

#4 TIME: REVELATION AND THE PROPHETS

John saw things that would “soon take place” and even saw things relating to the consummation of all history. This does not mean Revelation would help John and his hearers chart out history as it happened; rather, this would impart a divine perspective on reality through its twists and turns. However, time is repeatedly referenced in Revelation and we need to wrap our minds around it. Consider the repeated emphasis on *nearness* in Revelation. “Must soon take place,” (1:1; 22:6). “The time is near,” (1:3; 22:10). “I will come to you soon,” (2:16). “I am coming soon,” (3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). The saints under the altar want to know “how long?” and the answer is given in Revelation 10:5-7, “And the angel... swore... that there would be no more delay but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled...” “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near,” (22:10). Revelation also speaks of periods of time like “ten days,” “1260 days,” and “a thousand years.”

What are we to make of language like this? Looking at extra-biblical apocalyptic literature like Revelation and at the biblical prophets offers some context. The first readers of Revelation would have been familiar with the biblical prophets and popular Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature, so a brief analysis of *time* in these works will help us read Revelation as they did.

In his analysis of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature, Mark Roberts points out that apocalyptic literature contains many references to time:

It is standard operating procedure to place readers very close to the end when God does come. ... They do not invite calculation. There is no reason to add or multiply numbers in all sorts of remarkably creative ways in order to derive dates. ... Most references simply say, as John Collins writes, “the turning point is at hand.”³⁵ ... In apocalyptic literature the only time that matters is now because the readers are so close to the end and the faithful need to hold on.³⁶

When we read “soon,” we may hear this as a sort of time limit on that prophecy’s fulfillment. But this is not what apocalyptic intends to do. Writers of apocalyptic literature lived in dark times and they encouraged their readers by organizing time in an orderly way and by talking about immediate judgment and salvation. Roberts references Adela Yarbro Collins’ to further explain:

Adela Yarbro Collins... points out that examining all the references to time in Revelation leaves many unanswered questions, lots of overlap, and much uncertainty. ... She goes on to say, “it is not the case that the periods of time and numbers in Jewish apocalypses always serve to calculate the end. Their function is usually a symbolic one, helping to create order and meaning in one’s perception of history, the world, and life. ... nothing is random or accidental. Everything is measured and counted. There is a divine plan, all is in God’s control, and the outcome will be advantageous to those loyal to God’s will as revealed in the book.”³⁷ ... The reader is given a feel for a universe that is orderly, where everything happens in its predetermined time. ... God is in control.³⁸

Roberts goes on to explain how this perspective is vital in a world that appears as though it has “careened off its axis and is hurtling out of control into more darkness.”³⁹

³⁵ John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, second edition, 67

³⁶ Roberts, *Understanding Apocalyptic Literature*, 57-58.

³⁷ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Notes on Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism*, 137

³⁸ Roberts, *Understanding Apocalyptic Literature*, 56-57.

³⁹ Roberts, *Understanding Apocalyptic Literature*, 57.

This is not just true of apocalyptic literature. Consider how often Scripture uses timing as more of a literary device than as a calculated prediction.

- In “the song of Moses” in Deuteronomy 32:35, Moses speaks of what God will do to the nations after they have made his people powerless (a reference to their future exile): “*For the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly.*” If we were to restrict this promise that was “at hand” to a singular referent (not recommended), we would have to look around 539 BC — over 800 years after Moses wrote this.
- When Isaiah speaks of Babylon’s coming downfall (with a view towards the end of the world) he says in 13:6, “*Wail, for the day of the Lord is near*” and in 13:22, “*its time is close at hand and its days will not be prolonged.*” If we were to restrict this promise of destruction to a singular referent (not recommended), we would have to look again to 539 BC — 160 years or more after Isaiah wrote this.
- When the remnant who returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple were unimpressed with the result in comparison to Solomon’s temple, the Lord promised in 520 BC in Haggia 2:6–9, “*Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the LORD of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts.*” God promised to shake up heaven and earth so the treasures of the nations would come in and cause the glory of this puny temple to be greater than Solomon’s temple (the former) — *in a little while*. It is likely impossible to restrict this promise to a singular past referent. We could look to the beautification of the temple that happens in Ezra (beyond the lifetime of these workers), but the result was not “*greater than the former*.” We could look to Herod’s later improvements to the temple, but Jesus declared that temple “*desolate*” (Matt. 23:28). Instead, we should look to the temple Jesus is building in us today as he draws people from the nations. What’s more, Hebrews 12:26-29 applies this passage to the final day when “*things that have been made*” are removed and only his kingdom remains.
- When Paul warned in Romans about divisive people, he gave hope for the future by alluding to an ancient promise from Genesis 3:15. “*The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*” Nearly two thousand years have passed and while we can certainly see evidence of Satan’s defeat, we also recognize from another perspective that he and his workers are alive and not yet crushed under our feet.
- Though timing does function somewhat differently in Daniel as compared to Revelation, it is helpful to bring out its use of time periods. When Daniel was distressed about God’s city and people, God sent an angel who, in Daniel 9:24-27, lays out how God (and the Messiah) will bring a resolution to Daniel’s concerns over the course of the next seventy weeks. The angel allocates different periods of time within this seventy weeks for different steps in redemptive history. Many interpret this as seventy sets of seven years (490 years) and try to explain history in light of the timing the angel lays out. Without delving into the specifics, a literal calculation does not work. The given timing simply helps Daniel and his readers understand that there is order and meaning to time, history, and coming events.

When the biblical authors promised hope that is “near,” they were not intending for us to pull out a calendar or to limit their prophecies to their lifetime. Yes, other prophets who used this language did sometimes see things come to pass in their lifetime, but this doesn’t change the many uses which show that this language was likely more of a literary device. We must place Revelation properly in its Jewish and apocalyptic setting and recognize this language for what it is. We need to hear the repeated emphasis on the vision’s “nearness” as they heard it — you can and must organize your life around this vision’s perspective *now* (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:29-31).

We may wonder how judgment and salvation that is so far off can bring any comfort to its original readers. Consider Isaiah 13 as a test case. Babylon wasn’t even a world power yet, but Isaiah proclaims that Babylon’s doom is *near*. As Isaiah poetically depicts Babylon’s fall, he also writes of the undoing of all creation and of the judgment of the whole world. Talking about *timing* of fulfillment also brings up the question of the *scope* of the prophet’s oracles. While many (including myself) have read this cosmic judgment language as an imaginative way of describing Babylon’s fall, consider that the original hearers may have clearly heard Isaiah talking about Babylon’s judgment alongside the judgment of the whole world. The effect of this is to wrap up the

fate of Babylon with the fate of any and all arrogant, oppressive powers that might arise. The ancients knew that the fall of one Babylon wasn't the end of all sources of evil. But Isaiah helped them see Babylon's fall in light of God's promise to bring judgment to the ends of the earth.⁴⁰ Even if Babylon's judgment and the final judgment were to be beyond their lifetime, Jews have believed since Abraham that not even death can stop God's promises from being fulfilled. The resurrection means oracles do not have to be fulfilled immediately in order to comfort the hearers.

Simeon of Luke 2:25-35 offers a good example here. He had been anticipating *Israel's consolation* his whole life, but now he was an old man near death. But God had promised him that he would see the Lord's Christ before he died. When he saw the eight-day-old Jesus brought to the temple, he rejoiced saying he was at peace with dying because he had seen the one who would save the nations and bring glory to Israel. Why would someone anticipating Israel's consolation and glorification be at peace with dying even though he only saw the *one* who would bring it? As a believer in the resurrection, Simeon knew he would be raised up to enjoy the consummation of God's promises — and he was able to simply rejoice in seeing their inauguration.

Returning to Isaiah, by wrapping up promises that would be completed in the midst of history with promises that would be fulfilled at the consummation of history, Israel was reminded that their hope did not lie in God's destruction of one rather large source of evil, but in his judgment for all the earth. They did not have to check the newspaper headlines each day wondering if God's purposes would work out — wringing their hands over what may come after Babylon. Isaiah's message (and others like it) trained them to see Babylon's fall as a comforting (and foreboding) taste of the final day of the Lord as they continued to cry out, "how long?"

We will see Revelation doing the same thing. The seven seals, trumpets, and bowls likely give us various looks at God's partial judgments in the midst of history before culminating in God's larger judgment at the consummation of history.

In that vein, it is vital for us to recapture the spirit of Revelation and of the early Christians. In our prosperity and ease, it is easy for us to be the Christians of "Lord, not yet." But John cries out at the end of Revelation, "Come, Lord Jesus!" We need to recapture the simultaneous pessimism and optimism that was so characteristic of the worldview present in apocalyptic literature. Pessimism, because there is no hope in this age for lasting reform by human power. Optimism, because the victory of Jesus has been accomplished at the cross and we are certain in God's purpose and power to hasten the age and world to come.⁴¹ More fully embedding this perspective into our thinking will change our lives, and Revelation shows us how.⁴² Many will mock, "Where is the promise of his coming?" But we may respond "*that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*"⁴³

⁴⁰ Inspired by BibleProject. "The cosmic imagery shows how these important events of their day fit into the bigger story of God's mission to bring down every corrupt and violent nation once and for all. The prophets cared about the present and the future, and the cosmic imagery allowed them to talk about both at the same time. *How to Read Biblical Poetry: The Prophets*. <<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/the-prophets>>

⁴¹ On this, see Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 16.

⁴² One challenge is that Daniel is told to seal up his vision because it is for the time of the end while John is told *not* to seal it up because the vision is near. Bearing in mind John's and Daniel's different places in redemptive history is helpful here. The Jews saw history as organized into two ages — this age and the age to come. The Messiah would bring the age to come (though they didn't recognize this would require *two* comings of the Messiah). Daniel lived deep into this age. To explain how everything would turn out would have been too much for Daniel. What God showed Daniel was already overwhelming. It wouldn't help Daniel to shape his life around the specifics of what he saw — except of course around the knowledge of God's sovereignty to work it all out. In contrast, John lived after the coming of the Messiah. Though God's kingdom had not been consummated, the decisive victory had been won at the cross. The age to come had broken into this age. It was time for a fresh *revelation* to show Jesus' followers how everything progresses from here. Both John and Daniel served future generations, but Daniel's vision served his generation *less*. For John, the time was not far off. It was near.

⁴³ 2 Peter 3:8.