

2.3 - Audience and Purpose

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A great variety of opinion attends the identification of the purpose and the audience for whom John wrote. Some of this can be attributed to confusion, but there can be no doubt that the varied motives of interpreters play a large role in the discussion. For if it were possible to restrict the role of the book of Revelation to a particular audience or narrow purpose, then its relevance to believers occupying other geographic or historic positions will necessarily be reduced. The reader must know that this is a driving motive behind some interpretations which aspire to relegate John's message to the dustbin of history in order to avoid the conclusion that many events described therein are yet future.

2.3.1 - Can't God Prophecy?

Perhaps the most puzzling statements encountered in the discussion of the purpose of the book of Revelation are those which assert that this most prophetic of New Testament books is not about predictive prophecy:

The fact [is] clear, that the book is not a prediction of the great movements in the world and the Church in the later centuries of European history, or in the centuries which are yet to come. . . . these and many like inquiries all proceed from an utter misconception of the character of prophecy.¹

St. John did not write a textbook on prophecy. Instead, he recorded a heavenly worship service in progress.²

While we might agree that the book of Revelation is not a *textbook* and records a heavenly worship service, to imply the book is not about prophecy goes too far. Even Chilton himself seems inconsistent on this point.³ Beckwith confidently tells us that the book cannot be about "great movements in the world," whether in European history (which we would tend to agree with) "nor in . . . centuries yet to come." With a stroke of the pen he asserts that God had no intention of revealing historical events yet future. Even Chilton must admit: "John himself reminds us repeatedly, [the book] is a prophecy."⁴ Not just a prophecy, but "completely in keeping with the writings of the other Biblical prophets."⁵ And how did God utilize the other biblical prophets? As all interpreters ought to be quick to recognize, prophecy was never given *primarily* for its predictive content. It was always given with an emphasis on *motivating* its hearers to repent and return to God. Perhaps the quintessential example is that of the prophet Jonah who was sent to a people he despised and delivered a prophetic message which had its intended effect of turning the Ninevites to God and avoiding judgment (Jonah 3:5-10). The minute we lose sight of the motivational motor behind God's prophetic Word is the time when we begin to distort and cheapen what God wants us to understand. And so it is with the book of Revelation. It is a book of *revealing*, especially of the true character and righteous judgment of Jesus Christ. This message is set within the context of real-world history with an emphasis on a coming time of wrath and judgment which should serve as a *huge motivator* for those who do not yet know Jesus Christ to consider their error! But for all this, it is equally an error to deny the plain predictive aspects of biblical prophecy. One need only consider how Herod was informed of the *predicted* birth place of the Messiah (Mat. 2:5-6 cf. Mic. 5:2) or how Jesus arranged to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey (Mat. 21:2-5 cf. Zec. 9:9) in order to fulfill Zechariah's *prediction* concerning the Messiah in order to see that prophecy includes a predictive element. Has not God Himself said:

Remember the former things of old, for I *am* God, and *there is* no other; I *am* God, and *there is* none like Me, **Declaring the end from the beginning**, and from ancient times **things that are not yet done**, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure,' (Isa. 46:9-10) [emphasis added]

Why would these interpreters be so quick to assert that John's message is light on prophetic content or not really dealing with predictive events anchored in history? The answer lies in their motives. They desire to interpret the book from a [preterist](#) perspective which denies the future application of its contents. Let the reader beware: much of what is written concerning the book of Revelation is flavored by the predisposition of the commentator. It is our intent in the introduction to our work to attempt to acquaint the reader with a number of these predispositions so that he will be better equipped to judge for himself the validity of the conclusions of such interpreters. In response to those who minimize the predictive element of the book of Revelation, Couch states: "Why can't Revelation be a treasure house for the prophetic archaeologist if it is indeed a book of prophecy? Can't God write prophecy? Can't He give us the plan of the ages?"⁶

It is important to understand what the book claims for itself. The words *prophecy*, *prophesy*, *prophesying*, *prophet*, and *prophets* are forms used twenty-one times in the writing. And the way these words are used leaves no doubt that the book is forecasting events yet to come. No other New Testament book uses this term about itself in such a clear way.⁷

This prophetic content is not intended for mere head-knowledge, but like *all of God's written revelation*, it must travel the 18 inches from our head to our heart with the express design of affecting a change in our daily living:

The anticipation of seeing Jesus when he comes should cause us to live and act in a godly manner. As John wrote, we will be like Jesus when He appears (1 John 3:2), and so "every one who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1Jn. 3:3). [Peter] also wrote of this cleansing effect of prophecy when he wrote about the new heavens and the new earth. "Beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless" (2 Peter 3:14).⁸

2.3.2 - Overemphasis on Immediate Audience or Events

Although the principles of grammatical historical interpretation duly recognize the importance of the immediate audience of God's revelation,⁹ this fact cannot be used to undercut God's ability to reveal events far future from the day of the immediate readers. When interpreters overemphasize the immediate audience, it makes it difficult to see how God could reveal future events to those same readers without running foul of the limited scope of such interpreters. Indeed, this is the case in the book before us. When the application to the immediate audience dominates the purpose of the book, then interpreters tend to search the local history of the first readers in an attempt to find events which, in their mind, "match" the events described by God. Two such examples are the Roman practice of emperor worship¹⁰ and the myth that Nero would revive from the dead.¹¹ Such interpretations do not match the plain meaning of the text. Emperor worship was not a serious factor at the time of Nero, especially in Asia (see the discussion concerning the [date](#) when the book was written). Nor did Nero fulfill the biblical requirements of the beast (Nero committed suicide in 68 AD whereas the beast is cast *alive* into the Lake of Fire *at the return of Jesus Christ*, Rev. 19:20+). Nor has Nero been revived in the intervening centuries. (We discuss reasons why Nero cannot be the [Beast](#) of Revelation [elsewhere](#).) One wonders if God doesn't ask Himself, "How can I tell these people about events future to the time of the recipients of My revelation without them attempting to find everything I say fulfilled in their own time?"

2.3.2.1 - Misunderstood Motive

Another stumbling block to an accurate interpretation of the book of Revelation is attributing the wrong motives to its authorship. To listen to some commentators, one gets the idea that the Book was written only after long and careful thought by John upon the geopolitical climate of his day and the impact the culture was having upon the affairs of the church:

One thing that can probably be agreed upon by the majority of commentators is that a contributing reason for John's motive in writing is the perceived discrepancy in the Christian audience between, on the one hand, belief that the kingdom had been inaugurated, that God was sovereign over history, and that Christ would soon return to conclude history and, on the other hand, the reality that forces of evil continued to exist, to dominate culture and even flourish, while oppressing believers to varying degrees. How did the truth of the gospel relate practically and specifically to the difficult cultural, social, political, and economic realities?¹²

The reader should not miss the fact that John has just been "reinterpreted" from an obedient servant simply responding to the commands of His Lord (Rev. 1:19+; 2:1+, 12+; 3:1+, 7+, 14+; 4:1+; etc.) into a savvy geopolitical analyst complete with his own motives! Another frequently heard, but incorrect, motive is found in devotional and inspirational content. "St. John's primary concern in writing the book of Revelation was just this very thing: to strengthen the Christian community in the faith of Jesus Christ's Lordship, to make them aware that the persecutions they suffered were integrally involved in the great war of history."¹³ Again, the problem is not in recognizing that the book of Revelation does provide great spiritual encouragement and even immediate instructions for the [seven churches](#) of Asia, but it is manifestly unbiblical to assert that this was John's *primary* task and to imply that John had *his own* motivations for writing the book.

2.3.2.1.1 - Anti-Supernatural Motive for Writing

Here we must discuss a common thread which runs throughout many works on the book of Revelation and which is particularly troubling. It is the hallmark of much which passes for academic learning in our times. *Anti-supernaturalism*: a prevalent bias against the supernatural and an overt reliance upon the natural. A substitution of the rational and analytical capabilities of man for the revealed truth and intervention of God. An elevation of learned opinion over the simple statements of Holy Writ. There is no shortage of interpreters who are quick to attribute the writing of the book of Revelation to causes *other than* the direct intervention and command of God upon John: "It was **natural** that the Church of the first century should produce such a writing, for Christian hope centered in the coming of the kingdom of God and his Christ." [emphasis added]¹⁴ "The major thrust of Revelation is not

sociopolitical but theological. John is more concerned with countering the heresy that was creeping into the churches toward the close of the first century than in addressing the political situation."¹⁵ These opinions, although from learned sources, are directly opposed to the simple statements of the book itself, which Mills correctly recognizes:

[His motive] **is simply to fulfill his charge to faithfully record the vision he had been privileged to see** However, this same verse provides us with a clue to the divine purpose in the book, for it was, firstly, to provide a divine assessment of the condition of the churches which it addresses (the things which are), and then, secondly, to record 'the things which shall take place after these things.' This last purpose is prophetic, as is clearly stated in Rev. 1:3[±]; and this provides a clue as to the major purpose of the book. [emphasis added]¹⁶

Where these anti-supernatural interpreters would have us envision John pondering for some number of months over the potential letter which he planned to write, carefully considering various purposes and ideas which he hoped to frame in *his* message, the biblical reality is miles apart. "John was writing as fast as he could to record the visions he was seeing."¹⁷ Peter had this to say concerning "John's motive:"

And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for **prophecy never came by the will of man**, but holy men of God spoke *as they were* moved by the Holy Spirit. (2Pe. 1:19-21) [emphasis added]

2.3.2.2 - Relevance to the Immediate Audience

A frequent assertion by those who are not in favor of the book of Revelation describing future events is that if the book were to describe events yet future to the time of the hearers, then it would necessarily be irrelevant:

A predictive work which is totally unrelated to its own day could have no meaning for its readers because they would be unable to bridge the gap of thought between themselves and its prophecies. One might as well give a textbook on thermo-nuclear fission to a medieval monk and expect him to understand it as to present a work of complete prediction of the future to a man of any era and assume that he would profit by it unless some means were established by which he could connect his own times with the events which were to come.¹⁸

If we go along with dispensational interpreters in finding the Rapture of the church at Revelation 4:1[±], then the book becomes largely irrelevant, not only to the original readers, but also to all Christians of any age. . . . This leaves it far from obvious why Christians should take an interest in such events, or why God wished to reveal them.¹⁹

One wonders if these same commentators ever considered Isaiah's unmatched prophecy of the Suffering Servant? What value might this have had to his *immediate* readership living between 739 and 686 BC?²⁰ According to their criteria it must have been "largely irrelevant" to Isaiah's contemporaries since it sets forth in great detail the crucifixion of our Lord at least six centuries before the actual events. Obviously, these interpreters are aware of the many prophetic examples such as Isaiah, but choose to treat them differently because they have no bearing on events *yet future to our own time*. This insistence that all the events of the book of Revelation must pertain to the immediate hearers is without foundation and runs directly counter to the whole tenor of prophetic revelation throughout Scripture. Even many of those who lived as contemporaries of John failed to understand their contemporary Scriptures as being fulfilled in their day.²¹ Moreover, aspects of the prophecies themselves were not necessarily understood by the prophet himself, not to mention his contemporaries: "Interpreters of the Revelation should bear in mind two important passages: 1Pe. 1:12; 2Pe. 1:20, 21. Doubtless much which is designedly obscure to us will be clear to those for whom it was written as the time approaches."²²

To use the argument that the book must be understood by the first generation of Christians completely as a refutation of the futuristic position is not reasonable nor backed by the study of prophecy in Scripture in general. . . . it is strange that such an objection should be considered weighty. Much of the prophecy of the Bible deals with the distant future, including the Old Testament promises of the coming Messiah . . . the difficulty with this point of view is twofold: (1) Prophecy, as given in the Scripture, was not necessarily understandable by the writer or his generation, as illustrated in the case of Daniel (Dan. 12:4, 9). It is questionable whether the great prophets of the Old Testament always understood what they were writing (cf. 1 Peter 1:10-12). (2) It is of the nature of prophecy that often it cannot be understood until the time of the generation which achieves fulfillment.²³

2.3.2.2.1 - The Present Value of Future Events

Tenney explains that God's prophetic word is relevant for all readers in all ages:

Even though the Revelation may not find its fulfillment in the events of the present day nor even within the next century, it may still be relevant to the present situation. . . . One of the marvels of the written Word of God is its perennial relevance to every time and situation. Its principles are universally applicable, although its predictions may fit only one specific era. . . . There are four ways in which Revelation may be meaningful for this present age: (1) by giving to us the divine estimate of history; (2) by predicting the future to a definite degree; (3) by contributing theologically to the structure of Christian thought; and (4) by offering a spiritual stimulus to daily living.²⁴

2.3.3 - Purpose

The biblical interpreter who does not suffer from anti-supernaturalism will forgo attempts to plumb the depths of John's psyche to establish the purpose of his writing. Instead, he will recognize that John himself *had no purpose!* But that *God*, by direct supernatural intervention, simply told John to write. And as a dutiful servant, John did just that! The purpose of the book is not found in John, but in the plain statements given in the book and by an understanding of the content of the book. Mills provides an excellent summary:

The divine purpose in this book can be seen as threefold. The first purpose is to reveal Christ in His deistic glory. Chapter 1 introduces the risen Christ as possessing all the effulgence of the glory of the Father and also presents Him in a judgmental capacity (the sword of Rev. 1:16⁺). The purpose of revealing Christ in this glory is to depict clearly and unmistakably His deity—a fact which was already under question by some heretical sects—and also to present Him in an unmistakable judgmental role. This purpose, stated in chapter 1⁺, pervades the whole book; . . . The second purpose is explicit in Chapters 2⁺-3⁺, and meets the particular needs and circumstances of particular churches at a particular time. . . . to address the needs of the seven churches, and **thereafter to leave a body of admonition, commendation, and promise which would be applicable to the Church Age.** . . . The third purpose, achieved in Chapters 4-22, is to confirm the apocalyptic and millennial prophecies of the Old Testament. With the emergence of the mystery age, the Church Age, questions would understandably arise as to whether God's program had been abandoned, modified or whatever. The purpose of these nineteen chapters is to reaffirm these prophecies, to consolidate and supplement them into a fuller and more chronological record. . . . A secondary purpose is to give the Church a focus for the hope that each believer has by giving a preview of the Millennial Kingdom and of the eternal life which follows it. Revelation thus completes the New Testament argument by summarizing and consolidating those Old Testament prophecies of the Messianic Age of Righteousness which were unfulfilled at the end of the apostolic age, and by clarifying that these prophecies were still to be fulfilled at, or just prior to, our Lord's second advent, at which time He will set up the earthly kingdom prophesied in the Old Testament (we now know this as the Millennial Kingdom from Revelation 20⁺). Secondly, Revelation also completes the New Testament presentation of Jesus Christ by displaying Him in His eternal glory, thereby refuting any attempt to leave Jesus as merely human or less than fully God. And thirdly, Revelation addresses the needs of the Church at the end of the apostolic age, thus leaving a picture of a Church as diverse as that which has succeeded it, and, consequently, a body of principles which provide admonition, commendation, and promise that is applicable throughout the Church Age. [emphasis added]²⁵

Notes

¹Isbon T. Beckwith, [*The Apocalypse of John*](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 303.

²David Chilton, [*The Days of Vengeance*](#) (Tyler, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), xii.

³"The book of Revelation is not an apocalyptic tract; it is, instead, as St. John himself reminds us repeatedly, *aprophecy* (Rev. 1:3⁺; 10:11⁺; 22:7⁺, 10⁺, 18-19⁺), completely in keeping with the writings of the other biblical prophets."—Ibid., 27.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Mal Couch, ["Interpreting the Book of Revelation."](#) in Mal Couch, ed., [*A Bible Handbook to Revelation*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 51.

⁷Mal Couch, ["The Literary Structure of Revelation."](#) in Mal Couch, ed., [*A Bible Handbook to Revelation*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 81.

⁸Mal Couch, ["Bibliology in the Book of Revelation."](#) in Mal Couch, ed., [*A Bible Handbook to Revelation*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 89.

⁹That's what *historico* means—the historical context is key to understanding the text.

¹⁰"Revelation presupposes that Christians were being required to participate to some degree in the imperial cult (e.g., Rev. 13:4-8⁺,

15-16⁺; 14:9-11⁺; 15:2⁺; 16:2⁺; 19:20⁺; 20:4⁺).”—Gregory K. Beale, [*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 5.

¹¹“Some commentators argue that some passages in Revelation reflect a ‘revival of Nero’ myth, especially Rev. 13:3-4⁺ and 17:8⁺, 11⁺, which speak of the demise of the beast and subsequent revival. The Nero myth held that Nero would return from the dead and lead a Parthian army against the Roman Empire. If these texts reflect the myth, then Revelation is better dated later than earlier, since presumably it took time for the myth to arise, develop, and circulate after Nero’s death in 68 AD.”—Ibid., 17.

¹²Ibid., 28.

¹³Chilton, [*The Days of Vengeance*](#), 39.

¹⁴Beckwith, [*The Apocalypse of John*](#), 156.

¹⁵Alan F. Johnson, [*Revelation: The Expositor's Bible Commentary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), 4.

¹⁶Monty S. Mills, [*Revelations: An Exegetical Study of the Revelation to John*](#) (Dallas, TX: 3E Ministries, 1987), s.v. “Introduction.”

¹⁷Edward Hindson, [*Revelation: Unlocking the Future*](#) (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), 4.

¹⁸Merrill C. Tenney, [*Interpreting Revelation*](#) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1957), 137.

¹⁹Steve Gregg, [*Revelation Four Views: A Parallel Commentary*](#) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 42.

²⁰John MacArthur, ed., [*The MacArthur Study Bible*](#) (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1997), 952.

²¹“The full text of *The Didache* was rediscovered little more than a hundred years ago, in a codex found in Constantinople in 1873. This document proves that those who actually lived through the events of A.D. 70 regarded Matthew 24:29-31—the entire Olivet Discourse—as yet-unfulfilled prophecy.”—John MacArthur, “[Signs in the Sky](#),” in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, eds., [*The End Times Controversy*](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 112.

²²C. I. Scofield, [*The Scofield Study Bible*](#) (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002, 1909), Rev. 1:1.

²³John F. Walvoord, [*The Revelation of Jesus Christ*](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966), 21-23.

²⁴Tenney, [*Interpreting Revelation*](#), 194, 195.

²⁵Mills, [*Revelations: An Exegetical Study of the Revelation to John*](#) s.v. “Introduction.”

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