

This week, I was asked to preach on one of the lesser known and probably most misunderstood books in the New Testament, the Book of Revelation.

It is the last book in our Bible, it begins with Genesis and ends with Revelation.

As is always the case with biblical study, there are more speculations and theories than objective, historical facts.

Almost all of what I say is going to be an interpretation, to some extent, and there's arguably someone out there who will disagree with me, so please keep that in mind as we discuss this interesting book together.

So, what is the book of Revelation?

Well, it's several different things.

It spans three different literary genres.

The first genre is that it is epistolary, it's written as a letter, like the Apostle Paul's letters to the different early churches.

This letter was written by John of Patmos (not to be confused with the John the Baptist or John the Apostle) and he addresses this letter to the "Seven Churches of Asia."

So, what are these seven churches?

Well, they are seven of the largest and oldest congregations in early Christianity.

These worshipping communities were located in: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

All of these places are located were located in the western part of what is now modern-day Turkey.

Okay, so the Book of Revelation is written in the form of a letter to these seven congregations, and there is a lot of symbolism of the number seven in this book, that's why.

The second genre that it spans, that we are probably the most familiar with, is the apocalyptic genre.

In fact, the word 'apocalypse' is a Greek word and it means, revelation, so this book could presumably also be called the Book of Apocalypse.

There is a whole classification of apocalyptic literature and it refers to the end times, as foretold by an angel or heavenly messenger.

The end times can be a lot of different things depending upon what religious tradition you're a part of, but overall it means the ending of this reality and the start of a new creation.

This kind of literature assumes that this world, as we now it, is not aligned with God's will for us, and there will be a time when we will all be reconciled to God, and this world will pass away and something new will be created in its place.

This is sometimes known as the ultimate judgment day, when God will judge all people's on earth, determining who is going to heaven and who is going to suffer in hell.

So, the book is epistolary, apocalyptic and lastly, prophetic.

This means that it was written by someone who believed that they had received visions from God, and were speaking as God's messenger, on God's behalf.

We often associate prophecy with foretelling the future, which isn't necessarily accurate.

Prophecy can also be the prophet telling the people the truth about the reality that they live in now, and how they need to change their behaviors.

So, how has this book been interpreted throughout the millennia?

Well, a quick crash course is that it's been interpreted from the historicist, the preterist, the futurist and the allegorical perspectives.

What does each of those mean?

Well, historicists believe that this book should be applied to all of human existence from the Biblical times to the Second Coming, or the apocalypse.

They think it's a continuing revelation, that the messages in this text can be used to explain any events or notable persons throughout history.

For example, people who use the Book of Revelation to predict the date of the end of the world are historicists.

People who believe that the Pope is the Antichrist, this is a historicist perspective.

Now, the preterist perspective believes that it should be read from the lens that everything in the text has already happened.

The Book of Revelation, according to these folks, is only about events that happened to the early Christian Church in the first century.

They don't think it's appropriate to apply the messages in this book to more modern occurrences or to predict what will happen.

Next, we have the futurists who are basically the opposite.

They interpret the Book of Revelation to mean that it is telling us what is going to happen in the future, on a global scale.

People who believe the dead will be resurrected and the living will be taken up in the rapture, these are futurists.

These people live with a sense of urgency, that the day is near, we need to get ready.

Lastly, there are the allegorical folks who believe that the Book of Revelation is strictly symbolic.

They think it was written as a metaphor about the ongoing struggle of faith.

The characters in the text are symbolic representations of good and evil and that reading the text can help us grow deeper in our relationship with God, and reveal to us the difficulties of being a person of faith.

For the people in the allegorical category, the visions in the Book of Revelation are not actual people or events or the end of the world.

As for me, I think the Book of Revelation is a little bit of all of the above, except for one, and I'll explain why.

So, the preterist perspective is that everything in the book has already happened, they read it from the lens of the past.

I think this is true because it was written by people who were living under the occupation of the Roman Empire.

Also, they had survived the second destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, and they were still reeling from Christ's death.

So they were living in socially, religiously and politically precarious times.

And when people are under such duress, they often talk about cataclysmic, huge changes in reality.

This is a coping mechanism; it helps them mentally escape from their lived reality and gives them hope for a better future.

You hear this theme in many African American spirituals, which were written by people living under extreme oppression and enslavement.

Also, this tendency to talk, sing and write about a paradise in the future is an expression of their ultimate trust in God and God's judgment, that God will redeem those who have suffered.

They were hoping for the day when things would be restored to the way God intended them, it was a re-visioning of paradise and Eden.

In the sections we heard, the author wrote, *"They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."* (7:16-17)

And later on,

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more... he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away...

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true..."

Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life." (21: 1, 4-6)

The author draws from the beautiful imagery in Genesis to describe the paradise that God will create for humanity, and those who were persecuted will be redeemed.

The Book of Revelation is often seen as something scary and intimidating, but if you read it as a people hoping for new creation, that the world will be reconciled back to the way God intended, like Eden, then it's not scary, it's liberating.

So, this is preterist perspective, reading the text through the viewpoint of the early Christian communities who lived in precarious times and were trying to make sense of their reality.

But I can also see the text through the historicist perspective, which means that we understand it through all of human existence, past, present and future.

It applies to us today because we constantly have to make decisions as Christians, are we with the modern Empire, or are we with God?

John of Patmos was telling those 7 churches that they needed to choose Christ, and those choices and temptations still exist for us today.

We still have oppressive power structures and values of this world that we can accept, or we can align ourselves with Jesus' hope for the world.

This is that all the nations would be healed, that there would be no more fighting or destruction, no more war, violence or oppression.

No more injustice.

This, I believe, is the goal of paradise, God's dream for us, and Revelation is a culmination of that dream, that we might all be restored and healed.

And as Christians, we have to constantly decide, day in and day out, whether we want to be part of the healing or part of the destruction of this world.

Now, I don't think that it's appropriate to interpret the Book of Revelation from a futurist perspective.

This is the idea that the book was written to tell us what will happen to humanity, in the future, on a global scale.

I don't think it was written to predict the exact date and time of the end of the world, but I do think it predicts the end of the Roman Empire.

In this way, John of Patmos wasn't predicting the future for all of time, but I do think he believed that the oppressive regime that they lived under would fall.

This text has been misused to be predictive and to be judgmental of political events in today's world, and I am not convinced that that's an appropriate use of the book.

I don't think the author was writing to tell us that certain things would or would not happen in the 21st century.

People have used it in this way to foment discontent and disruption because they want to work towards bringing on the cataclysm so that we can get to the new world that they want.

For example, I have read that some people think God is using nuclear weapons and the threat of nuclear war to bring about the restoration of Eden, that these are tools to incite the cataclysm.

I think that's manipulative and using the Book of Revelation for our own motivations.

Lastly, I do think the book is allegorical because when it talks about beasts and horsemen and the lamb, those aren't literal.

They are all symbols for something else.

For example, those who worshipped the Emperor were described as "the beast," and of course, Jesus is identified as the lamb.

The text also draws on a lot of poetic language from the Old Testament.

For example, in chapter 2, he writes, *"Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."*

To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God." (2:7)

and at the end of the text, in Chapter 22, he writes,

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God...

On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

³Nothing accursed will be found there any more.” (22: 1-3)

This draws right from the description of paradise in Genesis, and the idea that we’ll be redeemed from the suffering that’s imposed upon humanity in Genesis after Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit.

Ultimately, while some of the images and descriptions in the text can be jarring, I don’t think it’s meant to be a frightening book.

It’s not meant to instill fear of the world, or fear of God.

It was written in discreet language so as not to draw the attention of the Roman authorities, but it asks those early 7 churches to choose God over the empire.

It’s a manifestation of a beautiful desire for the early Christians to return the world to the state that God wills for us, and even today, we can continue to work towards making that happen.

Amen.