



What are we to do with Revelation?

by the Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Eusebius Stephanou, Th.D.

The most obscure book of the New Testament is Revelation, or the Apocalypse (as known in the Greek). Historically, it has been viewed by the Orthodox Church with much reservation,

not because its authenticity was ever doubted, but because of the mysterious and enigmatic nature of what it contains.

Evidence that the book of Revelation was considered by the Church as authentic can be traced as far back as the beginning of the second century. It was generally acknowledged both in the East and the West that it was authored by the Apostle John, was inspired and was part of the New Testament canon.

Despite some dissenting views, expressed by such Church Fathers as St. Jerome, St. Cyril of Jerusalem and St. Gregory the Theologian, the Church as a whole accepted the Revelation as part of the New Testament canon. This was affirmed by such Church Fathers as St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Basil the Great, St. Methodius of Olympus, St. Isidore of Pelousium, St. John Damascene and St. Athanasius the Great.

The Sixth Ecumenical Council (held in 691 A.D.) gave the final authority of the Universal Church to the inclusion of the book of Revelation in the New Testament canon by sanctioning the Canonical Epistle 39 of St. Athanasius the Great in whose listing of the books of the New Testament the Revelation of St. John is included. This Ecumenical Council. Also officially recognized the Council of Carthage which, in its Canon 32, includes the Revelation in the list of New Testament books.

Very few Bible scholars and theologians have attempted to write commentaries on the book of Revelation.

You will barely find one name among them in the ranks of the early Church Fathers. A few of them, as was already pointed out, did not even consider revelation as part of the New Testament canon.

Can any Orthodox Theologian, least of all, layman presume to understand what is contained in the book of Revelation? If the Church Fathers were not emboldened to interpret it, how could anyone in our own day claim to read it with any measure of understanding?

Such an attitude of reservation has not been unique in the Orthodox Church. A cautious approach to revelation has been characteristic also of the Roman Catholic Church and was perpetuated by the Protestant Churches that emerged out of the Reformation.

A New Interest in Revelation

We are presently faced with the phenomenon of an almost sudden explosion of interest in the book of Revelation. How can we account for this recent surge of preaching and teaching on this last book of the New Testament?

Certainly the theologians from the various churches did not come to an agreement after dialog and deliberation. Frankly there is no human explanation for this phenomenon. We need to look for an explanation in the supernatural move of the Holy Spirit in the Church. All we can say is that it is the sovereign move of God that accounts

for this impressive trend and not the initiative of man.

God was deliberately keeping a seal on the mystery of the last days, especially as revealed in Revelation. The Lord made it clear to the prophet Daniel that the time for revealing the events which were to come to pass would fall in the future: “*But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the consummation, until many shall have been taught, and knowledge shall have been multiplied*” (12:4).

God decreed in His infinite wisdom that the understanding of the prophecies be put off to a future period of time that He has appointed. This explains why the book of Revelation has been shrouded in mystery through the centuries. No one seems to have the ability to open up its meaning and to unlock the fascinating truths it conceals.

Just as no man was able to break that seal, however he desired or tried, so in like manner no one in this apocalyptic age will be capable of keeping the seal intact. God’s timing is perfect and sovereign. His program, ordained from the foundation of the world, will not unfold even one minute earlier nor one minute later than He has appointed. No man, woman or devil can hold back the time-table of God, as the day of Christ’s return draws near.

Unfortunately, considerable reaction against apocalyptic matters on the part of many clergy seems to be evident in our Orthodox Church today, despite some new books that are being written on the “signs of the times.” But is it a question of theological speculation or opinion? We are facing an explicit commandment of God and we are held accountable to Heaven if we tamper with it. Those who dare to oppose this ordinance will incur divine wrath. “*It is frightful to fall into the hands of the living God.*” We can only respond in

obedience when God plainly speaks:

“Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand” (Rev. 22:10). While Daniel is instructed to *“shut up the words and seal the book,”* John, by contrast, is commanded to *“seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book.”* As I have pointed out, this divine ordinance only in our present day has become meaningful and relevant.

Therefore, if theologians and the clergy in the church kept their distance from Revelation, it was not because of a free decision they had made. It had not been a case of willful indifference on their part. God Himself had a hand in it. He was simply enabling them to fulfill His initial decree: *“Shut up the words and seal the book.”*

This was a manifestation of God’s love, because the Revelation, if studied prematurely, would not only have proven meaningless for their times, but confusing and capable of erroneous interpretation.

Jesus revealed considerable truth regarding the close of the age, but certain truths were reserved to be disclosed to the Church at a later time. To take one example, the Lord revealed the doctrine concerning the Rapture through the Apostle Paul, as well as more explicit teaching on the coming of the Antichrist. Even in our own generation the Holy Spirit is infusing much more light in the church concerning the Rapture, the Great Tribulation and other events related to the return of Jesus.

This explains why the Orthodox doctrine on Eschatology (the end time) has remained in an undeveloped state. At the time the Nicene Creed was drawn up (4th century) it was sufficient for the Church to know and confess solemnly that the Lord Jesus Christ *“will come again to judge both the living and the dead whose kingdom shall have no end.”*

The Lord promised His disciples

that the Holy Spirit *“will show you things to come” (Jn. 16:13).* All things were not yet revealed to His disciples: *“I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth.”*

Just to add further support to what I have been affirming here, let me quote from the late professor of the theological school of the University of Athens, Greece, Panagiotis Bratsiotis. In the prologue of his book *The Revelation of the Apostle John (Athens, 1950)* this prominent Biblical scholar states the following:

“The Orthodox Eastern Church from the beginning lives and moves in the atmosphere of the Revelation, but, as should not be the case, despite the explicit mandate of the Lord (22:10 ‘Seal not the words of the prophecy of this book’), it continues to remain and to be regarded as a book ‘sealed with seven seals,’ open only to the ‘apocalyptic’ interpreters who emerge from time to time and especially to the Jehovah’s Witnesses and their victims.

The reservation and hesitation toward this divine, but certainly mysterious book, can be explained by the traditional fear in the Orthodox Church of the misinterpretations of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. However, this cannot be reconciled either to the pan-Christian authority of this book, or to the universally acknowledged recognition of its great religious importance, and, in the least, does it meet today’s needs in the Church of Christ which is struggling hard against the misinterpretations and the various anti-Christian and ungodly trends and forces. Consequently, a serious preoccupation with this book is a compelling need.”

Does Orthodoxy live the Revelation?

What does it mean that “the Orthodox Church from the beginning lives and moves in the atmosphere of

the Revelation,” as stated by the late professor P. Bratsiotis? It means that authentic Orthodoxy is the experience of the new age in Christ which is already in the here and now in part and the experience of the exciting expectation of complete fulfillment with the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Eucharistic life of the Orthodox Church is essentially apocalyptic. **It is the anticipation of the coming Marriage Supper of the Lamb, foretold in Revelation, chapter 19:7.**

How can it then be conceivable for a true Orthodox Christian to show aversion to the imminence of Christ’s return or to the presently growing preoccupation with apocalyptic matters?

Sound Orthodoxy is to “live and move in the atmosphere of the Revelation.” We find an increasing number of Orthodox who are talking and writing about the close of the age. This new interest is largely found among those who claim to have had a born again experience in the Holy Spirit.

This makes good sense, because it is the function of the Holy Spirit to excite the heart of the believer about the soon return of Jesus to take unto Himself His own. We have already pointed out that the Lord said that the Holy Spirit *“will show you things which are to come.”*

A heightened sense of expectation is the natural result of being fired up with a consuming love for Jesus. **When you really love Jesus and have a love relationship with Him, you naturally have a passionate desire to see Him soon and to be with Him forever and ever.**

Are you “living and moving in the atmosphere of the Revelation,” dear reader? It is a good time to search your heart and to examine your conscience. If you are not in the center of God’s perfect will with regard to the Book of Revelation, how can you possibly be in a right relationship with God? How

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can you possibly be saved? How can you possibly get to Heaven?

That Orthodoxy “from the beginning lived and moved in the atmosphere of the Revelation” does not necessarily mean that the seal on predictive prophecy had been broken. It was always an age of expectation for the church, but light on the circumstances under which Jesus would return and on the details concerning the close of the age was limited.

As the late professor P. Bratsiotis indicated in his book we mentioned already, it is not becoming to the historic Church of Christ, the one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, to look at the Book of the Revelation with fear. If the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other heretical sects have read false teachings into this last book of the New Testament, it is no excuse for the Orthodox Church to refrain from delving into it for the discovery of what God authentically is telling the church today and the entire world.

If the Orthodox Church is truly submitted to Christ, then perfect obedience to His will and absolute conformity to His word is in order. **The Lord couldn’t have made it clearer: “Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand” (Rev. 22:10).**

The appointed time when “all these things shall become known” is already upon us. Not only do we have the right to preach that “the time is at hand,” but we have the obligation to proclaim it from the house tops. It is not sensational apocalypticism, but simple obedience to the revealed word of God.

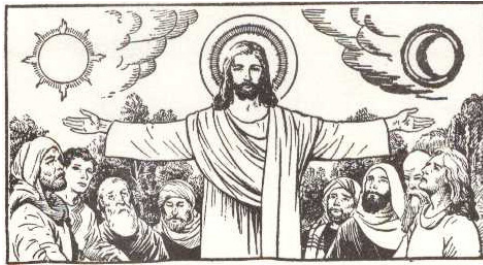
God desires that we now release the book of Revelation and remove every prohibition that has prevented His people from reading and studying it. He wills that any ban which was placed on it be lifted and made readily available to those He has redeemed in the blood of the Lamb and to the unregenerate world. Any bishop or priest who discourages the people in the church from reading the Revelation will have to answer to God one day. I would not want to be in his shoes.

Releasing the Revelation to the curiosity and spiritual thirst of our people does not necessarily imply

license in the interpreting of its contents. Lifting every ban which has been placed on it does not mean lifting every caution and care.

The clergy seem to be more apprehensive and insecure about the reading of Revelation than many of our laity. Perhaps the major reason for this negative attitude is the fact that the seminary curriculum of courses does not include any study of this last book of the New Testament. The priests who graduate from our seminaries are deprived of any real acquaintance with what is contained in it.

Consequently, the ordained seminary graduates come today totally unequipped, face-to-face with parishioners who not only are beginning to express a curiosity about Revelation, but who already are studying it and are more familiar with it than their own parish priest.



Our lay people are availing themselves of the many useful publications put out by Fundamentalist and Pentecostal writers some of which, I believe, are in the mainstream theologically, and sound from the orthodox standpoint. Writings on Bible prophecy are currently flooding the religious book market. Wisdom dictates that no priest ignore this fact.

A Matter of Obedience

Reading Revelation is more than a matter of obedience. It is a rewarding act of submission to the divine will in the literal sense of the word. There is a reward that is reserved for the one that reads it. There is a blessing from God that is in store for the believer who engages in the study of it. The same Jesus that promised, “Blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it,” now assures us similarly:

“Blessed is he that readeth and

they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein, for the time is at hand” (Rev. 1:3).

It is significant that the Lord this time adds the words “that readeth...” to “that hear...” He knew in His foreknowledge that at “the time of the consummation” the circulation of books and printed literature would reach its peak when the Revelation in print would be available to the maximum number of people. No ignorance of it could be justifiable. Christian believers in particular would be defenseless in the sight of God for being uninformed about the book of Revelation.

I am making the point for the benefit especially of those that take the attitude of “Well, what’s the use of reading Revelation when you can’t understand it.” Granted that it is a difficult section of the Bible to understand, but understanding will never follow, unless one first reads it and keeps reading it over and over again. Understanding results from reading and rereading the book of the Revelation with a humble heart that seeks earnestly and sincerely. **As is the case with the understanding of all Scripture, comprehending Revelation comes with repentance of all unconfessed sin, purity of heart and fervent prayer. Spiritual illumination comes only as a gift of the Holy Spirit.**

Knowing the prophetic message of Revelation is so crucial to the life of the believer that the Lord repeats that beatitude in the last chapter: “Blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book” (Rev. 22:7). Not to read or hear the words of this prophecy is to lose out on sharing in divine blessedness.

Needless to ask, “How can one keep the prophetic sayings in revelation, unless he reads and studies them?” Once you read it and hear it; once you receive its message, you are held responsible by God to observe every ordinance that is contained therein. You are judged in the final analysis on the basis of how you observed what you read and heard in the word of God, as St. James teach-

es: *“But be ye doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves” (1:22).*

Failing to study Revelation and dissuading others from reading it is a flagrant violation of God’s explicit ordinance. It incurs a severe penalty – eternal banishment from Heaven and consignment to the unquenchable fire of Hell!

Caution must be exercised against the spiritualization of explicit prophecies and promises and against treating predictive statements as allegorical. *“If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book. And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book” (22:18,19).*

Are we listening when God speaks?

The shrine on Patmos Island makes the book of Revelation a historic and tangible reality. It has given the Greek Church a historic and perpetual association with the Apocalypse. It is, therefore strange that the Greek Orthodox in actuality have little, if any, familiarity with this last book of the Bible. Normally, the Greeks should be more at home in Revelation than Christians of any other church.

It would help us to remember that in the Old Testament God used the Babylonians and Assyrians as His instruments in chastising His backslidden people of Israel, He is the same God Who says: *“I am the Lord, I change not” (Mal. 3:6).* The decline of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in our own day dramatizes the failure of the churches of the Apocalypse to listen when God speaks to them.

By identifying the age of the coming Kingdom of Christ with the Byzantine Empire and later with the Church on earth, the Greek Church lost her apocalyptic perspective and sense of expectation.

Monasticism, however useful to the church, came to replace the pro-

phetic ministry. By and large the monk became the substitute for the prophet. The Church and the empire were totally consumed either with fighting wars of survival against outside enemies or with combating theological heresies.

But when the prophetic ministry goes, interest in eschatological reality goes too. Triumphalism prevails. One would normally expect the Greek Church to have become more apocalyptic, as a result at least of the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the Asia Minor disaster in 1923.

True that many believed at the time that the loss of Byzantium to the Turks would mark the end of the world. However, neither of these earth-shattering calamities availed to change in any permanent manner the way of thinking in the church. Neither of them gave rise to any prophets. No Jeremiahs nor Elijahs emerged to leave a permanent prophetic heritage with the Greek Church. *“Remember from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works, or else I will come unto thee quickly, and I will remove thy candlestick out of its place, except thou repent” (Rev. 2:5).*

In closing, I want to remind you, dear reader, that Patmos has a special importance for all Christians, Roman Catholics and Protestants, as well as Orthodox. What a pity that no prophetic message has been coming out of Patmos in these apocalyptic days!

At anniversary celebrations periodically held on Patmos, we hear only religious platitudes mouthed by our Church leaders. Especially since this holy island is under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, an evangelical and prophetic voice should be sounded, calling the entire Christian world to repentance and a reconversion to the living Christ.

If our Church leaders have no wake-up call for the people of God and for the apostate world, let them simply quote from the Spirit-anointed text of the book of the Apocalypse. Let the message from Heaven be heard!

56 Years of Ministry

2024 marks the 56th Anniversary of this vital ministry. 56 years ago Fr. Eusebius Stephanou began this outreach ministry which took him to numerous countries around the world. He worked tirelessly to proclaim the Gospel to the Orthodox Church and to the world abroad. His video and audio messages are now available on YouTube and on Podcast. There are three new Podcast channels where Conference messages as well as Logos Outreach broadcasts may be heard. The following three titles can be found on the APPLE PODCASTS and on the SPOTIFY app. by typing the title onto the “Search Bar”. (1) MINISTRY OF FR. EUSEBIUS STEPHANOU. (2) THE LOGOS OUTREACH WITH FR. EUSEBIUS STEPHANOU. (3) THE LOGOS RADIO OUTREACH WITH FR. EUSEBIUS STEPHANOU.

I would also like to make a correction from my article in the last newsletter titled: *“Why is there such an interest in the Millennium?”* The Second Ecumenical Council was held in the city of Constantinople, not Ephesus. There was a third Council which was held in Ephesus which also involved important Christological issues. The articles in our newsletters often dwell on subjects which can be complex in nature, and which involve historical and theological details. Sometimes the original articles of Fr. Stephanou which are reprinted from older writings of his, are not long enough to fill all four pages in the newsletters. Whenever there is some extra space, it allows me to write on subjects many of you have inquired about, or have questions on. With many major events taking place in the world, a number of you have asked about what the Bible or Church Fathers had taught about regarding the End Times.

You will be happy to know that I have recently discovered some writings of Fr. Stephanou which dwell directly on End Time events, and plan on printing them in upcoming newsletters. Even though most of these writings are well over 40 years old, they are so timely that it is as if they had been written today. I know that they will be a blessing to you. Sincerely, *Joseph Abbate.*