

NOTRE DAME SEMINARY

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO  
THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN

SUBMITTED TO

ANGELO LUPINETTI

SS 102 – INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

BY

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## Introduction

The final book of the New Testament, and the Bible as a whole, is The Book of Revelation or The Apocalypse of John, either of which is a correct and acceptable name for the book.<sup>1</sup>

Raymond Brown is quick to point out, however, that Revelations is not.<sup>2</sup> This discussion will outline the meaning of the name of the book as well as the implications of that name. It will also discuss the historical background and ecclesial situation of the writing of Revelation. These details should provide insight into this often misunderstood and misused text.

### Overview

Revelation was written near the end of the period in which the bible was written; only one, II Peter, was written after it.<sup>3</sup> Generally, Revelation is accepted to have been written between AD 92 and 96. This would place it near the end of Domitian's reign as emperor and during his persecutions of Christianity.<sup>4</sup> The Book of Revelation is unique in the New Testament in literary genre. Whereas the rest of the New Testament falls into Gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), History (Acts of Apostles), Epistles (Paul's letters, Hebrews, and the catholic epistles), The Book of Revelation revives a genre used in several of the Old Testament books:

Apocalyptic.<sup>5</sup> Revelation consists principally of two main sections: The Letters to the Seven Churches and the Revelatory Experience. Raymond Brown divides the book further into five

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament (Anchor Bible Reference Library)* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 1997), page 773.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament (Anchor Bible Reference Library)* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 1997), page 774.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament (Anchor Bible Reference Library)* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 1997), page 774-775.

sections: Prologue, Letters to the Seven Churches, Part One of the Revelatory Experience, Part Two of the Revelatory Experience, and the Epilogue with Concluding Blessing.

## Findings

The words Revelation or Apokalypsis in Greek literally mean unveiling.<sup>6</sup> Brown points out that, while both are valid and correct titles for the book, the latter “has the advantage of catching the esoteric character of the genre of this work, so that it is not simply thought of as revelation in the ordinary religious sense of divine communication of information.”<sup>7</sup> The name indicates that the book is a unveiling of things beyond the earthly domain. The writer, John, who Brown maintains is different from John the Evangelist or John the writer of the Letters of John<sup>8</sup>, indicates in the first chapter the origin of the content of the book. He indicates that the book contains, “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him, to show his servants what must happen soon. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John”<sup>9</sup> when he “was caught up in spirit on the Lord's day and heard behind me a voice as loud as a trumpet.”<sup>10</sup> This clearly indicates the most superficial meaning of the name of the book. The entire content of the book is an unveiling of the vision that was given to John of “what must happen soon.”<sup>11</sup> The implications of the title of the book of Revelation are deeper than that, however. As Brown implies, the name itself implies a return to the literary genre of Apocalyptic Literature.

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<sup>6</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament (Anchor Bible Reference Library)* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 1997), page 773.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament (Anchor Bible Reference Library)* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 1997), page 774.

<sup>9</sup> Rev 1:1 NAB.

<sup>10</sup> Rev 1:10.

<sup>11</sup> Rev 1:1.

This genre historically flourishes when conditions are at their worst to provide some reassurance to those going through trials and tribulations. Examples of the genre of the apocalyptic can be found in several books in the Old Testament, most notably, Daniel, which contains an extended apocalyptic vision. In the case of Daniel, the book is prompted by the Babylonian Exile; in the case of Revelation, the text arises from the destruction of the temple just over 20 years earlier and the ongoing persecutions of the Christians under the Emperor Diocletian. At this time, the persecutions are violent enough that the Christian community is looking for some light and some expectation of deliverance, just as was the case in the Babylonian Exile. Incidentally, there was also a resurgence in Jewish apocalyptic literature in the years following the destruction of the Temple, so there are both Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic texts from this period.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the persecutions of Diocletian, the Church was still in the early stages of solidifying. This led to the inclusion of the Letters to the Seven Churches that makes up the first section of the body of the text. There is some speculation that this section was actually written after the Revelatory Vision, but it was inserted to provide an ecclesial dimension to the book.<sup>13</sup> The addition of these epistles in the Book of Revelation makes the book, in a literal sense, an encyclical. That is to say, it opens with a series of letters addressed to different Churches that form a circle in Asia Minor; they form a cycle for the text to follow as it was to be delivered to each local church.<sup>14</sup> Based on the content of the letters to the churches, it is possible to identify several challenges facing the Christian world in the waning years of the first century of

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<sup>12</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament (Anchor Bible Reference Library)* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 1997), page 779.

<sup>13</sup> Angelo Lupinetti, "The Johannine Corpus - Revelation" (lecture, Notre Dame Seminary, New Orleans, LA, April 11-13, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Angelo Lupinetti, "The Johannine Corpus - Revelation" (lecture, Notre Dame Seminary, New Orleans, LA, April 11-13, 2011).

Christianity. These letters, combined with the historical context of the age, provide four important aspects of the situation in which the book was written. First, as has been mentioned, the Church was being persecuted under Diocletian and Antipas. These persecutions arose from non-Christians and anti-Christians. The Church was already facing various heresies, for example, the Nicolaitians, Jezebel, Gnosis – that is to say, the beginning of Gnosticism or proto-Gnosticism. Also, first century Christians faced many temptations. It must be recalled that the early Christian churches are minority groups in a social atmosphere of idolatry, so there is a significant temptation to join into the activities of the surrounding culture. The most apparent example is the risk or temptation to eat food offered to idols. Finally, it is apparent based on the letter to the church at Laodicea, there was a tendency, at least in some of them, to a lukewarm expression and living of their faith.<sup>15</sup> Combined, these four threats to the Church represented a very real danger that the author of the book of Revelation saw the need to combat.

## **Conclusion**

In order to understand the purpose and meaning of the Book of Revelation, it is necessary to approach the book with a clear understanding of the intention of the writer, the literary genre to which the book belongs, and the historical and ecclesial situations and challenges that were faced by the churches to whom the text was addressed. With these in mind, the reader can appreciate the depth of meaning and metaphors and rich symbolism available in the text.

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<sup>15</sup> Angelo Lupinetti, “The Johannine Corpus - Revelation” (lecture, Notre Dame Seminary, New Orleans, LA, April 11-13, 2011).

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