

# Understanding the Book of Revelation

Revelation 1:1-3

Introduction: It has been over 1900 years since the Book of Revelation was written. Christians must have understood it when it was written (Rev. 1:1-3). However, that understanding apparently was lost through the Middle Ages. Even since the great awakening that took place in the early 1800's, Christians still struggle to understand it over 300 years later. Why is that the case? Is it logical to assume that God provided a book that He knew was not understandable? I would like to suggest a few reasons why we struggle to understand the Book of Revelation.

I. The Book of Revelation was written to Christians, for Christians.

A. Not everyone who claims to be Christians are Christians. True Christians are slaves to Christ. In the original Greek and throughout the Book of Revelation, the word servant, as translated into English, is the word "slave" (Rev 1:1). It makes an excellent and stark distinction. Only a person who is a slave to Christ will understand the Book of Revelation.

1. Slaves to Christ believe, repent, and are immersed in baptism (Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38).

2. Slaves to Christ obey His words (Matt. 7:21). They don't pretend to obey or make excuses as to why they do not obey His instructions.

3. Slaves to Christ will not be found within a denominational organization which is where the bulk of the interpretation for the Book of Revelation has occurred to this day. It is not that they cannot get some of the information correct. They are ingrained in false teachings. They will not be able to provide a proper interpretation for the book.

B. Christians have relied too heavily upon non-Christian scholars for an interpretation of the Book of Revelation.

C. Only Christians will understand imbedded concepts that are necessary for a proper interpretation of the book. For example, an understanding of baptism, life after death, redemption and repentance are required to interpret the Book of Revelation properly.

D. The Book of Revelation was written in such a manner that prevents the worldly from understanding it. It is reminiscent of parables (Mk. 4:11-12). If Roman authorities got ahold of the Book of Revelation and it was understandable to them, they would have done everything in their power to destroy it. They were

already doing everything they could to destroy Christians. Worldly people were not meant to understand the Book of Revelation.

## II. Inaccuracy dating the Book of Revelation.

A. We must know when John was on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9). There are at least 6 historical sources that identify the year.

1. All were early Christians. To declare them as liars would be to slander their reputations (Psm. 101:5; Prov. 10:18). Some suggest the early sources were misinformed as though we are more informed than they were when we are 1900 years removed.

2. They all lived in the first 200 years after John was on Patmos.

3. The earliest source may have been Hegesippus who wrote about 50 years after John was on Patmos. He was only one generation removed from when the Apostle John lived. Hegesippus' testimony came through Eusebius, a 4<sup>th</sup> century historian who preserved many early writings. Hegesippus wrote, "But after Domitian had reigned fifteen years, and Nerva succeeded to the government, the Roman senate decreed, that the honors of Domitian should be revoked, and that those who had been unjustly expelled, should return to their homes, and have their goods restored. This is the statement of the historians of the day. It was then also, that the apostle John returned from his banishment in Patmos, and took up his abode at Ephesus, according to an ancient tradition of the church."<sup>1</sup>

4. About 30 years later, Irenaeus writes concerning the Book of Revelation itself, "It would have been announced by him who beheld the apocalyptic vision. For that was seen no very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign."<sup>2</sup>

5. Clement of Alexandria wrote about A.D. 193, "about the Apostle John. For when, on the tyrant's death, he returned to Ephesus from the isle of Patmos, he went away, being invited, to the contiguous territories of the nations."<sup>3</sup>

B. There are no historical sources that support an earlier date. If John was on Patmos at an earlier date, wouldn't history have provided evidence to the same? Rather history reveals a later date.

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<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Hendrickson Publishers, 1998, Book III, 20, pg. 85.

<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus, "Irenaeus Against Heresies," Ante-Nicene Fathers, Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, ed., Hendrickson Publishers, 1995, Vol. 1, Pgs. 559-560.

<sup>3</sup> Clement of Alexandria, "Who is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?" Ante-Nicene Fathers, Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, ed., Hendrickson Publishers, 1995, Vol. 2, Pg. 603.

### III. Word confusion.

A. The Book of Revelation has words with two or three meanings. Any confusion will prevent a proper understanding of the book.

1. The word sea has three meanings: 1) the ocean, 2) a large group of people (Rev. 17:15), 3) sea of glass (Rev. 4:6, 15:2, 21:1).

2. The word beast has three meanings: 1) the sea beast (Rev. 13:1), 2) the earth beast (Rev. 13:11). 3) Satan is also called a beast (Rev. 11:7).

3. The word fallen has three meanings: 1) destroyed (Rev. 14:8, 18:2), 2) dead (Rev. 17:10), 3) morally lost (Rev. 2:5, 9:1, 17:10).

#### B. Misconceptions.

1. Jerusalem versus Rome as Babylon (Rev. 17:18).

2. Some say Rome never fell but it did fall three times in history. The last time was so complete that it was called desolate.

a. Procopius of Caesarea (c. 500 – c. 554 A.D.) was a historian who wrote this firsthand description of Rome as it existed in 546 A.D. “In Rome he suffered nothing human to remain, leaving it altogether, in every part, a perfect desert.”<sup>4</sup> Procopius further wrote, “As for the Romans, however, he kept the members of the senate with him, while all the others together with their wives and children he sent to Campania, refusing to allow a single soul in Rome, but leaving it entirely deserted.”<sup>5</sup>

b. An unknown writer wrote in The Chronicles of Marcellinus, this statement about Rome: “Everything that had belonged to the Romans was carried away, and also the Romans themselves were led into Campania – captives. And after this devastation, Rome was so **desolate**, that, for forty days or more there was to be seen in it not a single inhabitant, but only wild beasts.”<sup>6</sup> The word desolate is the same word the Apostle John used to describe the symbolic city of Babylon (Rev. 18:19).

#### C. Mistranslations.

1. A literal translation of Revelation 13:3 and 13:12 from Greek to English uses the words “stroke of death” as opposed to the English translation “wound.”<sup>7</sup>

2. A literal translation of Revelation 17:10 from Greek to English reads, “*The five fell, the one is, the other not yet came, and whenever he comes a little [while] him it behoves to remain.*”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John Miley, *Rome as it was Under Paganism and as it Became Under the Popes*, J. Maddon and Company, London, 1843, vol. 2, p. 196.

<sup>5</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, VII, xxii.

<sup>6</sup> Miley, vol. 2, p. 196.

<sup>7</sup> Alfred Marshall, The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament, Zondervan Publishing House, 1975, pg. 1007.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 995.

#### IV. A failure to understand Roman History

A. The main reason we have utterly failed to understand the Book of Revelation.

B. If we don't know the history of Rome, how will we know what happened that is reflected in the Book of Revelation? Our history of the Roman Empire was John's future. The Book of Revelation is about the destruction of the fourth kingdom as prophesied by Daniel. It makes no sense to ignore Roman history. It is key to the understanding of the Book of Revelation.

C. Most Christians believe in the historical approach in the understanding of the Book of Revelation. Why hasn't a Christian read the Roman history to figure out the meaning of the book? I asked that question of my brother. His answer was, "Do you want to read The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire?" Most people find the study of Roman history rather intimidating!

D. Study to present yourselves approved (certified, authenticated) to God (2 Tim. 2:15).

Conclusion: The narrative and symbols in the Book of Revelation are well reflected in Roman history. A careful study of ancient source documents has made the Book of Revelation understandable. In future lessons, we will unravel amazing prophecies that have illuded our understanding for centuries.