Revelation Study 1
Revelation & the Shape of Apocalyptic

Read: Rev 1

What kind of a book is Revelation?
Austin Farrer called St John's Revelation "the one great poem which the first Christian age produced."
Almost every misunderstanding and misinterpretation of this book stems from an inability or refusal to recognize that Revelation is poetry.

> "A poet uses words not to explain something, and not to describe something, but to make something. Poet (*poētēs*) means "maker." Poetry is not the language of objective explanation but the language of imagination. It makes an image of reality in such a way as to invite our participation in it. We do not have more information after we read a poem, we have more experience. It is not "an examination of what happens but an immersion in what happens." If the Revelation is written by a theologian who is also a poet, we must not read it as if it were an almanac in order to find out when things are going to occur, or a chronicle of what has occurred." Eugene Peterson

> "I do not read the Revelation to get additional information about the life of faith in Christ. I have read it all before in law and prophet, in gospel and epistle. Everything in the Revelation can be found in the previous sixty-five books of the Bible. The Revelation adds nothing of substance to what we already know. The truth of the gospel is already complete, revealed in Jesus Christ. There is nothing new to say on the subject. But there is a new way to say it. I read Revelation not to get more information but to revive my imagination." *Ibid.*

Why and for whom was Revelation written?
Many attempts to study Revelation assume that it was written as "history in advance" – cataloguing the events that will take place in the final days of the world with little or no relevance to St John or his readers. So, for example, we have from Hal Lindsey's Introduction to his own book, "There's a new world coming",

> "The information in the book you're about to read is more up-to-date than tomorrow's newspaper….I think you'll be surprised to see what kind of predictions were made almost two thousand years ago!"

Lindsey is quite comfortable in asserting that John could be entirely ignorant about his subject matter. Of the image of the tormenting locusts in Rev 9, he writes,

> "I personally tend to think that God might utilize in his judgements some modern devices of man which the Apostle John was at a loss for words to describe nineteen centuries ago! In the case just mentioned, the locusts might symbolize an advanced kind of helicopter."

Such an approach reflects a misunderstanding of both prophecy and the purpose of scripture.

First, prophecy is not the same as prediction.

> "A common way to misunderstand prophecy, and especially the prophecy of the Revelation, is to suppose that it means prediction. But that is not the biblical use of the word. Prophets are not fortune-tellers. The prophet is the person who declares, "Thus says the Lord." He speaks what God is speaking. He brings God's word into the immediate world of the present, insisting that it be heard here and now. The prophet says that God is speaking now, not yesterday; God is speaking now, not tomorrow. It is not a past word that can be analysed and then walked away from. It is not a future word that can be fantasized into escapist diversion. It is personal address now: "for the time is near"(Rev. 1:3, 22:10)." Eugene Peterson

Secondly, all scripture is primarily pastoral in its intention. John was writing with his own congregation (readers) in mind. He was writing to convey God's word for them.

> "It is generally agreed that the revelation has to do with eschatology, that is, with "last things." What is frequently missed is that all the eschatology is put to immediate pastoral use. Eschatology is the most pastoral of all the theological perspectives, showing how the ending impinges on the present in such ways that the truth of the gospel is verified in life "in the middle." *Ibid.*

So how do we begin to approach Revelation?

> "A good place to begin is to be courteous to St John himself by honoring the fundamental concerns that we discern in his life and that come to expression in the Revelation: that his subject is God (not cryptographic esoterica), and that his context is pastoral (not alarmist entertainment)." *Ibid.*

What is Apocalyptic, Apocalypse and Apocalypticism?

Apocalypse – Greek word meaning an unveiling or uncovering of thst which is hidden, hence a "Revelation."

Apocalyptic – a particular style of poetic writing that developed in Middle-East and Asia Minor during the Intertestamental period (300BC – 100AD).

Apocalypticism – the particular world-view that is born out of oppressive situations and gives rise to a fear of imminent destruction.

Historical examples of Apocalypticism

- Judaism facing extinction at the hands of Rome.
- Thomas Müntzer and the Münster uprising (1535).

- Millerite Movement (1844).
- Nongqawuse and the Great Cattle Killing (1857).
- David Koresh and the Branch Davidian Sect (1993).
- Osama bin Laden & the Twin-Towers (2001)

Other examples of Apocalyptic Writing

- Daniel
- Isaiah
- Zechariah
- Mark
- Apocalypse of Peter
- Bel and the Dragon
- Enoch

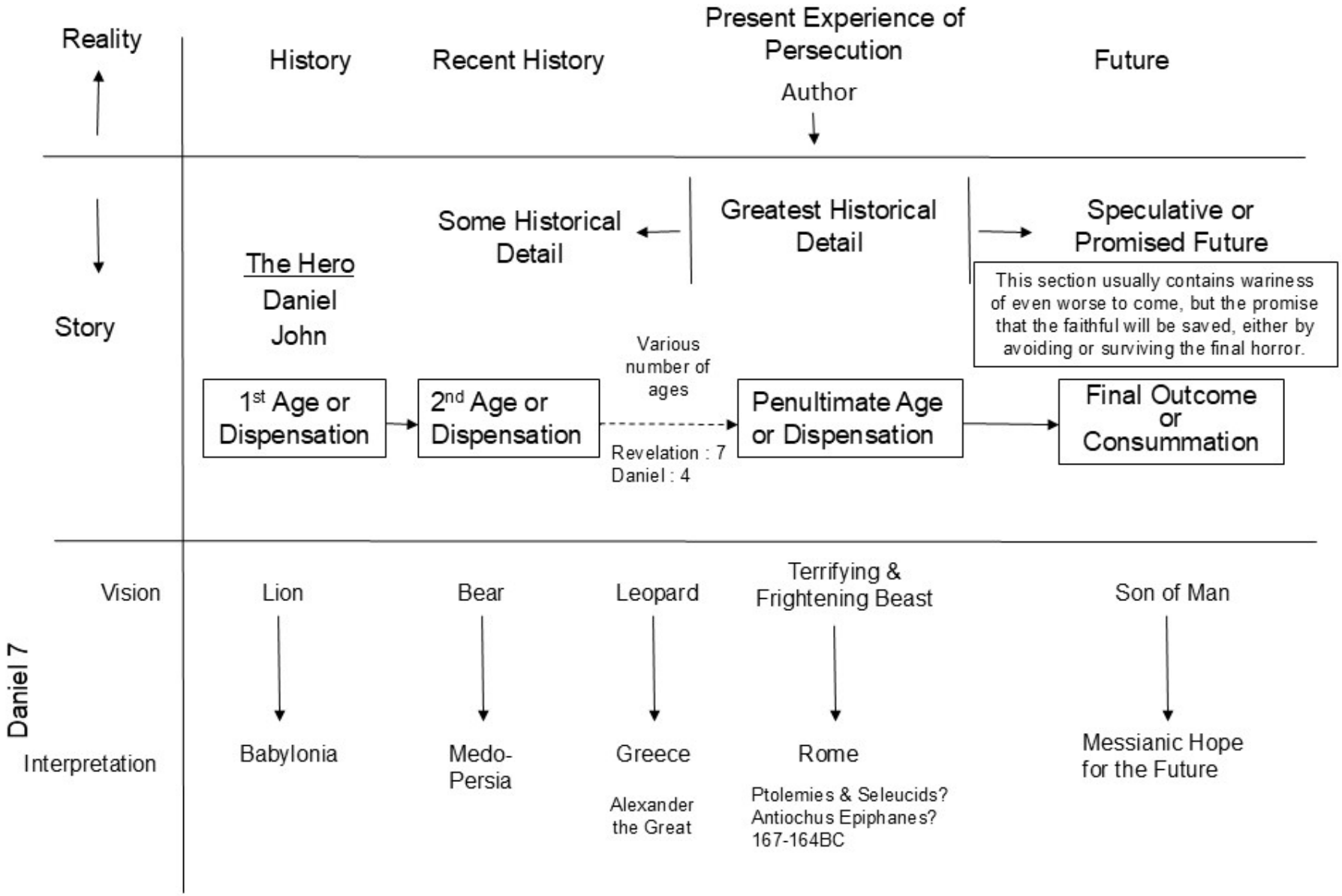
St John's Context

- Early Christians driven underground by Judaism as an heretical sect.
- First persecutions came as part of wider persecution of Jews.
- Nero: Persecution of Christians in their own right.
- Demand for Emperor Worship vs "Jesus is Lord!"

The Structure of John's Revelation

1:1-3	Prologue
1:4-3:22	A letter to the 7 churches
4:1-5:14	The Heavenly Council
6:1-8:1	The Seven Seals
82-14:20	The Seven Trumpets
15:1-19:10	The Seven Bowls
19:11-22:5	Final Judgment and Ultimate Salvation
22:6-21	Epilogue

The Shape of Apocalyptic



Outline of John's Revelation

