

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

CHAPTER 1

THE APOCALYPSE--SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Only with prudent trepidation do we undertake the study of the Apocalypse, the final written message of the New Testament. Of all the writings of the New Testament, it is the most obscure and enigmatic. St. Jerome, the great biblical scholar of the early Church, complained in a letter to Paulinus, bishop of Nola, *“The Apocalypse of John has as many secrets as words.”* There are 913 distinct words in this work. Without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit it remains a sealed book, and its study an exercise in futility or worse, delusion. The following admonition of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council to the students of the Sacred Scriptures will never be more appropriate than in this present study, *“And let them remember that prayer must accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; for ‘we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine sayings’”* (St. Ambrose and Doc. on Rev. Chap. VI, Sec.25). St. Jerome maintains that to read or to study the Holy Scriptures without the Holy Spirit is like skipping stones across a frozen pond. The mind remains merely on the surface of meaning, while the spirit remains in darkness.

THE LITERARY FORM

The author of our present study used a literary form peculiar to his time, one that was certainly mysterious and perhaps even bizarre to people of today. It is called apocalyptic. The work begins with the Greek word *apocalypse*. It means uncovering or unveiling. The use of the word implies disclosure of a hidden and specific truth, or revelation of events unknown, whether of the past, present, or future. Apocalyptic writings are prophetic in the sense that the writer acts as a messenger from God, revealing that which only the Divine could know. However, it differs from those writings generally accepted as prophetic because of its dualistic view. The apocalyptic writer does not picture merely the perceived empirical reality of the here and now, he beholds the presence and power that stands behind the present reality and transcends it.

He sees beneath the earthly dimension the supernatural struggle of good and evil. Human beings are but willing instruments in an unseen and undreamed reality.

One of the essential elements of apocalyptic writing that distinguishes it from general prophetic works is that the revealed material comes clothed in picturesque, often bizarre images and mysterious symbols. All true mystical experience is ineffable, which means such experiences cannot adequately be expressed in ordinary, concrete language. The mystical experience defies definition. Even after the seer has described the mystical message, the hearer only “sees indistinctly, as through a dark glass.” Moreover, in the case of such writers, they resort to images and symbols not only because of the mystical nature of the revelation, but because of the politically volatile nature of the material revealed. The message is deliberately veiled to hide it from the uninitiated.

Apocalyptic writings deal with past and present reality, as well as with the future. The future is divided into the historical future--things to come to be within this present world, and the final cosmic occurrence that would bring into being the new heaven and the new earth. The images and symbols differentiate between the dimensions of time. The past and present reality would be only thinly veiled and easily decoded like a political cartoon. As the seer describes future events, the images become more nebulous and vague and easily misread. When the author speaks of the cosmic events that will shake the foundations of the universe, the images and symbols become wild and fantastic. It is the intention of the author to “blow the minds” of the hearers. Apocalyptic writing is not meant so much to produce knowledge of the mind as to cause illumination within the human spirit.

This form of literature came to be in times of religious crises. It took the form of a series of visions supposedly received by a patriarch or prophet of old, but hidden until a later time. The real author of the work remained hidden under a pseudonym. The purpose of such writings was to console the people of God in times of earthly afflictions. This form of literature appeared in Israel after the Babylonian Exile, during the Maccabean period, and during the Roman conquest of Israel. Apocalyptic passages are found in Isaiah (Chapters 13 through 35), Joel, and Zechariah. They are also found in Ezekiel, which is largely apocalyptic. It was the Book of Daniel, however, that set the form for later apocalyptic writings. Daniel was probably written around 165 B.C., when the Jewish people suffered under Antiochus Epiphanes. Other Jewish

apocalyptic works followed Daniel but none were included in the Sacred Scriptures.

Christians coming out of a Jewish environment would be influenced by the Jewish apocalyptic writings, which were very popular at the time. The writer of the New Testament Apocalypse was certainly influenced by Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. We find apocalyptic characteristics in St. Paul's Second letter to the Thessalonians (2:1-12). A "little Apocalypse" has appeared in the Synoptic Gospels (Mk. 13:24-31).

THE AUTHOR

Unlike the Jewish writings, the Apocalypse of the New Testament was produced under the author's own name. The gift of prophecy was accepted in the Christian Community. The writer is a Christian prophet known and respected by the Churches to whom he writes. His name is John. He writes in exile from the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, southwest of Ephesus. Who was John? Our earliest written testimony comes from St. Irenaeus who was born in Asia, probably in Smyrna, about 140 A.D. He maintained that this John was the son of Zebedee, the brother of James, one of the Twelve Apostles. St. Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Origen also accepted John the Apostle to be the author of the Apocalypse and the fourth Gospel.

Historical evidence confirms that John the Apostle resided in Ephesus and was buried there. According to Irenaeus, John lived in the time of Trajan to at least the year 98 A.D. Ancient writers confirm that the Apostle lived to an old age. The fourth Gospel indicates this (see Jn. 21:21-24).

Authorship of the Apocalypse was not questioned until the Third Century, when St. Dionysius of Alexandria held another John to be the author of the Apocalypse. He found support for this in the fact that Ephesus had two monuments claiming to be the tomb of John. According to Papias, a personal friend of St. Polycarp, there were two Johns who were both disciples of the Lord. St. Dionysius ascribed the authorship of the Apocalypse to the other disciple named John, for he could not accept the fact that the same person wrote both the Apocalypse and the fourth Gospel.

It is also difficult for many modern scholars to believe that the same person produced both works. It has been said that the Apocalypse contains the worst Greek in the New Testament, whereas the fourth Gospel is written in worthy

and honorable Greek. Some scholars solve the problem by maintaining that a school of disciples naturally grew up around the famous apostle. The mind and spirit of John stimulated the works of the Johannine School, which later produced and published in John's name. Even St. Dionysius, the first to doubt John's authorship, later wrote, "*We do not know who it is that writes but it is John that speaks.*"

Since St. John's authorship was generally accepted, at least in the Western Church, the divine inspiration of the work was readily accepted. The Apocalypse, along with the Letters of John, was classified as an inspired writing. However, the apostolic authorship would not have been so readily upheld if the contents of the book had not been in harmony with the teachings of the other apostolic writings.

TIME OF COMPOSITION

Early Christian tradition is almost unanimous in assigning the Apocalypse to the last years of Domitian, who reigned from 81 to 96 A.D., which still remains the most probable time of composition. It was written at a time of persecution, when the Churches in the East were compelled to choose between Christ and Caesar. As John foresaw the situation, the persecution would spread over the entire Roman Empire, and end only with the fall of Rome and paganism.

The Church had not yet recovered from the psychological shock resulting from the terrible persecution initiated by Nero. This persecution had largely been confined to Rome. There, Christians were killed because they were falsely accused of being arsonists and atheists. But, the persecution that broke out under Domitian was on a large scale, and was concerned with the Christians' refusal to worship the Roman State, and the emperor, who personified the divinity of Rome. Christians were accused of being atheists, and haters of humanity. Domitian was serious about being worshipped! Towards the end of his life he demanded that everyone render him divine homage under the title "Our Lord and God." His will would have been enforced even more in the Roman provinces, for they jealously strove to demonstrate their loyalty to Rome and the emperor. The enforcement of Domitian's decree would have initiated a persecution that would spread like wildfire throughout the Empire, devastating the Christian Church. St. John foresaw and forewarned of this possibility. Only the assassination of Domitian on September 18, 96 A.D., prevented this possibility from becoming a terrible reality.

THE LETTER'S DESTINATION

John directs the Apocalypse as a letter to seven churches in the Roman Province of Asia, which is today the western section of Turkey. The seven cities addressed in the letter were located on a great circular road that connected the most populated and wealthy sections of the province. Even though John addressed only the Seven Churches, he probably intended his message to reach the entire province.

John addresses congregations he had known, and to whom he had ministered, conveying to them revelations from the Chief Shepherd of the Church, Jesus Christ. These revelations came to John through a succession of visions, which he records and transmits as commanded. Each of the Christian congregations addressed in the letter had problems peculiar to itself. Jesus Christ, the glorified Head of the Church, is presented as having personally visited these Churches. He came, not so much in the role of the Good Shepherd, but more as Inspector General. The searchlight of Divine Truth shone upon them, and the Eye of the Lord saw down to their hearts. The spiritual condition of each community was assessed, and its particular circumstances noted. The Lord sent a report of these findings through His messenger John.

One gets the impression that the Inspector General has reviewed His troops in order to assess their weaknesses and strengths. The report indicates the spiritual work to be done speedily within the Churches. They have lived in a time of relative peace, but this period is drawing quickly to an end. A time of tribulation lies ahead.

The letter does not so much turn its attention away from the Seven Churches as it turns the eyes of the Churches away from their own particular problems, to behold a panoramic view of the world. What is revealed is of vital importance to all Christians, and gives reason and purpose for the critical analysis of the individual Christian Communities. What is seen is intended to produce some vital changes with the Christian Church. The visions and revelations are fearsome, and are intended to profoundly affect the spirits of those who hear them. The greatest power the world can muster rises to confront the Church. The visions tell of coming persecution involving the entire Church; the time of persecution remains indefinite. The anticipated and final struggle between the Church and the World--between Christ and the Antichrist--comes in the final visions. The whole world turns in force against the Church. The hour of its greatest peril ushers in the hour of its final

triumph and eternal victory. One author has written that the entire Apocalypse is to the Christian Community a *Sursum Corda*—“Lift up your hearts!”

THE DOCTRINE

The Apocalypse firmly defends the oneness of God. It assumes an immovable stand against idolatry. It beholds in idolatry the mother of all sin and the essential cause for the corruption of all earthly and human life. It was the damning sin of the Empire, reaching its peak with the Roman Emperor’s claiming divinity. Idolatry is demonolatry and magic, and the manifestation of its powers.

The Apocalypse presents the Christ of the Gospel; a Christ changed through the Resurrection and Ascension. Christ receives the titles of God—the Alpha and the Omega, the Living One, The Holy, the True. At the sight of Christ’s glorified humanity, the seer swoons. Christ appears as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who relates to the Church, the world, and to God with the greatest fullness. The Ascended Christ demonstrates total love for His Church. From Him flow all spiritual gifts. These gifts aid the members of the Church toward their final reward. The martyrs are His witnesses, and the saints His servants.

The severity of God is depicted in the Apocalypse. Without a doubt this was intended to give a balanced picture to the God of the Gospel. Life on earth is a time of war; one can be lost in a war. The Apocalypse makes clear the meaning of being lost to God. This message was needed when the Christian Community faced both the moral laxity of pagan life on one side, and pressure to acknowledge the divinity of Rome on the other.

The Apocalypse addressed itself to a concrete situation—the Church in tribulation. The permanent value of the Apocalypse is that it offers insight to the Church for the understanding of world history. The history of this world is an arena in which God works out redemption. All life comes within the embracing Will of God. The history of the world is a demonstration of the continuous conflict between the Will of God and forces of evil. This evil uses human instrumentality to accomplish its designs and purposes, but the evil itself is of cosmic and universal scale. The Will of God is to create a new heaven and new earth in which the saints will be vindicated. This final divine purpose will be accomplished!

THE APOCALYPSE

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“HAPPY IS THE MAN WHO READS THIS PROPHETIC MESSAGE, AND HAPPY ARE THOSE WHO HEAR IT AND HEED WHAT IS WRITTEN IN IT, FOR THE APPOINTED TIME IS NEAR!” (Revelation 1:3)

FIRST DAY: Read Summary through the Literary Form.

- 1. What part does prayer play in the study of Sacred Scripture?**
- 2. What can be expected without prayer and serious study?**
- 3. How would you describe the literary form of apocalyptic writings?**
- 4. Why are unusual images and symbols used?**

SECOND DAY: Read Daniel 12:1-13.

- 1. What feeling does reading this chapter of Daniel leave within you?**
- 2. In what way is this reading apocalyptic?**
- 3. What does this reading foretell?**
- 4. How does it comfort God’s People?**

THIRD DAY: Read II Thessalonians 2:1-12.

- 1. What feeling does this reading create within you?**
- 2. To what danger does Paul address himself in this reading?**
- 3. In what way is this reading apocalyptic?**
- 4. Why will many be deceived by the Evil One?**

FOURTH DAY: Read Mark 13:5-37.

- 1. What feeling does this reading leave within you?**
- 2. Why do you think this reading has been called the “Little Apocalypse?”**
- 3. What is the real danger in the “Last Days?”**
- 4. What does the Lord advise His people to do?**

FIFTH DAY: Read Summary: The Author, and Time of Composition.

- 1. What is the best evidence for accepting John the Apostle as author of the Apocalypse?**
- 2. Why do many scholars find it difficult to accept the Apostle as the author of this work?**
- 3. Why does the reign of Domitian (81-96 A.D.) appear to be the time of composition of the Apocalypse?**
- 4. Why was it possible that a great persecution would break out during the reign of Domitian?**

SIXTH DAY: Read Summary through The Doctrine.

- 1. Who addresses the messages to the Seven Churches? Why?**
- 2. What is the great evil that is demonstrated in the Apocalypse?**
- 3. How do you understand the severity of God presented in the Apocalypse?**
- 4. What lesson does the Apocalypse have for us today?**