

Notes on Revelation

Frank A. Nemecek, Jr.

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I offer this material in conjunction with Leong Tan's Fall 2009 elective class on the book of Revelation. To understand more about my writing, see my companion work on the gospels.

Modern Bible Scholarship and Textual Criticism

The vast majority of texts from the early first century have been discovered in my lifetime. It has taken most of my lifetime for them to be made available to scholars and studied in detail. It should not be considered surprising or heretical that modern scholars, with texts and tools unavailable to church thinkers of the second through the sixth centuries, might reach different conclusions about the texts.

I present here some of the work of these scholars, providing references as appropriate. I generally present ideas that represent the consensus of modern scholars, to the best of my ability. I am only beginning my study of this area. Christianity, especially its branches of Conservative and Fundamental Christianity, place strong emphasis on the texts of our New Testament. It should therefore be of great importance for any such Christian to understand, as best they can, how these texts were collected into a canon, and especially what the texts mean. The gospels work I mentioned above covers more detail about why one can't expect to understand this genre of ancient literature without understanding the literary and cultural ways of the time.

Author and Date

The work is attributed to a John, who recounts a vision. John was a common name of the day. It's very unlikely it was the same John after which a gospel is named. There are far too many differences in style, content, and doctrine.

There is some chance it was written before AD70, but it's much more likely it was written around AD90-95 or later. The language is the classical Greek of the day, by a well-educated and literate author. This suggests Greek was the original language of writing. The gospels rather seem a hasty Greek translation of Hebrew (see

Apocalypticism

Judaism began with the Covenental worldview. If Israel worshipped and obeyed YHWH alone, he would be their god, and they would be his people. He didn't claim to be the only god, just the god of Israel. It was monotheistic, but that meant worshipping only one god, not that there was only one god.

People wondered why they still got defeated by their enemies. That opened the way to the Prophetic worldview. You get defeated if you don't obey. If you got defeated, you must not have obeyed. People eventually noticed that even when they obeyed, they often got defeated anyway.

Then led to the decline of the Covenantal and Prophetic worldviews, and the rise of the Apocalyptic worldview, Apocalypticism. It incorporated dualism, and explained away the defeats as a conflict between the powers of good and the powers of evil. It tried to give hope by saying that someday, evil will be defeated. Apocalyptic literature expressed that worldview by telling stories showing that in the end, evil is defeated and punished, and good prevails. An apocalyptic text isn't really trying to predict the future, only that eventually good prevails.

There were plenty of apocalypses besides the Apocalypse of John ("Revelation") in the early first century, as well as the previous couple of centuries.

References

1. Ehrman, Bart D., History of the Bible (audiobook). The Teaching Company, 2005.