

GLEANINGS — August 28, A.D. 2016  
Understanding the Apocalypse

The word comes from Greek and means "uncovering." An apocalypse reveals what once was once hidden. Thus the final book of the Bible is also called Revelation – it reveals. For many, Revelation does not seem to live up to its name. Rather than uncovering or revealing, it perplexes and causes head scratching! Several principles for rightly dividing (correctly interpreting) the Apocalypse follow.

First, the book is not a collection of revelations, plural. It is one revelation. It is an unveiling of Jesus Christ, as the first sentence of the book proclaims. This apocalypse makes manifest the Person, work, and kingdom of the One "through Whom are all things," 1 Corinthians 8:6.

Second, the book of Revelation makes extensive use of symbolism. Consider its first vision, seen by the apostle John who received this revelation of Jesus Christ, communicated by an angel who was sent to John by Jesus Christ. In the vision, John sees a sharp two-edged sword coming out Christ's mouth and seven stars held in Christ's hand.

Does this mean that Jesus (previously seen, heard, and touched by this same John shortly after His resurrection) now has an ancient weapon or a fencer's epee in place of a tongue? Is His real human hand not only scarred by nails but able to grasp gigantic balls of burning gas which dwarf the Earth as if they were cherries? Just as Jesus before His passion spoke in figurative language (His parables, cf. John 16:25), even so what follows John's opening vision speaks of Christ's Person, work, and kingdom in a figurative way.

Third, the symbolism of the Apocalypse draws heavily on the Old Testament. This includes the plagues God sent upon Egypt at the time of the Exodus; ancient, whorish Babylon and her cryptic names as given for example in Jeremiah 51; Ezekiel's visions of living creatures around God's throne, Daniel's apocalyptic dreams involving dreadful, monstrous beasts; Zechariah's vision of the two olive trees/witnesses and more. Those who overlook Revelation's deep Old Testament roots or the illumination which the contextualized cross referencing of such passages provides are in danger of interpretive shipwreck!

To illustrate this, consider: without the vast amount of Scripture regarding sacrificial lambs, would we understand what the Spirit is saying to the churches when He uses a term found elsewhere in the New Testament and depicts Jesus as THE Lamb "standing as if slain" in Revelation 5:6, and as THE Lamb "slain before the foundation of the world" in 13:8?

Fourth, to understand Revelation we must remember its original recipients and the troubled times in which they lived. In the passage which is the risen Christ's letter to the church at Philadelphia (3:7ff), the Lord refers to the hour of trial about to come on the whole Roman world (Greek OIKOUMENE). Judaeans believers were facing the impending destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) and dispersion from their homeland. Gentile believers elsewhere were dealing with various wars and upheavals during a time of chaos in the Roman empire; in the single year A.D. 69 four emperors ruled in succession in the midst of violence and bloodshed!

Psalm 119:89 proclaims that God's word is "forever settled in heaven." Like all the rest of the Bible, the Revelation instructs us who live millennia after it was written. It surely has application to us. Yet the more we know of the context in which the congregations of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea lived and served the Lord...the more we grasp about why John described himself to them as "...both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:9), the more accurate our understanding of the Apocalypse will be.