The Book of Revelation

How should we read it? Is it a detailed blueprint of something... past, present, or future? Why are the images so fantastic? All sorts of questions come into people's minds as they read this book. Some have the feeling that the book is very difficult to read. We should just read it. The book was intended as exhortation and encouragement to the early churches, and it now serves as exhortation and encouragement to us. The original readers were common readers, and so are we all today. John has not written a book that is inaccessible at all. By giving it our attention, we will be instructed by it, as were the original readers.

So why are we presented with such fantastic images? The book contains such images because that is what was shown to John while he was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day (Rev. 1:10). John's first vision was of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. The staggering images give us the unmistakable impression that what happens in the book has greater than cosmic significance, it has eternal significance. The book is about the struggle of good and evil, our redemption by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the eternal triumph that belongs to him. The eternal existence, birth, earthly life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are stunning beyond words, so if words are to be used to communicate what has happened, what is happening now, and what will happen in the future, what better words can be used than those that originate from a great vision from Jesus Christ? These staggering images impress themselves upon our minds and motivate us to endurance and to be encouraged in the face of difficulty. The early believers needed such encouragement because in some cases their lives were being threatened. We also need encouragement in our setting, wherever and whatever that may be! We need this book. We need to see the battle that is being waged between good and evil, and we need to see in the most dramatic terms how glorious and triumphant our Lord is and will be! This is the reason for the unique format (in the New Testament) of this book. Don't look at the book superficially as a prediction of the future. It is a vision of the present and the future, based upon what Jesus Christ has accomplished! Its purpose is not to predict details about the future, but rather to exhort us to faithful living right now. The battle, judgment, and triumph of Jesus that are portrayed in the fantastic visions of Revelation are simply a call to be faithful to him now. The book is about how we should live in the light of the unspeakably stunning plan of God. We may go to other biblical books and study them to understand this plan; the Spirit will help us to understand the other books. Then, when we read the great vision of Revelation, we will understand that even these words about the vision are inadequate to express the greatness of what God has done, is doing now, and will do through Christ.

The reader will recognize images and themes from other biblical books. The image of a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1-2) surely echoes the great Old Testament revelation in Isaiah 65:17-19. And the seven great plagues of Revelation, beginning in the eighth chapter, point us back to the plagues of Egypt; in both cases, men would not repent (Rev. 9:20). The Book of Revelation points throughout to the struggle of good and evil, and to the triumph of God in Jesus Christ. Like other books of the Bible, the intention is to strengthen and encourage the faithful to maintain their testimony to Jesus, even in the face of persecution. Read the book like this.

In terms of its inspiration, this book is different from other books in the New Testament in which the writers, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, produced works that arose from their own mind, heart, and experience. The Book of Revelation, on the other hand, is a vision almost in its entirety, and John wrote down what he saw and heard. It is different in this respect. John still wrote the book himself, from his experience, but this experience was a vision. John's material comes from quite outside of our experience in this sense, because we have not seen the Lord directly, but it was not outside the experience of the other apostles. We remember Paul's vision of the Lord in Acts 9 when he was just blinded by a bright light as the Lord spoke to him. And all the other apostles saw Jesus during his life and ministry, as well as after the resurrection. So, the visual presence of the Lord does not lie outside the experience of any of the apostles! The uniqueness of this vision, therefore, is that it came at the end of the apostolic period, and Jesus did appear to John in his glorified body, which nobody had ever seen before. The transfiguration of the Lord was different (Luke 9:28-36). Jesus, at the end of the apostolic period, presented himself in his glorified body to John as the triumphant Lord so that the churches would remember him in the face of the difficult trials they were undergoing. We should realize that any believer's experience is equally as stunning as even that of the apostles who encountered the Lord himself visually, because we possess the gift of the Holy Spirit and we always stand in the presence of Jesus Christ himself (Matt. 28:20). The Lord has also promised to show himself to those who obey him (John 14:21). Furthermore, the Spirit lives with us and is in us, so we do know Him (John 14:17). Our lives are indeed in perfect continuity with Jesus' disciples who saw him (John 20:29). It's not the vision of the Lord that is decisive; many people saw Jesus visually and did not believe in him! We have not seen Jesus visually, but we believe in him! The different eras are no advantage or disadvantage when it comes to believing in Jesus; we are all in the same exact boat! John's vision was not an advantage to him that we do not possess. None of his original readers saw the vision either, but the book was used by the Holy Spirit to encourage them in very tough times to remain true to their Lord, and so it is used by the Spirit in our time. The Spirit is not hampered by anything; the Spirit is able to bring us through all our experience, whatever that may be, to stand on the last day in the presence of Jesus Christ and to see him face to face (1 Cor. 13:12).

The Book of Revelation is not intended as a crystal ball to see into the details of the future. Some interpreters attempt to use the book as such. Some of these interpretations have been more fantastic than the images in the book itself. The book does have significance for the future, just as it has significance for our present, and for the past as well. The book grips us with the question as to how we shall live out our days, beginning with today! Our present and our future are based on the victory that Christ won on the cross. The Book of Revelation points to the same themes as other New Testament books. It is an exhortation like the epistles. It does not give us any insights into the details of the future that the rest of scripture does not already give us, except for the important teaching about the "second death." It is intended, as a staggering vision, to communicate to us the significance of remaining faithful to our Lord today and into the future.

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