

A Modern Orthodox Study on the Book of Revelation

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The Book of Revelation, like most apocalyptic pieces of literature, was written in response to persecution. It is a work heavily influenced by the Epistles of Paul and the Book of Daniel the prophet. The overall point of the letter is to encourage believers to faithfulness even if this fidelity were to cost them their lives. John's apocalypse differs from others in that it deals solely with the present and the future rather than giving numerous predictions of events of the past. Since the community is accustomed to receiving God's word via Paul's epistles, John also utilizes the epistolary form to comprise a significant part of the first half of his book. Thus Revelation follows Paul's "example by casting its message in the literary form of a letter to the churches" (The New Testament: An Introduction, Vol. 3, Tarazi, 18). Yet this format actually serves as a literary device. In fact, Revelation's letters to the churches are actually intended for every church community as indicated by the repetitive phrase, "let him who hears hear what is said to the churches" which closes each letter to the seven churches. As Prof. Tarazi writes, "In other words, every word is meant for every hearer" (Tarazi, 18).

This adaptation of the epistolary format forced John to abandon a feature common to other apocalypses. This common feature, as shown in the Book of Daniel, was the presenting of itself as a hidden document -written ages ago- which is suddenly revealed at the time its content fulfillment. The Greek word *apokalypsis* (from which we get the English title "Revelation") thus means to uncover or unveil something which had previously been hidden or covered up. John's message from the Lord which is written down in the Book of Revelation, on the other hand, is meant to be presented without delay to his immediate audience (Tarazi, 18).

Another work which serves as a prototype of Revelation is Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. These two works have in common as their audience churches which have quickly fallen away from the Gospel which was preached to them (cf. Rev. 2:14-16 & Gal.1:6-9). Both documents, as a result, lay down a stern warning to their audience to recommit themselves to the truth or suffer the consequences of their lack of commitment (cf. Rev. 3:15-21 & Gal. 5:13-21). Yet John in the Book of Revelation must go one step further and convince his hearers to accept persecution for the sake of the truth and to "love not their lives, even unto death" (Rev. 12:11). And this calling to fidelity, even unto death, was a message that had to be made clear unto all of the churches. The message John has to make crystal clear to his hearers is that, in the face of all the turmoil, suffering and persecution, God is in control of all. To this end, John utilized a great example which Daniel had not available, that of "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2) who now, in fact, is risen (1 Cor. 15:14). As Prof. Tarazi writes, "Christ figures in Revelation as the prototypical martyr to whom all new martyrs will be likened and with whom they will reign in the coming kingdom of God" (Tarazi, 19).

Because of the Book of Revelation's apocalyptic genre, it is critical to understand its language in order to avoid wild interpretations. As Prof. Tarazi insists, "all scriptural books are works of literature and must be read and understood as literature" (Tarazi, 19). Thus the book of Revelation serves as an "extended parable." Revelation can be seen as an expansion of Mark chapter 13. The book is "a call for the endurance and faith of the saints" (Rev. 13:10) as well as a

promise: “to him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Rev. 3:21).

The unusual style in which this message is conveyed was chosen by John for a specific reason: in order to help encourage frightened Christians in the face of intense persecutions. The power of the Book of Revelation is in the way it shows the forces of evil in seemingly complete control of the world until God finally comes in power to deliver his faithful. He does this by casting down the powers of darkness. As Prof. Tarazi explains, “The author’s certainty in his vision is reflected in how long and detailed it is: it is precisely its narrative character that helps lend it the air of authority needed to encourage those who want to persevere but otherwise might waver” (Tarazi, 20). Revelation thus instills confidence in its readers by helping them to know that if they endure, as Paul taught, “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (Rom 8:18; Tarazi, 20).

The Book of Revelation also uses number symbolism to convey many truths of its message. This is a literary device carried over from the Old Testament, but Revelation takes this symbolism to a new level. To be unfamiliar with the symbolism these numbers are meant to convey is to miss a significant part of Revelation’s message. For instance the number three has the meaning of assuredness. Thus to say Jesus was dead three days is to say he was assuredly dead (Tarazi, 22). The number four is a number which conveys the idea of totality. Five often means the Mosaic law because it stands for the five books of Moses. Seven is the number which means fullness of divinity. The number six, being close to (or resembling) the divine number (seven) -but being short of it- signifies evil (Tarazi, 23). Thus the infamous triad “666” represents the full embodiment of evil. Three and a half, being half of seven, signifies the human sphere as opposed to the divine. Twelve evokes the idea of the twelve tribes of Israel and therefore can connote all of Israel. The number forty connotes a long duration of time and also a generation. Today numbers are likewise used figuratively rather than literally. Thus “dozens,” “tons,” “thousands” and “millions” are often used without any intention of conveying a specific numerical value (Tarazi, 24).

Sometimes numbers are coupled in order to convey the symbolic meaning of both numbers. For instance in Revelation the number “12” (Israel) is squared for emphasis to signify the new Israel, the Church, and is finally multiplied by the number “1,000” to indicate vastness. Thus the “144,000” of Revelation indicates a vast multitude that will bear witness to Christ and be saved. Some modern sects, not understanding biblical numerology, have interpreted this number and text to be restrictive whereas it actually has the opposite meaning. Lastly, biblical numerology typically utilizes units merely for the purpose of logic. Thus it would have been illogical to say Jesus fasted for forty weeks, months or years. The number forty needed to be coupled with an intelligible unit (i.e., days). Thus, in order to understand the meaning of the text, the numbers should be focused on rather than the units of measurement.

The Book of Revelation can be divided into five major sections. These are: 1) The Invitation to All Believers to Martyrdom, 2) The Seven Seals and Seven Trumpets, 3) The Forbearance of the Martyrs, 4) The Divine Retribution, and 5) The New Jerusalem (Tarazi, 7). The first section is an invitation to all believers to martyrdom. It includes an introduction, a salutation, a vision of Christ, a message to all the churches, a call to martyrdom, a section on the heavenly court and a chapter dealing with the Scroll and the Lamb (Tarazi, 7). A significant aspect of this first section is the way in which martyrdom is emphasized. In fact, no group among the faithful other than martyrs are glorified and “it glorifies them repeatedly and forcefully”

(Tarazi, 50). As Prof. Tarazi writes, “Perhaps the most striking of all is the implication that accepting death by martyrdom is in fact *the only sure way* to attain the promised life after death” (Tarazi, 51). Later in Revelation John acknowledges other ways that Christians may be saved but he places the rewards of martyrdom in class of their own.

The second section is on the Seven Seals and the Seven Trumpets. It includes passages on the 144,000 of God’s Israel who are sealed, the Angel and the Little Scroll, and the Two Martyrs, which are somewhat interspersed (Tarazi, 7). Based on literary forms of ancient literature these successive sets of seven do not necessarily convey new or different events following one another. These can just as easily be repetitions of the same events told in different terms (Tarazi, 64). An important part of this section is the first rider who opens the first seal. It is significant that John starts his series of dark visions with one which is on a brighter note. As Prof. Tarazi writes, “In spite of all that follows, the readers are to remember that right from the start the rider on the white horse, who will ultimately bring salvation, is all along in control of the entire scene (cf. Rev. 6:1-8 & 19:11-21, Tarazi, 66).

The third section is a meditation on the forbearance of the martyrs. This section discusses the Woman and the Dragon, the First and Second Beasts, the number of the Beast, the Song of the 144,000, and the story of the harvest of the earth (Tarazi, 7). Importantly, during the section on the harvest of the earth, John gives a warning to those who are tempted to take the easy way out through apostasy by receiving the mark of the beast. This warning is given by calling for “the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (Rev. 14:12). John does not paint a false, rosy picture to his audience in Revelation. As Prof. Tarazi writes, “The message throughout Revelation is crystal clear: there is no ‘middle way’; there is only a choice between endurance leading to blessing and capitulation leading to curse... yet, John always tempers his dire warnings with the message of hope” (Tarazi, 98). Thus John’s warning is followed by a great promise, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth... Blessed indeed, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!” (Rev. 14:13).

The fourth section, on Divine Retribution, touches on the angels and the last plagues, the bowls of God’s wrath, the necessity of watchfulness, the Great Harlot and the Beast, and the fall of Babylon (Tarazi, 7). In John’s section on watchfulness, the Lord states this profound message to John’s audience, “Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is he who watches” (Rev. 16:15). This harkens back to Paul’s Epistle to the Thessalonians where he describes the Lord’s return in similar terms: “For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night” (Thes. 5:2, Tarazi, 104). Another interesting part of this section is how John describes the fall of Rome. Whereas one would expect to find joy expressed over the falling of the great evil power, it is actually described in surprisingly sad terms. Prof. Tarazi explains that John take this approach “to give his hearers incentive to stand up to Rome’s oppression from two directions: through bright promises of future blessings if they end up as martyrs and through dire warnings of what will happen to them if they give in” (Tarazi, 107).

The final part of the Book of Revelation concerns the New Jerusalem. It includes sub themes of the three hallelujahs, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, the Rider on the White Horse, the Thousand Years, The Defeat of Satan and the Universal Judgment, the New Heaven and the New Earth, the New Jerusalem, and the Coming of Christ (Tarazi, 7). One of the messages of this section is that God is more powerful than earthly emperors. As Prof. Tarazi notes, “In Revelation, we are seeing but different renditions of the same picture of the ‘last days’ when God

will make his glory and power known to all” (Tarazi, 111). John puts the story of the millennium, or the long period before the devil is released and the final battle is fought, before the final battle for a reason. It is to encourage those who become martyrs by telling them their sacrifice will spare them the need to go through this final, dreadful battle (Tarazi, 119).

Thus the Book of Revelation serves a great purpose to its immediate audience. As Prof. Tarazi states, it is a book “about the end time that has already come upon us, not about something that will happen later on, or something that will take a long time to get here and will last a long time after it gets here (Tarazi, 64). It also speaks to each generation of Christians because each time it is read, “Christ the Word is at that time brought into the midst of the congregation to judge it and to save it” (Tarazi, 127). Finally, its promise -which is to us all- remains a great one: “Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work. Blessed are those who do His commandments that they may have their right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city” (Rev. 22:14). This great promise summarizes the purpose and meaning of the Book of Revelation.