

Revelation as Biblical Literature

There is a very good reason why *Revelation* is the final book in the New Testament, and was “squeezed” into the canon in the 4th century. The Muratorian Canon, which is believed to date to 200 A.D., is the earliest compilation of canonical texts resembling the New Testament did not contain it. *Revelation* was almost not included in the canon at all. Many of the presbyters in attendance at the Council of Nicaea didn’t want it in the Bible. For reasons we can only speculate about, the decision to include it was made at the last minute -- truly a cliffhanger. AND, had Jesus not preached about end times as recorded in the Gospels, our Bible might look very different today.

First, it is important to clarify that *Revelation* was written by John of Patmos, NOT John the Apostle. This is an important distinction, and was one of the primary reasons why initial leaders of the Church wanted the book excluded from the canon. It was difficult to see this book as inspired by God, even though throughout the text John refers to God telling him to “write what he is told.” Nevertheless, the inclusion of *Revelation* into canon came at the insistence of Athanasius, (described as a ‘fiery fourth century bishop), who argued that this scroll was read in the early Church and honored by the early Christians.

In 70 A.D., the Romans stormed Jerusalem, burning down its sacred temple and leaving the city in ruins. With the loss of the Temple, early Christians hoped they would be able to worship safely but their lives became radically different because of the rise of violent persecutions and other formidable obstacles initiated by Rome. *Revelation* became a letter of encouragement to the followers of Jesus throughout the persecutions.

Revelation is not about the end of the world but about the fall of the Roman Empire, and its purpose was to strengthen the faith of the members of the seven churches by giving them (and us) the assurance that deliverance from the evil powers fighting against them was close at hand. The powers of darkness will consistently fight against the Church but the Church will always triumph over its persecutors! This assurance is as relevant for us as it was for them.

Since the Early Church was viewed as the enemy of Rome, *Revelation* is written in a type of code that uses the use symbolism and war-like imagery to describe participation in God's eschatological victory over evil. Writing in code was necessary because to write critically of Rome, her emperors, and its ministers was to set oneself up for death. It was wise to keep direct criticism to oneself!

I hope this article helps you to understand *Revelation*’s ‘beginnings’ a little better. There is more to come! My next installment will explain the symbolism presented in *Revelation*. Stay tuned!!

Stay strong in the faith! Sister Helene