

Course Outline

God's Plans for Cosmic History, Part 1

Revelation 1:1-8:6

Analysis

- I. Introduction (1:1-20)
 - a. Prologue (vv. 1-3)
 - i. Verses 1-3 form the prologue, which identifies the genre of the book (a “revelation”--i.e., apocalypse), the nearness of the end (though in the New Testament this means that everything is ready with Christ’s first coming; “the last days” began at Pentecost--Acts 2:17), and a blessing attached to the study and application of this book as the word of God (particularly for believers in persecution).
 - b. Greetings and dedication (vv. 4-8)
 - i. Verses 4-8 offer greetings and a dedication. John is writing an encyclical to seven churches in Asia Minor (western Turkey) that could easily have been delivered from one to the next via a roughly circular road (cf. v. 11). The rich Christological and Trinitarian references (taking “seven spirits” in v. 4 as the “sevenfold [i.e., complete] Spirit”) remind us that there is much theology to be learned from Revelation even apart from the more controversial parts of its eschatology.²⁰² John also applies language of Jews in the Old Testament to the church (“a kingdom and priests”--v. 6) a point to keep in mind when we come to chapter 7. Verse 7 reminds us of the central eschatological point of the book--Jesus will return in triumph--on which most interpreters can also agree.
 - c. John’s commission (vv. 9-20)
 - i. Verses 9-20 describe John’s commission. He writes from exile in the penal colony on the island of Patmos in the Aegean sea, a kind of ancient Alcatraz. He had some sort of ecstatic experience one Sunday (v. 10), including a vision of the exalted “son of man” (i.e., Jesus; cf.

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Dan. 7:13). The individual items of this picture of Jesus should not be given independent significance, but together they create a powerful portrait of Christ the glorious, majestic judge. Christ identifies himself as the Eternal One, using the identical language that God Himself has just used (vv. 8, 17). He commissions John (v. 19) to write about what he has seen (presumably this vision just reported), what is now (the present events of chapters 2-3) and what will take place later (at least chapters 6-22). The heavenly vision of chapters 4-5 could be seen as either present or future. John is to write to the “angels” (or “messengers”) of the seven churches. This could refer to pastors, emissaries from the churches, metaphorically to guardian angels, or even to the heavenly nature of the church, but it is clear that the letters are to be delivered to entire Christian congregations.

II. Letters to the Seven Churches²⁰³

- a. All seven letters are very similarly structured. The general pattern is address, identification of the speaker (Christ), commendation, criticism, threat of judgment, call to hear, and promises to those who “overcome”—i.e., remain faithful Christians in hard times. Two churches receive no criticism: Smyrna and Philadelphia. Two receive no commendation: Sardis and Laodicea. The seven churches reflect the full spectrum of faithfulness and faithlessness present in every age of church history.
 - i. Ephesus (2:1-7)—losing your first love
 - 1. Those who remained orthodox despite the intrusion of heretics (see under Epistles of John above) had won the theological war but lost the ethical battle. Little is known about the Nicolaitans (v. 6) but the word means “conquer the people.” The Ephesians are called to repent and do the works they did at first (v. 5), a reminder that forsaking their first love (v. 4) is not primarily a statement about their lack of emotional warmth but a problem with the practical outworking of their faith. The promise of the tree of life stands in stark contrast with the Artemis cult tree-shrine in town and the asylum it offered.
 - ii. Smyrna (2:8-11)—persevering despite difficult circumstances

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1. A strong Jewish community in this city played a key part in the local persecution; we must not take John's words in v. 9 as applying to all Jews. "Persecution for ten days" employs a small, round number for a short period of time. The offer of a garland (v. 10) was appropriate for a city that had a wreath as its well-known emblem of beauty. Despite their faithfulness, however, God gave them no guarantees of outward blessing in this life.
- iii. Pergamum (2:12-17)--mixing faith and immorality
 1. Pergamum was a center of Zeus worship, Asclepian healings and the imperial cult, any or all of which are good candidates for "Satan's throne" (v. 13). Food sacrificed to idols here probably refers to the feasts to demons of which Paul spoke in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22, since it is linked with sexual immorality. The "hidden manna" is similar in meaning to the bread of life; white stones were used for admission tickets, a jury's vote of acquittal, and a sign of initiation into certain cults (v. 17).
- iv. Thyatira (2:18-29)--confusing the devilish with the divine
 1. Thyatira and Pergamum have similar problems. This time the city is compared with Old Testament Jezebel, Ahab's wicked wife, against whom judgment was prophesied and executed. "Satan's so-called deep secrets" (v. 24) may refer to the (Gnostic?) idea that one has to experience evil deeply in order to show one is immune to it. Thyatira was also the home of merchant guilds (including one for potters) that participated in idolatrous pagan ceremonies. Compare the smashing of the pottery in v. 27.
- v. Sardis (3:1-6)--almost totally dead
 1. The state of the church matched that of the town; both were in eclipse. Those who overcome will never be erased from the book of life (v. 5; cf. Exodus 32:32-33); the double negative is not a challenge to eternal security but a strong affirmation of it and perhaps a direct contrast to the Jews who were crossing off the names of Christians from their synagogue registers.
- vi. Philadelphia (3:7-13)--obedient and faithful
 1. Here is the most positive of all the letters. The key promise

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comes in v. 10. Grammatically this could refer to preservation either by taking the Christians away from the troubled area or by protecting them in the midst of trouble. Proponents of a “pre-trib” rapture favor the former; “post-tribbers,” the latter (citing an exact grammatical parallel with *tereo + ek* in John 17:15). But if this is a reference to the great tribulation at the end of human history, it is the only one in these letters to the seven churches. Every other detail in them makes sense in the context of early church history; perhaps the “hour of trial” here is merely future, empire-wide persecution.²⁰⁴ Is it mere historical coincidence that Philadelphia continued to have a Christian church long after the other churches of Asia Minor had been obliterated by either Romans or Muslims? The stable pillar of v. 12 contrasts with the temples that were often damaged in the ancient world by frequent earthquakes.

vii. Laodicea (3:14-22)--undrinkable and useless

1. This is the most negative of the seven letters. The church in town was like its water supply, proverbial for its lukewarmness. Laodicea did not have its own fresh water, so it had to be piped in either from the clear, cold mountain streams near Colossae or from the therapeutic hot springs near Hierapolis. Either way by the time the aqueducts reached Laodicea, the water had become tepid. Thus hot and cold are both positive metaphors in this passage, over against the state of the Laodiceans.²⁰⁵ Laodicea was also famous for its wealth (it rebuilt itself without Roman aid after an earthquake in A.D. 60), its black wool industry, and a medical school that produced eye salve. By way of contrast, v. 17 declares the Christians there to be “wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.” Jesus knocks at this church’s door to try to reclaim them for a vibrant faith (v. 20). This gentle approach contrasts with the forced entry of Roman officials who demanded lodging in this wealthy town as they came through an impressive triple gate in the city walls.

III. Heavenly Praise (4:1-5:14)

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- a. The heavenly throne (4:1-11)
 - i. John, in his vision, is now caught up to the heavenly throne room, in preparation for viewing future events (which seemingly begin in 6:1). Around the throne he sees twenty-four elders, and four living creatures resembling Old Testament cherubim and seraphim (cf. Ezekiel 10:14 and Isaiah 6:2). The “elders” are always linked with other heavenly creatures, so probably are not human but angelic. The main point of chapter 4 is the complete worthiness of God to receive all glory and honor.
- b. The scroll of end time events (5:1-14)
 - i. Chapter 5 continues that theme but transfers it to the slain Lamb who alone can open the scroll that will narrate end-time events. A sacrifice for sin must be paid before the devil can ultimately be conquered. The litany of praise increases in perhaps the most majestic chapter in all the Bible, as John sees the presentation, exaltation and enthronement of Christ. It is also significant to note that John here describes Jesus as the Lion of the tribe of Judah (v. 5), but, when he turns to look at Him, he sees a Lamb (v. 6). The suffering servant is also the warrior-king. And we are reminded that in apocalyptic literature, two seemingly diametrically opposite symbols can be used for the same entity without contradiction. This glimpse of heaven provides John and his readers with the necessary sustenance to prepare themselves for the difficult days about to be described.

IV. The Seven Seals (6:1-8:5)

- a. The heart of the book of Revelation is occupied with a description of twenty-one judgments of God on the world, in three groups of seven judgments each. The first of these is depicted as seven “seals,” which have to be removed from a scroll so that it can be unrolled. The imagery of a scroll (cf. 5:2-5) harks back to Old Testament passages (most notably Ezekiel 2-3) in which God’s judgments were written on such documents. Because the seals must be removed before the scroll can be read, it is natural to take these events as the prelude to God’s end-time judgments (later called “the great

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tribulation"--7:14) rather than part of those judgments themselves.

- i. The four horses and riders (6:1-8)
 1. Indeed the first four seals, also identified with four horsemen, described judgments which have often occurred over the course of history: militarism, warfare, famine and death (6:1-8).
- ii. The fifth preparatory event—cries of the martyrs for vindication (6:9-11)
 1. The fifth seal is different, unleashing the cries of martyrs for vindication, who are told they must wait a little longer (6:9-11).
- iii. Sixth seal—cosmic upheavals at the threshold of the end (6:12-17)
 1. The sixth seal describes events which cannot be interpreted literally without the universe dissolving (and yet there are apparently fifteen judgments yet to come). Cosmic upheavals, however, are standard fare in apocalyptic literature for universal political and social turmoil (similar to our “all hell broke loose,” or “they turned the world upside down”).²⁰⁶ Whatever literal events are implied, they produce extreme terror (vv. 12-17).
- iv. The 144,000 and the numberless multitude (7:1-7)
 1. Before describing the seventh seal, John offers an interlude of sorts (7:1-17). Here he narrates his visions of two apparently quite different groups of people: 144,000 Jews and a numberless multi-ethnic multitude. The first group is sealed, to be protected from the tribulation that the ensuing judgments will inflict on the earth (recall the protection of the Jews in Moses’ day during the first Passover). The second group is described as those “who have come out of the great tribulation” (v. 14). Understandably, pre-tribbers find strong support here for the rapture of the church, with the exception of a small group of Jewish-Christians who must live through it. But the reference to cleansing in v. 14 makes a little more sense if this verse refers to those who have lived through the tribulation before coming out of it. And if a lion can be a lamb (5:5-6), it may be that the 144,000 and the numberless multitude actually represent the same group--the universal church. After all, John only “hears” the number of the first group

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(v. 4); when he turns, presumably to look at them, he “sees” the numberless multitude (v. 9). The 144,000 clearly equals 12 X 12 X 1000--the perfect number of Jewish tribes and Christian apostles multiplied by a large number for completeness. If John wanted to depict the church as the true Israel, this would be a magnificent and vivid way to do it. All of God’s people would then live through the tribulation but they would be protected from His wrath (though not from the devil’s persecution).²⁰⁷

- v. Seventh seal—preparation for seven trumpets (8:1)
 - 1. With 8:1-5, we proceed to the seventh seal. But except for heavenly silence followed by “cosmic sound effects,” no new judgment occurs. This suggests that the seventh seal is preparatory for or inclusive of the whole next series of seven (trumpet) judgments.²⁰⁸

V. The Seven Trumpets (8:6-11:19)

- a. The first four trumpets (8:2-12)
 - i. Now we are ready for the depiction of the great tribulation. As with the first four seals, the first four trumpet judgments are closely parallel (8:6-12). They are reminiscent of the plagues on the Egyptians, which suggests they were designed, even at this late date, to encourage the wicked to repent. Chapter 9:20-21 confirms this intent, even if the godless continue to rebel. In each case a third of the plague’s target is afflicted. This is more severe than the seals, yet still leaves over half the earth unaffected. The imagery is as apocalyptic as ever; several of the plagues are literally impossible (to strike only a third of the sun, etc.), but the point is that they are terribly unpleasant.
- b. Fifth and sixth trumpets (8:13-9:21)
 - i. The fifth and sixth trumpets (also called the first and second woes) are of a different nature (8:13-9:21).
 - 1. Their demonic origin (9:1-6)
 - A. Here John sees armies of locusts grotesquely portrayed,

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whose origin is the Abyss (9:1-2). This suggests a description of demonic rather than merely human warfare. The irony is that the devil is made to turn against his own (vv. 3-4).

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