

## **THE BOOK OF REVELATION**

The book of Revelation also known as the Apocalypse (a Greek word meaning unveiling, disclosure or revelation) constitutes one of the apocalyptic literatures that has been out of use for many centuries and is no longer easily interpreted by modern readers. It is a book which borrows extensively from the Old Testament, especially Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel. A characteristic of this book is the account of visions in symbolic and allegorical language. Whether these visions were real experiences of the author or simply literary conventions employed by him is an open question.

This is probably the most misunderstood book in the entire Bible because it abounds in unfamiliar and extravagant symbolism, a feature common with apocalyptic literature which was widely popular in Jewish and Christian circles from 200BC TO 200AD. Most of the complicated symbolism modern readers find so confusing with apocalyptic literature would have been familiar to its first readers from the knowledge of the many other apocalypses that were written at the time. In the book of Revelation for example, we come across the use of symbolic numbers that would have made sense to the readers of that period: 7 for perfection, 6 for imperfection, 5 for affliction, 4 for the earth, 12 for Israel, 1000 for a great number. These are not numbers to be taken literally. Thus the lamb with seven horns and seven eyes suggests Christ's universal (seven) power (horns) and knowledge (eyes); the 144,000 'saved' who were marked with the seal in 7:4 represent the large number of the redeemed who constitute the perfect Israel (12x12x1000) and not an exact number of those who enter heaven. Similarly, the monstrous dragon (Satan) and the beasts (the Roman emperor and the religion of emperor worship) and the horrendous blood-drinking harlot (pagan Rome) are so portrayed as to make as vivid as possible the ugliness of sin and the opposition to God and his Christ.

### **Author, background and Date of Composition**

The last book in the New Testament canon was written originally to the seven churches in the Roman Province of Asia minor. This book was written by John, identified by later Christian tradition as the apostle John, author of the fourth Gospel. However, the style in this book is somewhat different from that of the Gospel. He does not present himself with the authority of an apostle nor with the title "the elder" used at the beginning of his second and third letters. His style and theology is also different from the fourth Gospel. In the Gospel, he is called to 'to give witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus (Jn 1:2) and to prophesy again about many peoples (10:11). Thus the comparisons of style, vocabulary and use of Greek grammar make it impossible to suppose that the author of this book and writer of the Gospel of John are the same person. Nevertheless, he writes with an authority that he presumes will be accepted in the churches in and around Ephesus where the Johannine community was based. Despite the differences with the Gospel of John, there are strong resemblances between his language and theology and that of John's Gospel. This makes it possible that the author was a prominent disciple of the Johannine school, belonging to the group of prophets referred to by the expression 'your brothers the prophet' (22:9) who enriched the communities of Asia Minor. They fought against false apostles (2:2) and Nicolaitans (2:15) especially their teaching of Balaam (2:14) and the so-called deep secrets of Satan (2:24).

The book was composed in the second century towards the end of the reign of emperor Domitian (81-96), when emperor worship got a new impulse from local governors in Asia Minor. Hence, the symbolism of the first beast (13:1-10) and Babylon the harlot (ch.17), which all referred to idolatrous emperor worship. The propagators of this cult were portrayed as the second beast, or false prophets and seducers (13:11-17; 19:20). Thus, it was composed as a resistance literature to

the persecution of the church by the Roman authorities. Written at a time when the Christians of Asia Minor needed encouragement and orientation. A number of them had already become martyrs (2:13, 6:9). Many others were harassed by local authorities and put in prison (2:9-10); others were tempted by money and worldly pleasures (3:17, 13:16-17, 18:11). It was thus a letter of encouragement written in an apocalyptic style.

### **Message**

It would be incorrect to consider this book a forecast of future history or to identify its symbolic characters with historical persons of the present, recent past or immediate future. All that the book tells us about the future is that the people of God would encounter persecution throughout their history. And they will triumph in the end by the omnipotent power of God in Jesus Christ who will come to judge the world. Thus, no matter how great the evil in the world, God is still in control of history and his triumph is a divine certainty. In this decisive battle between Christ and the followers of Satan, Christ's overwhelming victory will usher in an everlasting reign of God (11:15; 12:10). Even the forces of evil, unwittingly carry out the divine plan (17:17), for God is the sovereign lord of history.

A personal message from this book to all Christians is the assurance of Christ's cosmic victory. Reminding us that Christianity is a dynamic force in our lives. That is why the seven letters that begin the book (1-3) warn the churches to which they are addressed about the danger of mediocrity in the practice of religion. Ultimately therefore, the message of this book is about God and Jesus Christ, who has conquered the world by his cross. No matter the opposition, God's universal rule is certain. The faithful should therefore, not lose courage even if they live in a world filled with structures of sin, for they will share in the triumph of Christ over the false pretenses and the promises of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. (Fr. Denis Tameh).