

## **Revelation**

At the end of the Bible lies, not Paul, but Revelation—a book that at first sight looks like the black sheep in the New Testament family. With its fantastic visions of heaven, its gory stories of the future, its impenetrable signs and symbols, many a reader has given up in exasperation in the attempt to fathom out its mysteries.

In the Jesus movement it's clear that a new understanding has come to the fore. One doesn't normally expect that a Messiah should *die*, and yet Paul's ironic message is that, in fact, the Messiah was crucified. In the thinking of the time, it follows that even when a Messiah dies or suffers, *the event precipitated by that death should be the coming of the new kingdom*. What we find in Paul, and among most early Christians, is that slightly ironic twist of fate that the death of the Messiah doesn't immediately inaugurate any new kingdom... and yet their sense of apocalyptic expectation is undiminished. Paul will go through his entire life thinking the kingdom will come soon, despite the fact that the Messiah had already died.

When Paul talked about the message of Jesus Christ and his crucifixion, it is the beginning of the thinking that appears for the first time in the New Testament—the language that will become the hallmark of all the later Christian tradition. Indeed it originates much of the vocabulary that makes Christianity distinctive. The term "Christ" is a title. It's the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Messiah*, words that mean exactly the same thing. They both refer to someone who is anointed, identifying someone as a religious figure in a new way.

For Paul to use the term "Christ", however, does not automatically signal he was within an immediately recognizable Christian frame of reference. The term Christ/Messiah was used by any number of different Jewish people, and meant different things in each case. So to hear that term probably wasn't unique... It's significant therefore that the Book of Acts tells us that the term "Christian" is a follower of the Messiah or a proponent of some Messiah.

Paul's thinking stemmed from his own interpretation of the Jewish scriptures: mostly from the prophet Isaiah, but specifically *that when the kingdom comes once the Messiah has arrived, there will be a light to the nations, "a light to the gentiles."* To Paul, the messianic age arriving with Jesus was a window of opportunity for bringing the gentiles into the elect status alongside the people of Israel. Paul thus created this apocalyptic message of what the kingdom was about to be. And the arrival of the gentiles—the engrafting or integrating of the gentiles who will come to believe in the true God of Israel into the community of Israel as the elect nation—is one of the hallmarks of the messianic age.

Paul alluded in a number of his letters to the message he would have preached to groups large and small, emphasizing two things: on the one hand, very clearly, the importance of the death and resurrection of Jesus. On the other hand was the importance of understanding the end time; the immediacy of the end time; that one must be prepared for it, and; the way one prepared for it was to be good.

There are a lot of *ethics* found in Paul's writings. It is around this issue of *how* one lived in anticipation of the end time (which was, after all, just around the corner) that is central for Paul. This is tightly tied to Paul's message about the saving significance of the dead-now-risen Jesus.

This message about the coming end time threatened not only Roman officials, but also any native population dependent on Roman rule for their livelihood and continued peace and security. Although physically quite weak, Paul was tough, however, and able to take all kinds of controversy and suffering. He included in his letters long lists of the things he endured: the number of times he'd been beaten; the number of times he'd been imprisoned; the number of shipwrecks he'd survived; and, seemed proud of them. Paul always attributed his staying power to the grace of God or the power of God. He had a strong sense of experiencing the power of God through suffering.

Throughout Paul's ministry a main concern was when this kingdom was going to arrive. What was going to happen? How soon? Almost from the moment Paul began preaching in the Greek world, people assumed that the kingdom would have to arrive soon. Paul's very first letter to the Thessalonians, the earliest single writing in the New Testament, included consolation to the congregation because people were dying *prior to* the arrival of this much anticipated kingdom.

By the end of Paul's career when he wrote the massive Roman letter (probably the last thing that he wrote), he still was saying the time had grown short. The kingdom was still near. It appeared that Paul never expected to die before the kingdom arrived, so this apocalyptic message that was the hallmark of the earliest stages of the Jesus movement is still one of its central features because of the prophetic preaching of Paul.

Christians have struggled with Revelation; Luther wished it was not in the New Testament at all. Others have embraced the apocalyptic nature of the book, preaching for two thousand years that, *The End is Nigh!* Yet at its heart, Revelation is a profoundly Christian book. Its central message is this: in spite of any appearance to the contrary, God is still Lord and King over the universe.

Revelation is a vision of God's kingdom, God's judgement... but most importantly God's sovereignty over everything. Where there is injustice in the world, it will be rectified. Where there is sin, sickness, disease and the devil, these will be eradicated. John, the author of Revelation, was a seer who has been given a revelation of what is going on in heaven. He was able to see God's perspective. And the message he heard there is that after all, God is indeed in control, through Jesus, who conquered death through his own victory over death.