

# IN RESPONSE - REVELATION, AN INTRODUCTION

by Dennis Prutow

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To fill out my previous exposition of Revelation which began with chapter 4 and in response to requests from readers, I'm taking a look at the first three chapters of this great book. We begin with an introduction. I am not interested in debating the various views concerning date, authorship, interpretation, etc. I simply give you my position with some support. I do this so you will understand my approach to Revelation.

First, we take the traditional view John, the son of Zebedee, the disciple of Jesus and the apostle, wrote Revelation. This is the majority report regarding authorship.

Second, there are two primary views concerning the time of writing. The early date places John's work prior to 70 A.D. and the destruction of Jerusalem. The late date places John's writing at the end of the First Century about 96 A.D. Contemporary advocates of an early date are Jay Adams and Kenneth Gentry. Adams is an amillennialist. Gentry is a postmillennialist. Irenaeus testifies to the late date of Revelation. This is significant since Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, one of the seven churches of Revelation. And Polycarp was, in his youth, a disciple of the apostle John. At this point I personally favor the later date for the book.

Third, I see one of the primary themes of the book of Revelation to be the majesty of God. We have before us a divine drama. The Triune God is the main character. Jesus Christ takes center stage and is the One worthy to unfold history. Christ speaks to the church and lays before her consummate blessing and victory. Because the judgments are God's judgments and the victory is God's victory, we ought to come away from Revelation with a deeper appreciation for the greatness, majesty and glory of God.

Fourth, we need to realize, as we study the book of Revelation, that John presents us with many and varied visions. These visions are pictures of reality not reality itself. Albertus Pieters likens the visions of Revelation to political cartoons. He does not do this to be irreverent. Rather, Pieters wants to make a valid

point. Pieters then displays a cartoon from a 1928 edition of the New York *Herald Tribune*.<sup>1</sup> An elephant wraps its trunk around a tiger's tail.



and joyously swings the tiger overhead.

In 1998, we do not grasp the meaning. We do not know the historical context. We do not know the symbolism of the tiger. The tiger represents "Tammany Hall, the Democratic organization in New York City."<sup>2</sup> The cartoon portrays the "victory won by the Republican party in the national election of 1928, when Herbert Hoover was elected president."<sup>3</sup> Pieters says, "We are in a very similar situation with respect to the interpretation of the book of Revelation."<sup>4</sup>

Keeping this in mind, we must be careful to remember Revelation does give us great word pictures. Again, I say, the pictures are not reality itself. They symbolize certain realities. Because Revelation is rich in Hebrew thought, the Old Testament helps us to understand many of these symbols. Some of the symbols are also interpreted for us by Christ Himself. We ought to humbly allow Scripture to interpret Scripture.

Fifth, there are also several differing approaches to the overall interpretation of Revelation. The Historical interpretation sees Revelation as a record of the history of the church from the time of Christ to the end.

Another view holds that all of Revelation from chapter four forward is future. Fulfillment comes immediately before the second advent of Christ. These futurist interpreters fall into two basic categories. The more moderate futurists are classic premillennialists exemplified by George Ladd and Leon Morris. The more radical futurists are the dispensationalists. Dispensationalism was popularized in the Schofield Reference Bible.

The preterist interpretation looks at almost all of the book of Revelation as fulfilled in the first two or three centuries of the Christian era. Preterist means past. The preterist is also more likely to be postmillennial in approach and to argue for the early date for Revelation.

Another school of thought looks at Revelation as a "philosophy of history." James Ramsey represents this school of thought. He says Revelation

was not intended to give beforehand a history of particular events, but to present the principles that were to shape the world's history, so far as it concerned the progress of the divine kingdom, in their chief combinations and workings, and so to unfold the general course and grand characteristics of God's dealings with His church and the nations during the long ages of conflict and darkness through which the church was to pass,—the various forms and combinations of evil that should oppose her, and the power by which she should overcome, and the glory that should eventually crown her triumph.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Albertus Pieters, *The Lamb, The Woman and the Dragon* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1937), opposite 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-39.

<sup>5</sup> James B. Ramsey, *The Book of Revelation: An Exposition of the First Eleven Chapters* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 35.

# IN RESPONSE - REVELATION, AN INTRODUCTION (CON'T)

by Dennis Prutow

I am partial to the "philosophy of history" approach to Revelation. I also agree with Swete who says of his exposition:

With the preterists' it will take its stand on the circumstances of the age and the locality to which the book belongs...; with the 'futurists' it will look for the fulfillments of St. John's pregnant words in times yet to come. With the school of Auberlin and Benson it will find in the Apocalypse a Christian philosophy of history; with the 'continuous-historical' school it can see in the progress of events ever new illustrations of the working of the great principles which are revealed.<sup>1</sup>

No approach to Revelation has a monopoly on the truth. Each has its drawbacks.

Sixth, I hold this wonderful book of Revelation is divided into seven parallel sections recapitulating, from different perspectives, the time between the first and second advents. As Murray begins a brief exposition of Jesus' discourse on the Mount of Olives, he notes Matthew 24:4-14 gives "a forecast of interadventual history," a brief outline of the period between the first coming of Christ and the second.<sup>2</sup> Murray then notes:

Verses 15-28 comprise another section of the discourse. This section is not a continuation, because verse 14 had brought us up to the end. It must be, to some extent, recapitulation. Our Lord forecasts to the disciples certain additional features that had been delineated in verses 4-14, and gives the warnings and exhortations appropriate to the events involved. *Here we have a principle which must be applied in the interpretation of prophecy.* Delineation of the eschatological drama is not always continuously progressive; it is often recapitulatory. But recapitulation is not repetition (italics mine).<sup>3</sup>

Milton Terry suggests, "John's Apocalypse is but an enlargement of our Lord's

eschatological discourse on the Mount of Olives."<sup>4</sup> If Murray and Terry are right, Revelation will use parallel sections and recapitulation. Geoffrey Wilson says, "The dominant place which is given to the number seven has convinced some scholars that the book consists of seven parallel sections, each which depicts the church's conflict throughout the gospel age from a different standpoint."<sup>5</sup> Wilson's outline follows:

Section 1: *Christ among the seven churches* (chs 1-3).

The seven letters speak to the church in every age, because they show that the glorified Christ is always with his people, both in judgment to call them to repentance and in grace to assure them of victory.

Section 2: *The Lamb and the seven seals* (chs 4-7).

The vision of heaven reveals the victorious Lamb as the only one who is worthy to take the book with seven seals. These he opens one by one, thus securing the judgment of the wicked and the bliss of the redeemed.

Section 3: *The seven trumpets of judgment* (chs 8-11).

The first six warning judgments fail to bring the wicked to repentance and, though the witnessing church must suffer persecution, all these wrongs are avenged when the seventh trumpet heralds the final judgment.

Section 4: *The woman and the dragon* (chs 12-14).

As the woman gives birth to a son, the dragon (Satan) waits to devour him, but the child is caught up to heaven. The dragon now persecutes the woman and is assisted by the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth. The section ends with a vision of Christ's coming in judgment.

Section 5: *The seven bowls of wrath* (chs 15, 16).

In this vision there is portrayed the outpouring of God's wrath upon the impenitent and the terror of the last judgment.

Section 6: *The fall of Babylon* (chs 17-19).

The fall of the godless city is followed by rejoicing in heaven, and the destruction of the beast and the false prophet is depicted in a further account of Christ's second coming.

Section 7: *Christ's victory over Satan* (chs 20-22).

During the gospel age Satan is bound so that he may no longer deceive the nations, but he is released for the last battle, only to be overthrown at Christ's return, when the present universe is replaced by the new heaven and the new earth.<sup>6</sup>

There is another similarity with Matthew 24-25. Matthew 24:3 records, "As He [Jesus] was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?'" This question comes immediately after Jesus predicts doom for the temple. In response, the disciples ask their three-fold question. The question and the answer span the interval between Jesus' first coming and the second. Note there is more emphasis upon the destruction of the temple early in Matthew 24 while the emphasis falls upon final judgment as we pass on to Matthew 25.

In a similar way, the first section of Revelation gives us letters to existent churches. The final section of Revelation emphasizes the final state of believers with God in glory. As we move through the seven sections of the book, emphasis shifts to the final glorious victory of God over evil and the participation of the saints in that victory.

One final word of introduction. Some will ask what commentaries I have found particularly useful and helpful. Check the notes. I find three commentaries particularly helpful. They are Albertus Pieters, *The Lamb, The Woman and the Dragon*; James Ramsey, *Revelation*; and Geoffrey Wilson, *Revelation*.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry B. Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977), ccviii.

<sup>2</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976-82), 2:388.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Apocalypics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 269.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey B. Wilson, *Revelation* (Welwyn, England: Evangelical Press, 1985), 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12

# IN RESPONSE - REVELATION: PROLOGUE AND SALUTATION

by Dennis Prutow

We begin the exposition proper with the prologue, Revelation 1:1-3.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

The book before us is an unveiling given to us by Jesus Christ. Although it includes a revelation of Christ Himself, it is not primarily an unveiling of Christ. This is the case since the revelation comes from God the Father and is given to Christ. In turn, Our Lord gives this revelation to His servants.

The revelation given by God to His Son and passed to the servants of Christ involves the things which must shortly take place. Beyond doubt the book is written to early Christians and is meant to undergird their faith regarding impending Providences of God. Although we may place emphasis on impending events, the text also places emphasis on the *necessity* of these events. Jesus tells the disciples concerning their own time and the events surrounding the collapse of the Jewish nation, "All these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs" (Matthew 24:8). More will follow.

The revelation comes from God to Christ then to John by the mediation of Christ's angel. Angels play a large role in Revelation. They are messengers which transmit and carry out the purposes of God. The similarity is with Moses who received the law at Sinai through the mediation of angels (Acts 7:53, Galatians 3:19, Hebrews 2:2).

John then bore witness, through his book, to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. He did so by setting forth all that he saw in writing so we can all benefit from the revelation.

As a result, there is great blessing attached to those who read, hear, and take heed to the book containing these visions. Verse 3 is the first of *seven* beati-

tudes in the book of revelation. It carries the same form as those uttered by Jesus in Matthew 5:1-9. Reference is to the *public reading* of Revelation. The assembly of God's people is the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is a unique place for reading God's word and for the application of that word to the hearts of men and women. When you heed this book, you grasp the majesty and glory of God. You live under the power of His majesty. "The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). The study of Revelation is not brain candy.

Verses 4-6 gives the salutation:

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

John faithfully transmits the visions received to real people in real time. Although this is the case, the number seven refers to perfection, completeness and fullness. The seven churches are representative. We acknowledge this is the case when we read the apostle Paul. He also wrote to seven churches, the churches at Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica. We accept these letters as directed to specific people but also directed to the church at large throughout history. In like manner, the letters to the seven churches of Revelation are also to us.

We now hear the gospel. Grace to you. Grace comes in the form of the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit enabling men and women to embrace Christ. There is then peace with God. "Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand" (Romans 5:1-2). This grace comes from the Father who is eter-

nal, the beginning and the end. He is the fountain of grace. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing" (Ephesians 1:3). This grace and peace is mediated by the Holy Spirit. The number seven indicates He is a perfect, all wise, all powerful, all gracious Spirit.

Finally, this grace and peace come to us on the basis of the work of Jesus Christ. He is the faithful witness to the plans and purposes of God. He was crucified, dead, and buried. He rose again the third day. He is the firstborn of God worthy to receive all of heaven and earth as an inheritance. He therefore sits on the throne of heaven as Lord of all.

This Jesus demonstrates the love of God in His death and resurrection on behalf of sinners. He thereby releases men and women from the ruling power of sin. He forms His people into a new kingdom. They are priests who offer sacrifices of praise to God because this God is the indeed the source and wellspring of all grace and peace. The salutation properly ends with doxology.

John adds to this doxology a word concerning the coming of Christ. "Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen" (Revelation 1:7). We begin to get a flavor of the symbolism involved in the book with these words. Christ will come a second time in glory. Those who pierced Him, those guilty of sins making it necessary for Him to die, will see Him. Citizens of heaven, Christians, will rejoice at their salvation. The tribes of the earth, unbelievers, will mourn their judgment before the King.

This opening section of Revelation concludes with triumphant words of the Father, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty'" (Revelation 1:8). God is the eternal One. We must know His eternal majesty, His mighty power, His blessed holiness, justice, grace, mercy and love. And we will!

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# IN RESPONSE - THE VISION OF CHRIST

by Dennis Prutow

Revelation 1:9-11, introduces the great vision of the Master, Jesus Christ.

I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, "Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

John is a brother to all the Christians in Asia Minor and a fellow member of Christ's kingdom. He is a participant in their tribulation. He preaches perseverance and lives patiently before God. This patience and perseverance result from union and communion with Christ.

Traditionally, John was banished to Patmos, "a small rocky island in the Aegean Sea lying about thirty-seven miles west-southwest of Miletus. . . ." (See Acts 20:17). John was exiled to Patmos "because" of his testimony that Christ is Lord of all and "because" he preached this doctrine. "Committal to an island was a device used by provincial governors to rid themselves of men of high rank whose influence upon others was deemed to be harmful."<sup>2</sup>

John was taken up in a state of ecstasy and rapture. He passed the barrier separating this life with the spiritual realm. God thus transported him on the Lord's Day. The word translated *Lord* is used in one other place, 1 Corinthians 11:20, to designate the Lord's Supper. This is the Supper and the Day uniquely belonging to the Lord. The Lord's Day is the first day of the week, resurrection day. It is the day memorializing God's redemption (Deuteronomy 5:15).

John heard a voice like a trumpet. The trumpet call is a warning, a call to gather God's people, or a summons to action. Israel responded to the trumpet call to invade and crush Jericho. The significance of the message John is about to

hear is accentuated by the trumpet sounding voice. The voice commands John to put the visions into writing and deliver his book to all the churches.

John naturally turns to see who is speaking to him. Verse 12, "Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands." John sees seven golden candelabra. These are lampstands similar to the one found in the tabernacle. Each had seven lamps. "The seven lampstands are the seven churches" (Revelation 1:20). The church is to shed perfect light in a dark and sinful world (Matthew 5:14). The oil for the lamps comes from God (Zechariah 4).

Verse 13, "And in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash." Christ walks in the midst of His church, in the midst of His people. The title Son of Man emphasizes Christ's deity (Daniel 7:13). He is robed as the high priest of God and carries the ephod on His breast over His heart.

Again, we must realize the church of Christ is a special dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:22). "You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

God is essentially present everywhere (Psalm 139:7). God is graciously present in heaven and present in wrath in hell (Psalm 139:8). God's presence in the Old Testament temple differed from His general presence with the people of God. Similarly, Christ's gracious presence with His gathered people differs significantly from His general presence in the world. Christ is present with His church with special grace to apply His word to human hearts and change lives.

John now proceeds with a description of Christ. Verse 14, "His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire." Christ is shown with a white head of wisdom (Proverbs 16:31). His eyes are burning, penetrating, and piercing. "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good" (Proverbs 15:3).

Verse 15, "His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters." Christ does not have feet of clay like the feet of the image in Daniel 2:34 which was destroyed by God's kingdom. He strides through history with strength. His voice is one of power. Anyone who stands by Niagara Falls and hears the power of *that* water can understand *this* symbol.

Verse 16, "In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength." "The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches" (Revelation 1:20). Angels are messengers (Matthew 11:10). The primary messengers in the churches are the pastors. Christ has them in His hand. What comfort and care. Christ also speaks the word of God in grace and in judgment (Hebrews 4:12).

John's reaction is simple.

I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things" (Revelation 1:17-19).

It is as though the wind is knocked out of John and his heart stops. He falls on His face before Christ. He then hears wonderful words, "Do not fear." The disciples heard these words on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 6:50, Luke 5:10) and on the mount of transfiguration (Matthew 17:7). Christ then speaks of Himself as equal with God. He is the first and the last. Compare Revelation 1:8. Christ is back from the dead. He is the one who has the keys of death and hell. "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). We must stand in awe of the majesty of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.