

Apocalypse Now

Reading REVELATION | MAX LEE

Ever since the publication of Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), the book of Revelation has been wrongly read as a road map to the future. Lindsey popularized a (classic dispensationalist) way of reading Revelation in the twentieth century that continues to have a cultural influence on Christians today.

Typically this method attempts to connect the narrative episodes in the biblical texts with the real-time events reported by the local news. Many, for instance, have tried to identify “the Beast” (Revelation 13:1-10) with the world leaders of their day. Their guesses have ranged from the pope, to Nazi Germany's Adolf Hitler, and to every modern U.S. president including our current one. Sadly, the August 8, 2008, issue of *Time* magazine records the following statement from Lindsey: “Obama is correct in saying that the world is ready for someone like him—a messiah-like figure, charismatic and glib.... The Bible calls that leader the Antichrist.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. God bless our president. He certainly needs our prayers if some eccentric members of American evangelicalism think of him as the devil incarnate. Speculations such as

this ignore a fundamental principle of biblical interpretation: that the literary genre of a book tells us how to read the pages of its text.

Here is a thought experiment. Imagine if a mysterious disaster hit the local library and all the book covers were torn off. Your job is to re-shelve every book according to its literary genre, but there are no title pages. How hard would it be to complete your task?

The answer is not very hard at all. Read a few sentences of the opening paragraph, and the genre will be self-evident. If the book says, “Take two eggs, mix them with flour and salt,” it is probably a cookbook. “Once upon a time in a land far, far away” sounds like a fairy tale. “On July 4, 1776, George Washington marched” is likely a history book.

Read a few sentences in the opening paragraph of Revelation, and it is unmistakably an *apocalypse*. In fact, Revelation tells us in the very first three words of the Greek text that this is an *apocalypsis Iesou Christou*, or a “revelation from Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:1).

The Apocalyptic Genre

An apocalypse, which literally means “an uncovering” or “an unveiling”

but is frequently translated as “a revelation,” was a widespread literary genre in the Roman world, much as biographies, histories, novels, poetry, and science fiction are common today. There were already several Jewish apocalypses in circulation in the first and second centuries A.D., including 1 and 2 Enoch, the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, the Apocalypse of Abraham, and the Apocalypse of Adam, to name just a few. Our own Old Testament includes one canonical example: Daniel.

Apocalyptic literature is an intensified form of prophecy. If prophecy saw repentance as the ideal solution to the problem of sin and apostasy, then apocalyptic literature addressed a situation so dire and a people so bound to evil that repentance no longer appeared possible. God had to break into history to create new possibilities for humanity.

The way apocalypses show how God operates in our world is through visionary experiences. The seer can travel a great distance to receive a vision, or the human spirit can be swept up into the different levels of heaven while its body remains on earth (Revelation 1:10). An angel often acts as a mediator or guide, but sometimes God directly reveals to



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the seer the spiritual significance of earthly events (Revelation 1:2).

It was a common practice for the church to have seers report their vision and share it as a word of prophecy during a public time of Christian worship (1 Corinthians 14:29-33). The prophecy was subject to the discernment of the entire congregation, but if found authentic, everyone became accountable to hear and obey it (Revelation 1:3; 22:7). Because the author of Revelation was exiled to the island of Patmos for his persistent witness, his particular vision was written down in the form of a letter, circulated among the seven churches of Asia Minor, and then read aloud in a liturgical setting (Revelation 1:3-4).

The apocalyptic and prophetic genres do *not* lend themselves to a Lindsey-esque mode of interpreting visions. They were never meant to be read as horoscopes to the future. Neither do they regulate the relevance of Revelation only to those Christians living near the time of Jesus's return. Rather, whenever Revelation discusses the future, its purpose is to encourage a response from the reader in the *immediate* moment.

In the same way Jonah warned of a future judgment against the citizens of Nineveh in order to spark an immediate repentance from them (Jonah 3:4-10), the prophet John even

when describing far-off judgments (though many were concurrent with his day) expected his contemporary readers to respond now, not later. The readers of this apocalypse are asked to

repent, make costly sacrifices, and with haste join God in his mission to rescue the world from sin. Revelation cannot be treated as a note stuffed in a bottle, lost in the ocean of time, only to be opened and deciphered by those on shore who live near the

Max Lee is associate professor of New Testament at North Park Theological Seminary. He is currently writing a short commentary on Revelation for the revised Baker Evangelical Commentary on the Bible (available November 2009). Scripture translations used are the author's.

proximity of Christ's return. Whatever John the seer observed in his visions, it must have been understandable to the original audience who first received its message.

John and His Churches

Early patristic traditions beginning with Justin Martyr identified the author of Revelation as John, one of the Twelve, the son of Zebedee. He was writing near the end of Emperor Domitian's reign around the year A.D. 95.

At this time, the churches of Asia Minor faced multiple threats to their faith from different fronts. Some Christians (like those living in Smyrna and Philadelphia) experienced persecution and lost their businesses, their homes, and even their lives (Revelation 2:8-11; 3:7-13). Other congregations (like Sardis and Laodicea) were tempted by the luxuries of Rome and in danger of moral compromise (Revelation 3:1-6; 3:14-22). Still others (like Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira) fought off heretics who led many astray with their false teaching (Revelation 2:1-7, 12-29).

Looming over the heads of all was the constant shadow of the imperial cult. Christians faced a moral crisis as they were pressured to forsake their allegiance to Christ and worship the emperor instead.

Literary Guidelines for the Interpretative Task

Reading a composition according to its literary genre is essential for the interpreter. No one reads poetry, for example, as if it were prose. Although we do not share the cultural and literary instincts of the first-century reader, there is a simple guideline that we can all practice to avoid misinterpreting Revelation's central message. Rather than turning to CNN, Fox News, and the worldwide web, we should look to the Old Testament and the historical setting of John's churches for the source material of his visions.

In the series of seven trumpet judgments (Revelation 8:6-11:19), it is doubtful, for example, that John was given a glimpse into a dystopian future and upon seeing unmanned air reconnaissance vehicles with machine guns started to describe them as armored locusts with scorpion stingers (Revelation 9:1-12). John indeed saw locusts, but these monstrous creatures were an intensified form of the eighth Egyptian plague when God sent a swarm of locusts to cover Egypt and destroy its vegetation (Exodus 10:12-20). The Exodus story and other Old Testament narratives, not today's news media, are the source material for John's visionary experience.

The demonic locusts of the fifth trumpet are no ordinary insects since they are described with the combined features of animals, human beings, and other fantastic images. This is a spiritual battle, not a futuristic World War III. Deuteronomy 28 warns that God's people would suffer through the Egyptian plagues if they followed after foreign idols, but Revelation has applied this text to the world at large and the idolatrous values of Rome. The pain that the demonic locusts inflict is due to the hidden consequences of sin. According to Deuteronomy 28, the plagues cause "madness, blindness, confusion of mind" (28:27). Idolaters "will have no rest...and tremble in despair" (28:65), "be filled with constant dread, with life suspended in doubt" (28:66). Any way of life that shuts out God, even one as potentially comfortable as the Roman one, cannot satisfy but instead results in personal torment (Revelation 9:6).

The rest of the trumpet judgments, like the fifth, are also modifications of the ten plagues against Egypt (Exodus 7-12). The first trumpet unleashes hail and fire mixed with blood. The plague burns up a third of the earth, the trees, and green grass (Revelation 8:7; Exodus 7:17-21). The Roman

Empire was founded on bloodshed, and it could only reap more blood as it destroyed the lands with war.

The second trumpet features a burning mountain being thrown into the sea. It turns a third of the sea to blood, killing sea creatures and destroying ships (Revelation 8:8; Exodus 7:21). The destruction of the ships is a symbol of Rome's decline as an economic power since the sea was a means for prosperous trade.

The third trumpet focuses on a huge burning star falling from heaven and into a third of the earth's rivers and springs (Revelation 8:10). The star's name is Wormwood, a particularly bitter herb, one ounce of which can pollute up to 524 gallons of water (Revelation 8:11; Exodus 7:21). This vision assures the church that Rome's political power is in decline (like a star falling from its exalted place) yet warns that with political decline also comes moral decadence. The lures of Roman entertainment can still pollute the Christian community and lead its members to compromise their faith.

We could go on to talk about how the fourth trumpet indicts the imperial cult and its false claim to bring the light of salvation to the world (Revelation 8:12; Exodus 10:21-29), or how the sixth trumpet shows how moral corruption causes entire civilizations to fall apart and ultimately leads to death itself (Revelation 9:13-21; Exodus 12:29-32). But the immediate prophetic challenge is to call the church as intercessors (Revelation 8:2-5), as faithful witnesses (10:1-11:14), and as worshipers who join the heavenly litany despite the disappointment and despair that the plagues bring (11:15-19).

We live in a sinful world where empire, violence, war, economic injustice, disease, and death are perennial sources for human suffering. Revelation speaks to these realities, but more importantly, it asks the reader to respond to them with an enduring faith. ■