

In our last class we began the Apocalypse of St. John. Because of the complexity of this powerful and mystical book, we spent quite a bit of time first covering interpretational principles critical to understanding this divine book (some excerpts of this info is provided below). Then, in order to get a sense of the dramatic power contained in this book, we listened to a short professional theatrical recording of the reading of this chapter of St. John's Apocalypse. This is something we hope to do at the beginning of the class, each week for the duration of the book. Because of the significant amount of background info, we only covered the first eight verses.

INTRODUCTION:

Caesar could be important, and the Christians were loyal subjects. But they could never worship anyone other than God, nor give supreme place to any other. 'Caesar demanded that civic loyalty be the supreme loyalty, and this is just what Christians could not admit. Thus the Church's worship was forbidden, their faith branded a "religio illicita" ("illegal religion"), and the persecution began.

The Emperor Domitian, in promoting this cult of emperor worship, made it punishable offense to fail to offer the mandated worship. As with all persecutions of the Church, the clergy were the first to suffer, since they were the most prominent. St. John had already been exiled to Patmos. A few others had suffered martyrdom in recent memory. Now the full brunt of state persecution was about to be felt by the Christian rank and file. They needed to be prepared for the onslaught, to be steeled to remain steadfast in the face of the imminent attack - an attack which would sweep away fathers, mothers, teens, and even young children. The Book of Revelation was addressed to a frightened people, to those who lived in fear of the policeman's knock on their doors.

There were other challenges to the Church as well. Heretical movements... preached an easy compromise and co-existence of Church and pagan state. This option was all the more tempting in the face of the coming persecution. Also, as always, there were the Jews, who were taking the opportunity of state hostility to express their own hatred of the "heretical" Christians. Everywhere on earth one looked, there were problems, obstacles, failures, disasters. Where was God in all this? The might of Rome looked all but invincible; its power, unchallengeable, its claims, unanswerable. The Christians, by contrast, were pathetic and powerless. Had God abandoned them?

The Apocalypse of St. John is God's answer: The course of history and its outcome lay not with Caesar, but with Christ.

A. UNDERSTANDING THE APOCALYPSE: Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko, The Apocalypse "is an encrypted message written for those within the community alone to prepare and encourage them for what they must endure for Christ."

Apocalyptic literature is a peculiarly Jewish type of literature, written especially during times of conflict and stress. It is characterized by a predominance of fantastic symbols and by a sense of the imminence of the coming Kingdom. Numerology abounds, as does a preoccupation with the coming judgment of God. OBS P. 17-18

B. READ HANDOUT OF FR. HOPKO'S EXPLANATION (Copied below)

"So here I think we can make a very forceful, dogmatic principal for Orthodox: unless you are in the Orthodox-Catholic tradition you will not understand the book of Revelation. You cannot. Even being in the tradition you may not. But if you are outside it you certainly will not. Because you are not in the context in the living tradition in the spiritual liturgical world within which the disclosure is possible. What we will see today is that: Given what we Orthodox do, given how we believe, given how we pray, given how we build our Churches, given how our liturgy is, given how we understand the faith, we are

within the best possible condition of understanding this book than anybody. In other words, if we can't understand it, nobody will. Because we still live in that world that it bears witness to. This is our world. The book of the Apocalypse is our world. It should be our world, technically it is our world, and what we will try to do is point out how as a matter of fact, it is our world. How then, from our perspective, since it is our world, we would interpret it."

C. MAIN INTERPRETIVE APPROACHES (See handout):

- (1) Preterist View: Strictly about the Church at that time
- (2) Futurist View: Strictly about the End Times (eschaton)
- (3) Historicist View: About progressive periods in Church history
- (4) Idealist View: About Christians of the early Church, Christians at the end times and Christians of all times.

D. PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETATION:

- (1) Word images are apocalyptic (symbolic): "Don't take pictures." Symbolic word images are meant to evoke messages not visual images. E.g., "raining cats and dogs."
- (2) Numbers and Colors are also apocalyptic (or symbolic): They are not meant to be taken literalistically. For example "7" means fullness or completion.