

THE END OF INTERPRETATION: USE AND MISUSE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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IN 1982, THE AMERICAN NOVELIST ANN GRACE MOJTABAI VISITED AMARILLO, TEXAS, TO FIND OUT HOW ORDINARY CITIZENS WERE COPING WITH THE PROSPECT OF NUCLEAR ARMAGEDDON THREATENED BY THE COLD WAR. Amarillo was a good place to ask this question; as home of Pantex, the final assembly plant for all nuclear weapons in the USA, it was pretty much guaranteed to be high up on the list of targets for any nuclear strike. What she discovered was a startling juxtaposition of apocalyptic and technocratic worldviews, belief both in the promise of technological deliverance by means of superior science, alongside the blessed assurance of divine deliverance from the nuclear holocaust to come.¹ Not surprisingly, the vast majority of Christians in Amarillo believed in a pre-tribulation rapture within a framework of premillennial dispensationalism – God would supernaturally remove all true Christians to heaven before the suffering came, to return them when Christ returned to rule the earth for a (literal) thousand years.

CRITERIA OF EVALUATION

What constitutes the misuse of Revelation? This is a difficult question to answer, since inevitably it will depend on what you think Revelation is about, or (more importantly) what you think it is trying to achieve – assuming it is possible to talk about the intent of a text. Is it possible to get past the details of interpretative strategies and find a common starting point, departing from which implies a misuse of the text?

The most basic truth about Revelation is that it falls within the boundaries of the canon of Scripture. In other words, it has been the testimony of Christians down the ages, however they have understood Revelation itself, that this is part of God's Word – that is, this is a Christian text. To read this text with integrity, then, is to see it as part of Scripture's witness to God, as we understand him in Christ. Two of the most prominent truths about God in Scripture are that he is creator of the world, and that he is separate from his creation – he is "other". These two principles, of God as creator and of God as other, can offer a basic check on readings of Revelation without us having us to be tangled up in complex hermeneutical acrobatics.²

The belief in a pre-tribulation rapture as documented by Mojtabai, though increasingly popular in parts of the church, does not fair well against these criteria. As Mojtabai notes, this kind of reading places the circumstances of the twenty-first-century reader at the centre of the process; the circumstances of the citizens of Amarillo provide the dominant motive in the reading

strategy. There is very little awareness of the cultural difference of the text, or that it might have made reasonably good sense to a first-century Christian reader. The text is certainly strange, but it is not the strangeness of an alien context which might be engaged with. It is an assumed *absence* of context, and so the reader's own context fills the horizon. The secret message of the text, hidden for generations, is only now open for us, the last generation, to read. Somewhat ironically, this move has most in common with a postmodern reader-response approach to the text; the author is "dead" and the reader reigns supreme. There is little sense of the "other" in these readings, which often simply confirm us in our cultural prejudices even as at the same time they issue a challenge within the culture.

This kind of reading, most recently popularised in the *Left Behind* series,³ also fails to be faithful to the biblical theme of God as creator. The idea that there will be a future time when God withdraws his presence from the earth is hard to square with the overall biblical commitment of God to his world (see Gen 9.16), a world which testifies to the glory of God in its very fabric (Ps 19). God's commitment to his creation is in fact prominent within Revelation itself; the throne in chapter 4 is surrounded by the Noahic rainbow of promise, and it is God's activity in creation which is the first cause of praise (Rev 4.11). There appears to be a distinct reluctance within the visions to identify God as the cause of the judgement and destruction of the earth – the judgements are in the main the work of intermediary agents, and they are called forth by the living creatures (Rev 6.1, 3, 5, 7; 15.7) or by an anonymous voice from the throne (Rev 16.17).

So why has Revelation been so badly misread, and what can we do to guard against this?

CAUSES OF MISREADING

There are many features of Revelation that make it hard to read, and they are often interlinked. Here I want to focus on three issues that are in some ways at the root of the problem.

1. *Genre*

"Genre" is the technical word meaning the kind of writing that we are faced with. The reason why genre is important is that it is the means by which an author (usually unconsciously) communicates to the reader the kinds of expectations the reader should have and the conventions the reader should follow in constructing meaning from the text. In reading Revelation, we are at

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NOTES

1. AG Mojtabai, *Blessed Assurance* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

2. It is worth noting that here, as with other contemporary contentious issues, how we approach Scripture and how we understand God are inextricably bound together.

3. The *Left Behind* series (currently eight titles) by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins are published by Tyndale House (though not the one in Cambridge!). Someone has recently written a response critiquing its theology under the title *Don't want to be Left Behind* but this is not yet available in Britain.

4. It is somewhat ironic that the term "apocalypse" (meaning "revelation") occurs nowhere else in apocalyptic literature other than Revelation 1.1.

► loss as to what such expectations and conventions might be – put simply, it is an unfamiliar kind of text. In the time of Jesus, "apocalyptic" was a reasonably well-known genre,⁴ and Jesus himself deploys this style of speaking in what is sometimes called the "little apocalypse" or Olivet Discourse (Mk 13 and parallels). But most modern readers are unfamiliar with the conventions of such discourse, and the few examples we have (this small section in the Gospels and in Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation) baffle us equally.

But failure to understand genre will lead to basic failures in interpretation. In teaching, I often use this example:

The stars will fall from heaven,
the sun will cease its shining;
the moon will be turned to blood,
and fire and hail will fall from heaven.
The rest of the country will have sunny intervals
with scattered showers.

I simply ask why this is funny. The answer, of course, is that we are mixing genres – in this case, "apocalypse" with "weather forecast" – and it immediately becomes apparent that we interpret these two in quite different ways.

But Revelation is even more complex, in that it mixes genres from one section – even one verse – to another. Within the first nine verses of chapter one we move from apocalypse (1) to benediction (blessing, 3), to letter (4), to doxology (5), to apocalyptic again (7), through prophetic utterance (8) and finally to letter again (9). We are shooting at a moving target – and doing it in the dark!

2. *Metaphor*

The most striking thing about Revelation is its use of imagery. Strictly speaking a text itself cannot deploy imagery; what we refer to as its "images" are in fact metaphors. Here, Jesus is depicted as a lamb (Rev 5), the people of God as an army in a census (Rev 7), the power of Rome as a beast rising out of the sea (Rev 13), heaven as a city descending from the sky (Rev 21) and so on. The heart of the problem we have in reading Revelation is the problem we have reading metaphorical language.

Metaphor is both central to Christian (and possibly all religious) language, but it is also fundamentally problematic for post-Enlightenment rationalism. When the world is divided into that which we can know

objectively and with confidence, and that which is pleasing but without rational foundation, metaphor and with it religious language fall firmly into the second camp. This makes us treat metaphor in one of two ways. Either we deny metaphor any cognitive content – it does not say anything that we could not express better using propositions – or we deny that it is metaphor, that it is any different from literal, objective language. The first route sees Revelation as irrelevant and possibly dangerously misleading; the second turns us into fundamentalists.

At the centre of metaphor (according to French philosopher Paul Ricoeur) we find both an "is" and an "is not". When I describe my friend as "eating like a horse" my statement has cognitive content – I am expressing something that is true about my friend. And yet he is like a horse only in certain regards. If he were coming to dinner, I would still set out a knife and fork for him – not a nosebag! How the metaphor functions – which parts belong to the "is" and which to the "is not" – can only be known from knowing about the situation in which the statement is made. If someone asks, "Where is that old boot?" then the meaning will depend on whether he is asking about something he used to wear whilst playing football, or whether he is looking for his maiden aunt. In the former case, the identification of "old boot" with what he is looking for is total – everything that is true about the one will be true about the other. But when the expression becomes metaphorical, then the identification is only partial. To know which it is, and which parts carry over, we have to understand both the historical context (what he is actually asking for) and the literary context (how this language is being used).

So in the case of Revelation, to understand what it means to describe Roman Imperial power as a beast, we need to know something about the Empire itself, how it described itself, what it might have been like to have been a citizen of Empire. And we need to look carefully at how Revelation uses the language of "beastliness" – indeed, how it redeploys language from the Old Testament and elsewhere in doing this.

In devotional terms, this amounts to recognising that we are wanting God to speak to us through a text that, in the first place, was someone else ("John") speaking to another group of people (Christians in first-century Asia Minor). We need to engage an historically disciplined imagination and ask the question "What would *they* have heard from John in this?" in order to shape our

answer to the question “What should *we* be hearing from God through this?”

3. *The Academic versus the Devotional*

It was around 1830 that JN Darby first developed his doctrine of pre-tribulation rapture, a doctrine that was popularised by the Scofield Reference Bible and through that has directly affected Christians like those in Amarillo. During the same decade but in a rather different context, four German scholars (apparently independently) proposed the now generally accepted “solution” to the puzzle of the meaning of “666” in Revelation 13.18 – that it refers to Nero Caesar by enumerating his name transliterated from Greek into Hebrew characters. These two approaches to interpreting Revelation demonstrate the enormous gulf that has existed between academic and popular readings, to the detriment of both. Too many scholarly treatments of Revelation construct a speculative pre-history of the text, and render the text as we have it void of meaning. But the vacuum of understanding at the popular level, due to the lack of connection with scholarship by accident or by design, sucks in all sorts of bizarre theories. Darby’s own thinking was formulated as a conscious rejection of the intellectual trends in Bible reading of his time.

All this might sound a little daunting, and might suggest that there is little future for popular, devotional reading of Revelation. I do not believe that this is the case. I take very seriously the Reformation belief in the perspicuity of Scripture. But if *popular* reading of Revelation is also going to be *responsible* reading, we need to draw on the understanding of the whole body of Christ. And that will include believers from other cultures and backgrounds as well as believers who have studied the book at every level. Conversely, scholarly reading needs to acknowledge, engage with and speak to the ways that Revelation shapes the heart and mind of the “person in the pew”. ■