

The Book of Revelation Testifies to its Own Clarity

The intent of this brief writing is to demonstrate that the book of Revelation testifies to its own clarity and thereby expose the error of the often repeated claim which ascribes obscurity to the book of Revelation.^{1,2}

The book of Revelation testifies to its own clarity by opening with a profound introduction,

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must shortly take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.”

Revelation 1:1-2 NASB

The very first phrase of the very first verse of the last book of God’s Word speaks to the clarity of its content. From this phrase the book derives its title, “The Revelation.” Specifically, it is the Revelation of Jesus Christ. The Greek word translated *revelation* comes from *apokalupsis* which means to *unveil, disclose, appear, manifest, uncover*. By the book’s own admission it is **not** the obscuring of Christ and the events surrounding His return, rather, the book of Revelation is the unveiling of Christ, specifically, the events surrounding His return, Revelation 19 and 20 conveying the very culmination of His return.

Immediately following the introduction, the book states its purpose and in doing so further conveys its clarity. In verse 2 of chapter 1 the reader is informed that the revelation is given to **show** the bond-servants of Christ the things that must shortly take place. The revelation is therefore not something that hides by obscuring but shows by unveiling. The revelation is shown so clearly that John is able to bare witness to that which he saw (v. 2).

But the testimony of the book of Revelation to its own clarity does not end in the first two verses. God further testifies to its clarity with the pronouncement of the first of seven blessings stated in the book.³ Revelation 1:3 states a promise to bless the one

¹ Dr. Hal Ostrander, <http://www.bpc.edu/religion/Amillennialism.htm>, “It is hermeneutically unsound to let one *obscure passage* (Rv. 20:4-6, emphasis mine) in an apocalyptic writing govern the formulation of our resurrection doctrine. It seems much more logical to read Revelation 20 *after* having read all the Scriptures about the resurrection preceding it, rather than making it the starting point. This *obscure passage* (emphasis mine), then, ought to be made to harmonize with all the clear passages about the resurrection, not vice versa.”

² Berkhof, Louis, Systematic Theology, p. 715, “The passage [Rv. 20:1-6] occurs in a *highly symbolical book and is admittedly very obscure* (emphasis mine), as may be inferred from the different interpretations of it.”

³ Seven promises in the book of Revelation 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14

who reads and those who hear and all who keep the words of the prophecy of this book.

"Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near."

Revelation 1:3 NASB

Implicit in this great promise is the fact that the content of the words in the prophecy (not just John's encounter) is of such a nature that the one who reads and those who hear will be able to ***take to heart*** (NIV) its very words. Such is impossible to justifiably accomplish if the content is obscure.

Furthermore, so unyielding is God when it comes to the clarity of this book as He attested to in its introduction, at the end of the book He warns with dreadful consequences against adding to or diminishing from the words of the book of this prophecy,

"I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book."

Revelation 22:18-19 NASB

If the book of Revelation or any part of it is obscure as some would have us believe, it would be impossible to determine with any level of certainty whether or not we were adding to or diminishing from it. Therefore, if the book is obscure, this warning at the end of Revelation becomes just as meaningless and senseless as its introduction.

Given the fact that the introduction to the book of Revelation found in the first three verses plainly asserts the clarity (perspicuity) of the words of the prophecy of the revelation of Jesus Christ, the one who ascribes obscurity to the book is standing against God's very Word on the matter. Not only does standing against the Word of God by avowing the very opposite of what God says place a person in a precarious position, but contending for interpretations which stem from allegations of obscurity places one nigh unto being a recipient of the plagues of the book of Revelation as opposed to its blessings.

In both its beginning and end the book of Revelation testifies to the reader that its contents are anything but obscure. The book with its words is clear. If its words be otherwise, then the name, the purpose and the blessing at the beginning of this precious book lose their significance as well as the curse at its end. But praise be to God that the book of Revelation which constitutes the end of the revelation of the

written Word of God is as clear and therefore understandable as all of Scripture. For this reason the beloved of God can be certain that their faith rests not on obscurity from God but divine clarity and knowing this we can take all of His Words to heart and obey them.

Having acknowledged that the book of Revelation by its own admission is not obscure we must understand that this does not mean there are no difficulties to be encountered in the understanding process. There are things in the Word of God that are difficult to understand. And these difficulties are not limited to the subjects or books in the Bible pertaining specifically to eschatology but are encountered all along the way of our reading of God's Word (See 2 Peter 3:15-16). However, we must understand that such difficulties are not innate to the revelation of God but instead reside in the fallible imperfect minds of its readers. Therefore, we are exhorted by Scripture to study Scripture to show ourselves approved unto God (2 Tim. 2:15). As we do, we can rest assured that we will be able to come to the meaning of Scripture so that our lives are transformed.

"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

2 Timothy 3:16-17 NASB

Because **all** Scripture is from God and profitable to sufficiently equip the believer and therefore by nature must be clear, when someone comes to us claiming the Bible is obscure or certain parts of it are obscure we had best be on guard for it is likely we are about to be led into obscurity. Statements attributing obscurity to either the Bible or parts of it are often the result of a faulty hermeneutic wherein a clear text is either spiritualized or reduced to being a symbol when the intention of the text is not to be symbolized. Spiritualizing a text or reducing it to a symbol provides the opportunity for interjecting a foreign element into the text which supports a favored position.⁴

As Christians we must approach the Bible from the position that God is capable of and certainly does communicate clearly so as to be understood by His people. If something is to be understood as a symbol then generally this is self-evident in the text and in some cases the meaning is provided in the immediate context.⁵ For instance, in

⁴ Technically, this is referred to as *eisegesis*, which means to read a foreign meaning into a verse. The proper means of interpreting Biblical text is referred to as *exegesis*. In *exegesis* the reader draws the meaning out of the text.

⁵ In his work *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, Published by Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI., © 1994, p. 156, Walter C. Kaiser classifies symbolic imagery used in some prophecy into three groups:

1. Symbols that are explained in the same context (e.g., Dan. 2:37- 44; 8:20-21; Rev. 1:20; 4:5).
2. Symbols that are paralleled by Old Testament imagery (e.g., the tree of life from Gen. 2:9; 3:24 is used in Rev. 2:7; 22:2).
3. Symbols that are unexplained in the context or in the Old Testament (e.g., the "white stone" of Rev. 2:17; the "pillar" in Rev. 3:12), for which we are dependent of local customs or the immediate contextual usage.

Revelation 1:20 Jesus explained to John the meaning behind what John saw in Revelation 1:12-17. Revelation 12 describes specific events John saw as “*a great sign*” making it self-evident in the text that the sign which John saw represented something else.

A further point to be leveled against the claim of obscurity is the fact that if the book or a specific passage is truly obscure then any dogmatic interpretation of it would be questionable. The passages are either obscure or they are not. If obscure, then they must be regarded as obscure and left as such without dogmatically assigning a meaning. On the other hand, if the passage yields its meaning in the light of its immediate context, and the context of the rest of Scripture, then it is not obscure.⁶

For instance, any argument which begins its explanation of Revelation 20 by claiming it or verses in it are obscure would better serve its position by simply claiming ignorance as to the meaning of the passage rather than assigning a dogmatic meaning to it and thereby removing the basis of its claim of obscurity. There is little room for dogmatism in obscurity. Furthermore, and more importantly, obscurity is no basis for biblical faith.

Fellow Christians, instead of placing a veil over our eyes or allowing others to do so when it comes to the study of the book of Revelation, we should begin the study of Revelation with the mindset communicated in its introduction. The book of Revelation is clear as opposed to obscure. Therefore, it is knowable so that we can keep or take its words to heart and in doing so be blessed.

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⁶ Using Scripture to interpret Scripture is indeed a valid practice but one must keep in mind that when Scripture interprets Scripture it does just that. **Scripture interpreting Scripture does not lead to endless hermeneutical gymnastics where countless texts are spiritualized in order to arrive at a specific meaning.** Instead, when Scripture is properly used to interpret Scripture the meaning is reached by employing the same historical grammatical hermeneutic with each reference. Such a practice brings understanding to the mind without confounding other texts. For instance, Rev. 20:7 which states, “Satan will be released from his prison” further indicates the abyss mentioned in verses 1-3, into which Satan will be thrown, is indeed a real place in which Satan will be incarcerated for the determined time. Furthermore, in the case of the Greek word translated *prison* in verse 7, every place in the New Testament this word is used with reference to a place it refers to a place of incarceration. The amillennialist’s spiritualized interpretation of Rev. 20:1-3 which has Satan free to roam but is merely limited with regard to whom he cannot deceive is an explicit contradiction to the clear statements of Rev. 20:1-3 and verse 7, including the meaning of the Greek word translated *prison*.