

## Revelation in Its Context

The book of Revelation has been subjected to any number of interpretive grids throughout history. In the last 100 years or so the most popular grid has been that on John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). Darby believed that God's activity in the world was divided into seven dispensations. He believed that the book of Revelation reflected this (along with Daniel, Ezekiel and other apocalyptic books). He believed that the events depicted in Revelation would literally take place and that Jesus would reign on earth for 1,000 years.

His theories were popularized when they were placed in the notes of the Scofield Study Bible (1909). This was a period in American Christianity when Fundamentalism was on the rise. Fundamentalism was a reaction to the modernist tendencies to deny the authenticity or the miraculous events of the Bible. Fundamentalists moved to the other extreme of insisting that everything in the Bible is to be taken literally. Thus Darby's theories in Scofield's notes gained a foothold.

They were popularized in the 1970's by Hal Lindsay in his book "The Late Great Planet Earth". Lindsay tied his dispensational theories to the Soviet Union. He expected that the events of Revelation would soon begin to take place. The locusts talked about in Revelation, he assured us, were actually attack helicopters. Of course, when the Berlin wall fell and the Soviet Union collapsed, Lindsay's predictions collapsed as well.

However, there have continued to be people looking for literal fulfillment of the images in the book of Revelation and continued attempts to predict the return of the Lord (this, despite the fact that Jesus said that no one knows when it will happen – Matt. 24:36). In 1988 a group claimed that there were 88 reasons to support the idea that Jesus would return that year – it did not happen. More recently Harold Camping announced the end in May of 2011 – which also did not happen. One could easily Google "False predictions of the return of Jesus" to see that this has occurred numerous times throughout history.

It is not my intent to try and counter all of those claims nor to try and debate the varying grids placed on the book of Revelation (premillennial, postmillennial, etc...). That would be a huge undertaking and would bore most everyone who read it. Rather, I think it best to try and understand what the book of Revelation meant to those who first heard it. The book often tells us that these things are near and will happen soon. Thus I have a hard time believing that Christians in ancient places such as Thyatira or Philadelphia would have much concern about attack helicopters in the 1980's.

The challenges before the seven churches that heard the words of this prophecy were whether or not they would be faithful to the Lord despite the pressures around them to align themselves with the dominant culture. It is often imagined that the larger culture was attempting to persecute Christians into submission.

While this was certainly happening to a certain degree (2:13), there was also a significant pressure to succumb to the seductions of the larger culture. Much of the criticism of these churches has to do with surrendering to the values of the surrounding culture (e.g. greed – 3:17 and sexual immorality- 2:20).

The consistent message in Revelation is that, although it appears that the dominant culture is dominant, it will in fact fall. Therefore those who are followers of the lamb need to be faithful to the Lamb because he is and ultimately will be victorious. If you side with the prevailing culture and surrender to its will, you will go the way of that culture – into defeat. In other words, don't side with the loser! This message is as impactful today as it was to those early Christians.

### What is the Book of Revelation?

The book of Revelation is a genre of literature known as “Apocalyptic”. It was very popular in the ancient world both inside and outside of the Bible. In the Bible one will find apocalyptic in the Old Testament books of Daniel, Zechariah, and Ezekiel. There is a section in the synoptic gospels often referred to as “The little apocalypse” (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). Outside of the Bible there are writings such as the Sibylline Oracles and Fourth Ezra.

The word “Apocalypse” comes from the Greek word “Apokalupsis” which means “To reveal”. The idea is that there are things taking place in the spiritual world that are hidden from our view, but the writer is now going to make known to us. Because these things are beyond our normal comprehension, they are given to us in fantastic language. This language is highly metaphorical. It is filled with dramatic images and plays off of the symbolism of numbers. Below are some examples from inside and outside of the Bible.

Ezek 1:4-6 - I looked and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north-an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man, but each of them had four faces and four wings.

Zech 6:1-3 - I looked up again-and there before me were four chariots coming out from between two mountains-mountains of bronze! The first chariot had red horses, the second black, the third white, and the fourth dappled-all of them powerful.

Dan 12:7 - The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, lifted his right hand and his left hand toward heaven, and I heard him swear by him who lives forever, saying, "It will be for a time, times and half a time. When the power of the holy people has been finally broken, all these things will be completed." (All scriptures are from the NIV)

1 Enoch 14:8-9 - Behold, in the vision clouds invited me and a mist summoned me, and the course of the stars and the lightnings sped and hastened me, and the winds in the vision caused me to fly and lifted me upward, and bore me into heaven.

4 Ezra 11:1 - Then saw I a dream, and, behold, there came up from the sea an eagle, which had twelve feathered wings, and three heads.

Writings of this nature were prolific in the ancient world and in that context the book of Revelation would not have seemed odd. However, we are little accustomed to such literature in our own day, and so we are not sure what to make of it. We do, however, have literature that is similar in the Lord of the Rings series as well as The Chronicles of Narnia. Each of these tells a story that reflects a truth (the triumph of good over evil) in fantastic ways. It is only when we have trouble understanding what type of literature we are reading that are lured into the notion that locusts in Revelation 9:3 are attack helicopters.

The language of Revelation is meant to be understood in symbolic ways. There is no actual red dragon with seven heads and ten horns (Rev. 12:3) any more than there is an actual throne in heaven (Rev. 4:2). What actually does exist is a spiritual force (Satan) who is behind the evils in culture and who hopes to move Christians away from the Lord. And there is a God who is king of the universe who will ultimately be victorious.