

The Book of Revelation

and

The Armenian Church

Fr. Vazken Movsesian

The Book of Revelation and the Armenian Church

by Rev. Fr. Vazken Movsesian

For quite some time now, there has been a trend, especially in America, in the direction of prophecy and predicting the future. With the publication of such books as *The Late Great Planet Earth*, by Hal Lindsey, the atmosphere has grown cloudy with confusion as to the direction in which we are headed. People are looking for answers as to what the future has in store for them and their world. Many have labelled our time as the Age of Anxiety. It is easy to see how such a phrase was developed merely by viewing the existing circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Interestingly enough, many have turned to the Bible to seek the answers they crave. In particular, one book in the Bible, the Book of Revelation is turned to in the hope that it will supply the key which unlocks the doors of the future. Clearly, the author of Revelation tells us in the opening lines, 'This is the revelation God gave to Jesus Christ, that he might show his servants what must happen very soon...the appointed time is near!' [Rev. 1:1&3] New religious leaders are sprouting daily, rendering their own interpretation of this book. This is not a new phenomenon, for people have been preoccupied with and have been predicting the future for as long as history can recall. Unfortunately, many of these so-called prophets have abandoned all else and have committed their lives to the service of the end. Countless examples can be cited. Jim Jones is probably an example of this. Even more unfortunate is that countless people follow such 'false prophets' and set their own doom by reading only superficially over the pages of the Book of Revelation.

Throughout the centuries, however, the Armenian Church, along with her Eastern Orthodox cousins, has remained silent about this book. The Armenian Church's eschewal of the book has been the center of much criticism. The question comes up: Is the Armenian Church ignorant of the teachings of the Book of Revelation? Is it because the Armenian Church is not theologically advanced that she refrains from commenting on the book? Very plainly, the answer to both these questions is NO! Quite the opposite, the Armenian Church avoids the book because her theologically advanced position allows her to read beyond the mere words which are printed on the pages of the Book. Still many may question the validity of such a statement and so a few words must be said regarding the stance of the Armenian Church concerning the Book of Revelation.

It goes without saying that in order to understand the end we must first understand the beginning. Like any good book, we can not merely read the

last chapter and expect to understand the plot of the whole book. The same is true of the Bible, in which the Book of Revelation occupies the last pages of the New Testament.

When Jesus was walking on this earth, preaching His message, there was no New Testament. Upon His ascension to Heaven, His apostles expected an imminent end and His return. After years had passed, the young Christian communities had not yet seen the return of Christ and began to experience hardships within the communities. St. Paul wrote letters to these communities, offering guidance until Christ returned. According to modern scholarship, St. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians was the first of these letters, written some time in the 40's A.D. It is important to note that the Church was already in existence; therefore, **FIRST THERE WAS THE CHURCH, THEN CAME THE NEW TESTAMENT.**

Tracing the books of the New Testament chronologically, the Letters were written. Then between 60 and 80 A.D., the synoptic gospels were written first Mark, then Luke and Matthew. The Book of Acts, of course, is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke. The primary reason why the gospels were written was to spread the 'Good News' about Jesus Christ. Since many of the eye-witnesses of Jesus' earthly life were slowly dying, the Churches needed the gospels so that they could continue the tradition which was until then transmitted orally. The Gospel of John was not written until late in the First century A.D.

It should be remembered that during the first centuries of the life of the Church, Christians were being persecuted throughout the Roman Empire. Still, Christians had the hope of an imminent end. That is, they felt Jesus' return was right around the corner, and at that their problems would soon be rectified.

It was in this atmosphere of an imminent end that the Book of Revelation was first written. Its author, who calls himself John (Rev. 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), wrote this book from the island of Patmos where he had been exiled because of his Christian beliefs. The style of his writing is strongly symbolic and is classified as apocalyptic (the Greek name of this book is The Apocalypse of John). As a literary form apocalyptic literature was very popular from 200 B.C. to 200 A.D. The Book of Revelation is the only apocalyptic book in the New Testament, while the Old Testament claims the Books of the Prophets Ezekiel, Zechariah and Daniel. Symbolic descriptions cannot be taken literally. If we took everything which was said out of context and abided by those words literally, then surely most Christians would be blind and handless, because in Matthew 5:29 Jesus orders us to 'pluck out' our eyes and 'cut off our hands' if they offend us. In analyzing the Book of Revelation or drawing some meaning from it, we must view it in relation to the cir-

cumstances in which it was first conceived!

From the island of Patmos John was writing to the Christians in the Roman Empire. The book, like other apocalyptic writing, had a definite audience and was addressing real problems which they had. The problem was the Roman Empire. Domitian, a noted persecuter of Christians, reigned over the Empire (81-96 A.D.). Very simply, John was writing symbolically to the Christians in the Empire, offering them hope. Symbolically, he was describing the existing situation and explaining that despite the hardships involved in being a Christian, despite the pressures of paganism and despite the strong persecution they were experiencing, the Christian should not lose faith in the Lord, because in the end God would win over evil. Christian faith was uncompromising and the Christian should always live with hope. To say any more about the book would be adding to it something which isn't there. In that case, everyone can read what he/she wants into the book. Obviously the possibilities are infinite. In the Book of Revelation, the author gives this 'warning to everyone who is listening to the words of prophecy in this book: should anyone add to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. Should anyone take away from the words in this book of Prophecy, God will take away from his share in the tree of life and the Holy City, described in this book.' (Rev. 22:18&19) It is precisely because of this passage that the Armenian Church refrains from commenting on the Book of Revelation. Can we properly deal with this prophecy so that we would not add or subtract from its total message?

It should be mentioned that the Armenian Church does believe in the Coming of the Lord and in a Judgment Day. The three major Creeds of the Armenian Church attest to this fact. The Church Fathers who met at Nicaea in 325 A.D. wrote their creed which states, 'We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ ...(who) is to come with the same body and with the glory of the Father, to judge the living and the dead. We believe ...in the resurrection of the dead in the everlasting judgment of souls and bodies, in the kingdom of Heaven and in the life eternal.' The Creed which is written in the Book of Hours The Creed of the Orthodox Faith, also states, 'We believe in the Lord Jesus Christ ... who is to come with the same body and with the glory of the Father, to judge the living and the dead.' Finally, the Creed which is recited during the Service of Baptism states, 'We believe in ... His (Christ's) awesome and glorious second coming.' These three main Creeds of the Armenian Church sing in unison about the Coming of Christ. However, in the same light, the Church adds to the above statement, the passage from Mark 13:32, where Jesus says, 'that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, not even the Son: only the Father.'

Keeping this in mind, our first question to ourselves must be, why are we so concerned about the future? If we are truly to pay heed to the words of

Revelation and therefore have an uncompromising faith in God, shouldn't we trust God, that He will execute His plan as He sees fit? Jesus challenges us, 'Is there a man of you who by anxious thoughts can add a foot to his height (or a day to his life)?' (Matt. 6:27) Jesus further instructs us, 'If God clothes the grass in the fields, which is there today and tomorrow is thrown on the stove, will he not all the more clothe you? How little faith you have!... Set your mind on God's Kingdom and His justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well. So do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself. Each day has troubles enough of its own.' (Matt. 6:30-34) In other words, Christ wants us to shift our thoughts away from what will happen to what is happening. We must live each day for what it is worth. Tomorrow will come whether we want it to come or not, independently of our will.

We live in a world with many troubles. By worrying about tomorrow what are we doing to improve the world today? If we read Matthew 25:31-46 we see that interest in the Lord is not enough for a Christian. In this passage Jesus claims that those who have the Father's blessing and, therefore, will possess the Kingdom are those who '... when I was hungry gave me food; when thirsty, gave me drink; when I was a stranger, took me into their home; when naked clothed me; when I was ill, came to my help; when in prison visited me.' When was Jesus hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, ill or in prison? Jesus' answer very simply is, 'Anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me.'

The Bible is comprised of over 70 books. We do not do justice to its entire message if we only read one book. Our Lord offers us many valuable teachings. From the Book of Revelation, we can gain a very precious lesson: To have an unshakable faith and hope that God will win in the end. But until that time, we must focus our attention on the world today and how, through the implementation of Jesus' teachings in our own lives, we can establish a richer, fuller and more profitable life for ourselves and our brothers.