

Revelation: Let's look into a Mystery

The book of Revelation is, to most people, the most mysterious book in the Scriptures. While many ideas and interpretations have been advanced as explanations for Revelation, few readers have really understood the background against which this important book was written. Such understanding is vital if we are to grasp the role that Yahuwah intended this final book of the Scriptures to play in the life of His Assembly.

As the first century AD came to an end, it was a bewildering and discouraging time for Yahuwah's people. Years earlier, after the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Amanuwal Mashyach, the Assembly of Yahuwah had begun in a very dramatic fashion on the day of faithful day of Pentecost around 31 AD. Three thousand people were immersed on that day, and in the months that followed the number of the disciples multiplied greatly. Yahuwah's miraculous interventions was regularly evident.

After about two years, local persecution broke out in Jerusalem. Many of the disciples fled the area, but the early assembly movement continued to grow in scope and power. Over the first 25 years of its history, the story of the assembly is a story of growth and excitement. There was persecution, to be sure, but it was mostly local and spotty in scope and duration. New congregations were being raised up throughout Asia Minor, Greece and even in Rome. In addition, various of the original 12 Apostles preached the good news to remnants of the House of Israel, traveling beyond the Euphrates to the Parthian Empire, as well as to the British Isles. Additionally, the Assembly continued to grow in the Jerusalem area, so that when the Apostle Paul visited there in the late spring of 56AD, James called his attention to the thousands of Jews in the area who believed the message (Acts 21:18-20).

Then things began to change. Paul was arrested in Jerusalem during that Pentecost season around 56AD, and spent most of the next five years in jail – the last two of those years in Rome. Once Paul was no longer free to travel throughout the Greek-speaking world, serious problems began to surface in many of the Gentile assemblies. Paul had himself prophesied of this in his address to the Ephesian elders, while he was en route to Jerusalem in the spring of that year (Acts 20:29-30).

Heretical teachers soon sought to subvert the assembly, and to take control of it to further their own ends. Introducing their own "twist" to the good news message, and motivated by a desire for wealth and power, they sought a personal following. This is why both Jude and Peter compared such teachers to Balaam of old.

Around the time of Paul's release from Roman imprisonment, this situation was so far advanced that James' brother Jude exhorted those of The Way to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). This was necessary because some were deliberately distorting the meaning of "grace" to imply that obedience to Yahuwah's law was no longer necessary. Where just a few years earlier there had been doctrinal unity and evangelistic fervor, now there was increasing strife, confusion and discouragement.

The situation continued to worsen. Around Judea, revolution was in the air. Jewish zealots were agitating for the overthrow of Roman rule, and the establishment of an independent Jewish state.

Jewish believers faced increasing pressure to align themselves with this “patriotic” movement. Within months of Paul’s release, James (the brother of Amanuwal who served as leader of the Jerusalem Assembly) was killed by Herod in Jerusalem (Acts 12:1-2). Over the next five years, at the close of Emperor Nero’s reign, Roman persecutions against The Way increased. Hundreds of true followers were put to death, primarily in Rome but also in some of the provinces. Increasingly unpopular after the great fire that destroyed much of Rome, Nero sought to divert attention from himself by blaming the Empire’s problems on this new “sect.” Before the end of his reign – when Nero himself had to flee Rome around the spring of 68AD – the Roman Empire had executed first Paul and then Peter.

Shortly after the Pentecost around 69 AD, the Jerusalem Assembly fled to escape the soon-coming Roman army. By 70AD, both the Temple and Jerusalem itself lay in ruins, totally destroyed by General Titus and his troops. Virtually all of the original leadership of the Assembly was dead by this time. In fact, John was the only original Apostle still alive. After 70AD he made Ephesus, located in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) near the Mediterranean coast, his primary base of operations.

In the decades that followed, brethren saw increasing turmoil and doctrinal strife within the Assembly. By the early 90s AD, the subversive element had been successful in taking control of whole congregations and many true followers who remained loyal to John and the original Apostolic teachings were actually disfellowshipped (3 John 9-10). How bewildering this must have been, to those who had been awaiting the return of Amanuwal Mashyach and the establishment of His Kingdom! Jerusalem had been encompassed by armies and destroyed, just as Amanuwal had predicted shortly before His crucifixion (Luke 21:6, 20-22). However, well over 20 years had passed, and Amanuwal was not back yet. To make matters worse, the Roman government under Emperor Domitian was increasing its persecution of those of The Way, and seeking to enforce conformity with the state cult of emperor worship, especially in the area of Asia Minor where many true believers lived.

Then, around 96AD, the elderly John was arrested by the Roman government and banished to the isle of Patmos, off the coast of Asia Minor. Patmos was a place where political prisoners were exiled, and from which few ever returned. For someone of John’s advanced age, exile to a prison island must have seemed like a sentence of certain death. It was here where John was given the visions that were to comprise the final book of the Scriptures.

#### Peter Points to John’s Future Role

About 30 years earlier, in the closing months of his life, Peter wrote his last letter to the Assembly. Under Yahuwah’s inspiration, he sought to prepare the brethren for the future. He did so in two ways. First, he put together a permanent record of authoritative teaching for the Assembly. This was the first canon of the New Testament. We see it alluded to in 2 Peter 1:15: “But I will see to it that after I am gone you will have means of remembering these things at all times” (NEB). He did this by leaving an authoritative written record.

Second, he pointed the brethren to John. Along with Peter, and James the brother of John, John was said to possess a “more sure word of prophecy” (2 Peter 1:16-19), because he had been with Amanuwal on the mount of transfiguration (“eyewitnesses of His majesty,” v. 16), and had heard the voice from

heaven (cf. Matthew 17:1-9). When Peter was writing this passage, James had been martyred many years earlier (Acts 12:1-2), so Peter's "we" could refer only to himself and to John.

Aluhym purposed to use John to complete the New Testament, and Peter gave testimony to this in his final letter. John carried out this commission by writing a fourth good news and three letters – all probably completed before his Patmos exile – and finally the book of Revelation itself. John was responsible for putting the New Testament in its final form.

In his good news, John focused primarily on Amanuwal's teachings in the context of the festival seasons during His ministry. John did not begin with the human birth of the child Amanuwal – or even the beginning of His earthly ministry – but rather stressed His pre-existence with the Father from "the beginning." The world in which John wrote was very different from that of the first three good news writers, who had all completed their work before 70AD. John wrote against a backdrop of the heresies extant at the close of the first century. In the same way, his three letters dealt with the issues confronting the Assembly at that time. For instance, he was compelled to emphasize the importance of obedience to the law, and that such obedience could not be separated from the real love of Yahuwah.

### The Final Message

In his old age, in exile on Patmos, John described in Revelation 1:9-20 the most remarkable experience of his long life. He envisioned himself transported into the future, to the time of Yahuwah's impending intervention and judgment, called "the Day of Yahuwah" in numerous Old Testament passages. Hearing a powerful voice, John turned to gaze upon seven golden lamp stands. John saw One, standing in the midst of those lamp stands, whose face shone like the sun in its full strength. Absolutely overwhelmed by what he saw, he fainted. The One he saw standing there was the very One with whom he had walked and talked as a young man; the One beside whom he had sat, and upon whose shoulder he had leaned upon at their last Passover meal together. John had last seen Him when he stood with other disciples on the Mount of Olives, gazing up and watching Him disappear into the clouds more than 65 years earlier. As John lay collapsed, that One reached down and touched him gently with His hand. "Don't be afraid, John," He declared, "it is I." Mashyach went on to reveal Himself as the One who is the first and the last; The One who was dead but is now alive forevermore. John was ten told to write down what would be Amanuwal Ha'Mashyach's final message to the Assembly that He had built.

Years earlier, when Amanuwal had walked the earth as a human being, He had proclaimed the good news of the coming Kingdom. He had specially trained and taught 12 young men who were witnesses of all that He said and did, and sent them out to teach others. Now, well over six decades after he had ascended back to the Father, Amanuwal Ha'Mashyach appeared to His only disciple who was still living, and gave him His final message, to be recorded and transmitted to the Assembly.

In the midst of turmoil, and a world that did not make sense to them, Yahuwah's people needed to know that He had everything well in hand. He had a plan, and a purpose that would be accomplished. Thousands of Yahuwah's people had already "died in the faith" during the decades since Pentecost, around 31AD. But the Assembly did not need to worry, for the One who appeared to John had the keys

to unlock both death and the grave (Revelation 1:18). In His message to John, Mashyach was going to unveil the future, and show the servants of Yahuwah the things that would come to pass.

When pressures from the world seem overwhelming, it is easy to lose sight of the great invisible Yahuwah, and to focus instead on what we can see. Remember: Yahuwah did not operate on the time schedule that the first century Assembly expected, any more than He has operated on the schedule that many of today's true followers "set for Him" years ago! Events had lasted longer and grown worse than most members of the early Assembly could have imagined. What they discerned through their physical senses was a world in which the power of the Roman Empire was at its height. In addition, they saw the Assembly in turmoil and rent with heresies, mere decades after Amanuwal Ha'Mashyach ascended into heaven and gave assurance that He would return. What did it all mean and where was it headed?

This was the context, as John began to record Revelation, in which the Almighty began to open what had previously been closed. The book of Daniel (The final prophetic book of the Old Testament in the inspired order preserved by the Jews) concluded by stating that the full understanding of its message was closed until the "time of the end." Daniel strove in vain to look through the veil that obscured the future in order to understand the full implications of the message that he had received. He could not do so, because it was not yet time for that message to be clearly revealed (Daniel 12:8-9).

At the end of the first century, the time had finally come to unveil the future. You see, unveiling is what the book of Revelation is about. The English word "revelation" is translated from the Greek apocalypse also rendered in English as "apocalypse." It literally means a "revealing" or an "unveiling". While the future is veiled and mysterious to human beings, it is clear to Yahuwah. Man tries in vain to look through the mists of time and to perceive what it is that the future might bring. While all men can do is guess, the great Yahuwah who inhabits eternity is able to declare what the end will be – all the way from the very beginning.

Amanuwal Ha'Mashyach was shown to be the only One worthy to unveil the details of Yahuwah's great plan for the future, because He alone was worthy to break the seals and unroll the scroll containing Yahuwah's revelation (Revelation 5:4-5). Appearing to John in vision, Mashyach told him to record three "threads" of revelation, woven together to comprise the book that was to follow. These threads were "the word of Yahuwah: "the testimony of Amanuwal," and also the things that John "saw." For the very first time, the Old Testament prophecies (the word of Yahuwah) were woven together with Amanuwal's statements from the New Testament (the testimony of Amanuwal). More than 100 times in Revelation, verses from the Old Testament are either quoted or paraphrased. Revelation also contains direct statements by Amanuwal Ha'Mashyach, as well as allusions to statements that He made during His earthly ministry. Also, there are allusions to statements inspired by Mashyach in the New Testament and recorded by Paul or others in several of the epistles.

The references to the Old Testament and New Testament were woven together with visions of future events. The book of Revelation was intended to put the rest of the Scriptures in perspective, and to show the framework within which all prophecies of Scripture would be brought to completion.

The story of Yahuwah's Assembly through the ages was recorded, in advance, in the prophetic message addressed to the seven assemblies. It was important that believers be reminded that whatever problem they encountered were not a surprise to Yahuwah, but were foreseen in advance – and were “part of the story.”

Further, John recorded that the Roman Empire (which was at a pinnacle of power as he wrote) would receive a deadly wound, but this wound would be healed and the empire would continue for centuries (1,260 prophetic “days”) beyond. While he recorded a future martyrdom of saints, he also showed that the Almighty would finally pour out judgment on those who persecuted His people. In Revelation, John described the glorious destiny of those who continue to serve Yahuwah faithfully in spite of adversity, as well as the destruction of the incorrigible who reject Yahuwah's offer of salvation. John closed this final book of the New Testament with a glimpse of the new earth – the ultimate dwelling place of Yahuwah and His Family.

Revelation is an effective counterpoint to Genesis, providing the answers to the problems that Genesis describes. Genesis opens with the creation of the original heavens and earth. In Genesis, we see the serpent enticing our first parents; in Revelation the serpent is finally removed forever. Genesis introduces pain, sorrow and death as the consequence of man's sin; Revelation describes their banishment from the new heavens and new earth as a result of Amanuwal's redemption. Genesis describes mankind cut off from the Tree of Life, and driven out from Amanuwal's presence; Revelation shows that Yahuwah will finally dwell with the redeemed, who will have unfettered access to the Tree of Life. Genesis explains the origins of what we see around us; Revelation shows their final resolution.

This last book in your New Testament is an unveiling of the future – your future! It is a book written as Amanuwal's final message to the assembly, to show that regardless of how bleak things may appear, there is no need to be fearful or despondent. Yahuwah has a plan and purpose, and the accomplishment of that plan – on Yahuwah's time schedule – is absolutely sure.