over the hated Romans and reestablish God's kingdom in Jerusalem and eventually over the whole world. But after his crucifixion and death, many of his followers quit the movement, and Roman magistrates killed its outspoken leaders. Although John apparently was born some years after these events, he probably knew that the Romans had also crucified Peter, Jesus' right-hand man, and had whipped and beheaded Paul of Tarsus. He may have heard various accounts of the violent death of Jesus' own brother James, whom many regarded as his successor, beaten or stoned to death near the Jerusalem Temple.

But some of Jesus' followers - and *their* followers - refused to give up. John, persuaded by their preaching, was one of those in the next generation who insisted that Jesus was still God's appointed future king of Israel and, indeed, of the whole world. They claimed that God had brought him back to life and that soon Jesus would return from heaven to earth and vanquish his enemies as God's chosen ruler of the universe - "King of kings, and Lord of lords". Jews among John's contemporaries thought Jesus' followers were fools, of course, since Jesus had been killed sixty years before. But had someone asked his loyal followers how they could possibly believe that Jesus would return as king, John could answer that he had seen proof that the most astonishing of Jesus' prophecies had already come true - and so he dared hope that the rest would do the same. For when Jesus announced that "the kingdom of God is coming soon," he also privately warned his followers that before God's kingdom would come, terrible suffering must first take

place - earthquakes, famine, and war, followed by the unthinkable: that enemy armies would surround and besiege Jerusalem and utterly destroy the Great temple, the sacred centre of Jerusalem. Jesus repeatedly warned that Judgement Day - and God's kingdom - would come within one generation: *"There are some standing here who will not die until they see the kingdom of God having come with power ... I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."*

Imagine how John felt, then, when about forty years after Jesus' death, this shocking prophecy turned out to be true: in 70 C.E., Roman armies stormed Jerusalem, burned down the temple, and reduced the city centre to charred rubble. When this happened, John and others loyal to Jesus were both horrified and excited, for this meant that everything else he had prophesied would now happen. Jesus had warned that "wars and rumour of wars" would be "only the beginning of the birth pangs of the messiah" and told them to expect persecution, saying that "in those days there will be such suffering as has not been from the beginning of the creation until now, no, and never will be". But Jesus had added that *after* these catastrophic events, his followers would see "the son of man coming in the clouds, with great power and glory" to establish God's kingdom.

About ten years after the end of the Jewish war, racing against time, some of his followers wrote the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke to spread Jesus' message and warn the rest of the world before the end would come.

John, like many among the second generation of believers, waited for Jesus

to return and for his kingdom to “come with power”. But by the time John began to write his Revelation nearly thirty more years had passed. Now *two* generations had come and gone - and John along with Jesus’ other followers, must have wondered how the prophecy had failed. For when John travelled through Asia Minor, he could see evidence everywhere that the kingdom that actually had “come with power” was not God’s - it was *Rome’s*.

When John arrived in Ephesus around 90 C.E., apparently having spent some time travelling and preaching in Asia Minor, he might have seen a small army of expert stoneworkers constructing the colossal statues, each about a hundred feet high, of emperor Vespasian and his sons, and building the most spectacular temple in the entire city to honour as divine the very rulers who had devastated Jerusalem and destroyed the Great Temple of God. Longing for vengeance, John recalled Israel’s sacred scriptures: hadn’t King David himself declared that “the gods of the nations are demons?” And hadn’t the prophets - most recently, Jesus - announced that God would soon come to judge the world? Why would God allow these demonic forces and their arrogant human agents to overrun the world with apparent impunity?

What John did in the Book of Revelation, among other things, was create *anti-Roman propaganda* that drew its imagery from Israel’s prophetic traditions - above all, the writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. John claims that while he was on the island of Patmos, visions came to him - perhaps induced by prayer and fasting - when “I heard behind me a loud voice, like a trumpet,” saying, “what you see, write in a book,” John says that when he turned to see who was speaking to

him, he saw Jesus in the form that the prophet Daniel claimed to have seen - the Son of Man more than two hundred years earlier - his hair "white as snow, like white wool," his eyes blazing like flames, face "shining like the sun in full strength. When I saw him," John wrote, "I fell at his feet as though dead". Next, John hears Jesus declare that God's kingdom is, indeed, coming soon - and promise those who endure that "I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming upon the whole world".

John tells how moments later, having ascended "in the spirit" into the heavens, he was allowed to glimpse the glorious throne of God, the One on the throne radiating light, set among seven flaming torches, much as John had read in Ezekiel's prophecy.

Although many people assume that Revelation is all about the end of the world, the first vision in the first chapter of the book, is one of Christ, who is present among the churches. Then Revelation takes a look at what is going on in the churches through Christ's eyes. The idea is that Revelation wants us first to take a look at who Christ is and then take a look at who we are in relation to Christ. One of the main points of the Book of Revelation is to encourage followers of Christ to persevere through the troubles of this world and to worship the one true God, while condemning the ways opposed to God that are characterized by violence, idolatry, and greed.

Today's chapter consists of a visually stunning description of the throne room

of God, in which God is at the centre and is worshipped and praised. This is a stylized image of God's kingdom, in which God's will of order, peace, and joy is supreme. This is set up against the kingdom of this world, in which idolatry, violence, oppression, and injustice rule. The book of Revelation calls Christians to remain faithful to God and Christ and to resist the powers of evil in the conviction that God will prevail and bring salvation in the new Jerusalem.

Revelation's vision of the heavenly throne room introduces people to God, who is the Creator. The scene pictures a rightly ordered universe in which God is at the centre. Around the throne are four living creatures, who represent the created order. The creatures' faces are those of a wild and domestic animal, a bird, and a human being. The one with the human face does not take the central place of God, but with all creation joins in praise of God. The elders are the heavenly representatives of the community of faith. As they cast down their crowns before the throne, they recognize that God, and not the elders, is Lord of all. God is praised for being the creator of all things. Although Revelation is usually seen as a book of destruction, God's fundamental identity is that of Creator. This scene anticipates the outcome of the book, where God's purposes culminate in new creation. The words "holy, holy, holy" and the images of casting down crowns by heaven's glassy sea have inspired many hymns we use in worship. Revelation functions rightly when it invites us into worship too - which we do as we add our voices to the song.

Amen.