

Revelation's relevance for first-century Christians

(Some comments by James Stuart Russell)

Bible Version

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the King James Version (1769 Oxford Edition).
Public Domain.

Fundamental to a proper interpretation of Scripture is an appreciation of its original context:

What did the original author intend to say or convey to his original audience?

What were the underlying contemporary issues he sought to address?

Only once we have ascertained these basics can we properly understand the text's meaning.

And only then can we apply the text to ourselves, drawing out certain timeless principles for our own benefit.

Nowhere is this approach more needed than with the Bible's last book — Revelation, commonly called *The Apocalypse*.

Background and Overview of Revelation

Revelation was addressed to Christians who were about to face brutal persecution from the Roman authorities. The persecution was that under Nero, which, as Revelation 13:5 intimates, lasted for 3½ years or 42 months — from around November 64 AD until the tyrant's death in June 68.¹

Revelation portrays imminent events (1:1, 3; 22:6, 10). These imminence statements serve as bookends for the entire prophetic content of Revelation. Therefore, all of John's visions were fulfilled in the 1st century AD.

All the events portrayed are in our past.

Revelation serves as John's version of the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24 – 25; Mark 13; Luke 21:5ff.).

In this Discourse, Jesus connects his return with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple — to be witnessed by that generation (Mt 24:2, 15-16, 30, 34; Mk 13:2, 14, 26, 30; Lk 21:6, 20-21, 27, 32).

All of this was fulfilled in AD 70 at the end of the Jewish-Roman War.

Revelation's relevance for first-century believers cannot be overstated. It was specifically addressed to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, in present-day western Turkey (1:4, 11).

Blessing was promised for those who first read and heard and obeyed its message (1:3; 22:7).

The reason: The outworking and fulfillment of John's visions would affect them personally.

As Revelation was read out to each of the assembled congregations,² the members would be encouraged or challenged by its message and strengthened in their resolve. Forewarned is to be forearmed!

They were to remain faithful either unto death (2:10), or until Jesus brought relief by dealing with their persecutors (2:25; 3:11; cf. 2Thes 1:6-7). Faithfulness would bring great reward.

For a fuller discussion about Revelation, see my article on this website: *Revelation: A Preterist Interpretation*.

¹ That Roman persecution had not yet broken out when John wrote is apparent from Revelation 2:13 and 17:12.

² Revelation 1:3 (my translation): *Blessed is he who reads aloud and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and who keep what is written therein — for the time is near.*

James Stuart Russell (1816-1895) authored an early preterist work called *The Parousia*.³

We quote below his comments concerning the relevance of Revelation to its original intended audience:

Interpretation of the Apocalypse

We come now to the consideration of the most difficult and obscure part of divine Revelation, and we may well pause on the threshold of a region so shrouded in mystery and darkness. The conspicuous failures of the wise and learned men who have too confidently professed to decipher the mystic scroll of the apocalyptic Seer warn us against presumption. We might even feel justified in declining altogether a task which has baffled so many of the ablest and best interpreters of the Word of God. But, on the other hand, do we honour the book by refusing to open it, and pronouncing it hopelessly obscure? Are we justified in so treating any portion of the Revelation which God has given us? Is the book to be virtually handed over to diviners and charlatans, to be the sport of their fantastic speculations? No; we cannot pass it by. The book holds us, whether we will or no, and insists upon being heard. After all, it must have a meaning, and we are bound to do our best to understand that meaning. Wonderful book! that, after ages of misinterpretation and perversion, has still the power to command the attention and fascinate the interest of every reader. It refuses to be made the laughing-stock of imposture and folly; it cannot be degraded even by the ignorance and presumption of fanatics and soothsayers; it can never be other than the Word of God, and is therefore to be held in reverence by us.

But is it intelligible? The answer to this is, Was it written to be understood? Was a book sent by an apostle to the churches in Asia Minor, with a benediction on its readers, a mere unintelligible jargon, an inexplicable enigma, to them? That can hardly be true. Yet if the book were meant to unveil the secrets of distant times, must it not of necessity have been unintelligible to its first readers—and not only unintelligible, but even irrelevant and useless. If it spake, as some would have us believe, of Huns and Goths and Saracens, of medieval emperors and popes, of the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution, what possible interest or meaning could it have for the Christian churches of Ephesus, and Smyrna, and Philadelphia, and Laodicea? Especially when we consider the actual circumstances of those early Christians,—many of them enduring cruel sufferings and grievous persecutions, and all of them eagerly looking for an approaching hour of deliverance which was now close at hand,—what purpose could it have answered to send them a document which they were urged to read and ponder, which was yet mainly occupied with historical events so distant as to be beyond the range of their sympathies, and so obscure that even at this day the shrewdest critics are hardly agreed on any one point? Is it conceivable that an apostle would mock the sufferings and persecuted Christians of his time with dark parables about distant ages? If this book were really intended to minister faith and comfort to the very persons to whom it was sent, it must unquestionably deal with matters in which they were practically and personally interested. And does not this very obvious consideration suggest the true key to the Apocalypse? *Must it not of necessity refer to matters of contemporary history?* The only tenable, the only reasonable, hypothesis is that it was intended to be understood by its original readers; but this is as much as to say that it must be occupied with the events and transactions of their own day, and these comprised within a comparatively brief space of time.

³ Russell's work was originally published in 1878. A second edition followed in 1887. The entire work is available online here: http://preteristcentral.com/pdf/pdf%20books/1878_russel_parousia.pdf. And also here: https://www.truthaccordingtoscripture.com/documents/parousia/Parousia_Russell.pdf.

Limitation of Time in the Apocalypse

This is not a mere conjecture, it is certified by the express statements of the book. If there be one thing which more than any other is explicitly and repeatedly affirmed in the Apocalypse it is the *nearness* of the events which it predicts. This is stated, and reiterated again and again, in the beginning, the middle, and the end. We are warned that 'the time is *at hand*;' 'These things must *shortly* come to pass,' 'Behold, I come *quickly*;' 'Surely I come *quickly*.' Yet, in the face of these express and oft-repeated declarations, most interpreters have felt at liberty to ignore the limitations of time altogether, and to roam at will over ages and centuries, regarding the book as a syllabus of church history, an almanac of politico-ecclesiastical events for all Christendom to the end of time. This has been a fatal and inexcusable blunder. To neglect the obvious and clear definition of the time so constantly thrust on the attention of the reader by the book itself is to stumble on the very threshold. Accordingly this inattention has vitiated by far the greatest number of apocalyptic interpretations. It may truly be said that the key has all the while hung by the door, plainly visible to every one who had eyes to see; yet men have tried to pick the lock, or force the door, or climb up some other way, rather than avail themselves of so simple and ready a way of admission as to use the key made and provided for them.

As this is a point of highest importance, and indispensable to the right interpretation of the Apocalypse, it is proper to bring forward the proof that the events depicted in the book are comprehended within a very brief period of time.

The opening sentence, containing what may be called the *title* of the book, is of itself decisive of the nearness of the events to which it relates:—

Rev. 1:1— *The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants what things must shortly come to pass.*

And in case it might be supposed that this limitation does not extend to the whole prophecy, but may refer only to the introductory, or some other, portion, the same statement recurs, in the same words, at the conclusion of the book. (See Rev. 22:6.)

Rev. 1:3— *Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.*

[J.S.R. goes on to explicate on Revelation 1:7; 1:19; 3:10-11; 16:15; 21:5-6; 22:10.]

Rev. 22:6— *And he said unto me, These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done.*

This passage, which repeats the declaration made at the commencement of the prophecy (Rev. 1:1), covers the whole field of the Apocalypse, and conclusively establishes the fact that it alludes to events which were almost immediately to take place.

Rev. 22:7— *Behold, I come quickly.*

Rev. 22:12— *Behold, I come quickly.*

Rev. 22:20— *Surely I come quickly.*

This threefold reiteration of the speedy coming of the Lord, which is the theme of the whole prophecy, distinctly shows that that event was authoritatively declared to be at hand.

Thus we have an accumulation of evidence of the most direct and positive kind that the whole of the Apocalypse was to be fulfilled within a very brief period. This is its own testimony, and to this limitation we are absolutely shut up, if the book is to be permitted to speak for itself.

Date of the Apocalypse

If the foregoing conclusions are well founded, they virtually decide the much-debated questions respecting the date of the Apocalypse. Perhaps it may be admitted that the weight of authority, such as it is, inclines to the side of the late date: that is, that it was written after the destruction of Jerusalem; but the internal evidence seems to us overwhelming on the side of its early date. That the Apocalypse contemplates the Parousia as imminent is surely an incontrovertible proposition. That the Parousia is always represented as coincident with the judgment of the guilty city and nation is no less undeniable. Those who cannot find the Parousia, the destruction of Jerusalem, the judgment of Israel, and the end of the age [*sunteleias tou aiōnos*] in the Apocalypse, as in all the rest of the New Testament, and find them also as impending events, must be blind indeed. What other tremendous crisis was approaching at that period to which the Apocalypse could refer? Or what event could be more worthy to be described in the sublime and awful imagery of the Apocalypse than the final catastrophe of the Jewish dispensation, and the unparalleled woes by which it was accompanied?

1. That the Apocalypse was written before the destruction of Jerusalem will follow as a matter of course if it can be shown that that event forms in great measure the subject of its predictions. This, we believe, can be done so as to satisfy any reasonable mind. We appeal to Rev. 1:7: 'Behold he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all the tribes of the land shall wail because of him.' 'The tribes of the land' can only mean the people of Israel, as is proved by the original prophecy in Zech. 12:10-14, and still more by the language of our Saviour in Matt. 24:30. There cannot be the shadow of a doubt that the 'coming' referred to is the Parousia, the precursor of judgment, terrible to those 'who pierced him,' and always declared by our Lord to lie within the limits of the existing generation.

2. After the fullest consideration of the remarkable expression *tē kuriakē hēmera* [the Lord's day], in Rev. 1:10, we are satisfied that it cannot refer to the first day of the week, but that those interpreters are right who understand it to refer to the period called elsewhere 'the day of the Lord.' There is no example in the New Testament of the first day of the week [Sunday] being called 'the Lord's day,' or 'the day of the Lord;' but the latter phrase is appropriated and restricted by usage to the great judicial period which is constantly represented in Scripture as associated with the Parousia. ...

[As examples of the latter, J.S.R. gives 1Cor 1:8; 5:5; 2Cor 1:14; 1Thes 5:2; 2Thes 2:2; 2Pet 3:10.]

Notwithstanding Alford's objection on the score of grammar, we hold that there is nothing ungrammatical in the construction which regards *tē kuriakē hēmera* as 'the (great) day of the Lord.' On the contrary, we prefer the construction, on the score of the grammar, 'I was in spirit in the day of the Lord.' That is to say, the Parousia is the stand-point of the Seer in the Apocalypse: a fact which is amply borne out by the contents.

3. In Rev. 3:10 we are informed that a season of severe trial was then imminent, viz. a bitter persecution of those who bore the Christian name, extending over the whole world [*oikoumenē*—or the Roman Empire]. Now the first general persecution of Christians was that which took place under Nero, AD 64. We infer that this was the persecution then impending, and therefore that the Apocalypse was written prior to that date.

4. That the book was written before the destruction of Jerusalem appears from the fact that the city and temple are spoken of as still in existence. (See Rev. 11:1, 2, 8.) It is scarcely probable that if Jerusalem had been a heap of ruins the apostle would have received a command to measure the temple; should represent the Holy City as about to be trodden down by the Gentiles; or that he should see the witnesses lie unburied in its streets.

5. But, in truth, the Apocalypse itself is the great argument for its having been written prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. To suppose its prophetical character, and make it bear the same relation to the great consummation called in the New Testament 'the end of the age' that the Iliad bears to the siege of Troy. It may be safely affirmed that on this hypothesis it is incapable of interpretation: it must continue to be what it has so long been, the material for arbitrary and fanciful speculation; ever changing with the changing aspect of the political and ecclesiastical world. But we venture to think that if the views advocated in this volume are correct, the interpretation of the Apocalypse becomes possible, and that such interpretation will carry with it its own evidence, commending itself by its consistency and fitness to every fair and candid judgment. A true interpretation speaks for itself; and as the right key fits the lock, and so demonstrates its adaptation, so a true interpretation will prove its correctness by satisfactorily showing the correspondence between the historical fact and the prophetical symbol.

The True Significance of the Apocalypse

We are now better prepared to grapple with the question, What is the real meaning of the Apocalypse? The fact that, by its own showing, the action of the book must necessarily be comprehended within a very short space of time, and the knowledge (approximately) of the date of its composition, are important aids to a correct apprehension of its object and scope. To regard it as a revelation of the distant future, when it expressly declares that it treats of things which must shortly come to pass; and to look for its fulfilment in medieval or modern history, when it affirms that the time is at hand, is to ignore its plainest teaching, and to ensure misconception and failure. We are absolutely shut up by the book itself to the contemporary history of the period, and that, too, within very narrow limits.

And here we find an explanation of what must have struck most thoughtful readers of the evangelic history as extremely singular, namely, the total absence in the Fourth Gospel of that which occupies so conspicuous a place in the Synoptical Gospels,—the great prophecy of our Lord on the Mount of Olives. The silence of St. John in his gospel is the more remarkable that he was one of the four favoured disciples who listened to that discourse; yet, in his gospel we find no trace of it whatever. How is this to be accounted for? It may be said that the full reports of that prophecy by the other evangelists rendered any allusion to it by St. John unnecessary; yet, remembering the intense interest of the subject to every Jewish heart, and its bearing upon the apostolic churches generally, it does seem unaccountable that no notice should be taken of so important a prediction by the only one of its original auditors who left a record of the discourses of Christ. But the difficulty is explained if it should be found that *the Apocalypse is nothing else than a transfigured form of the prophecy on the Mount of Olives*. And this we believe to be the fact. The Apocalypse contains our Lord's great prophecy expanded, allegorised, and, if we may so say, dramatised. The same facts and events which are predicted in the Gospels are shown in the Revelation, only clothed in a more figurative and symbolical dress. They pass before us like scenes exhibited by the magic lantern, magnified and illuminated, but not on that account the less real and truthful. In this view the Apocalypse becomes the supplement to the gospel, and gives completeness to the record of the evangelist.

This may at first sight appear a gratuitous and fanciful hypothesis, but the more it is considered the more probable it will be found. ...

Even a slight comparison of the two documents, the [Olivet] prophecy and the Apocalypse, will suffice to show the correspondence between them. The *dramatis personae*, if we may so call them,—the symbols which enter into the composition of both,—are the same. What do we find in our Lord's prophecy? First and chiefly the Parousia; then wars, famines, pestilence, earthquakes; false prophets and deceivers; signs and wonders; the darkening of the sun and moon; the stars falling from heaven; angels and trumpets, eagles and carcasses, great tribulation and woe; convulsions of nature; the treading down of Jerusalem; the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven; the gathering of the elect; the reward of the faithful; the judgment of the wicked. And are not these precisely the elements which compose the Apocalypse? This cannot be accidental resemblance,—it is coincidence, it is identity. What difference there is in the treatment of the subject arises from the difference in the method of the revelation. The prophecy is addressed to the ear, and the Apocalypse to the eye: the one is a discourse delivered in broad day, amid the realities of actual life,—the other is a vision, beheld in a state of ecstasy, clothed in gorgeous imagery, with an air of unreality as in objects seen in a dream; requiring it to be translated back into the language of everyday life before it can be intelligible as actual fact.

[End of quote.]