



History Under Control

Harold T. Bryson

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The book of Revelation is the strangest book in the New Testament. It opens with an unusual vision of a person who has hair white as snow, eyes as a flame of fire, feet like burnished bronze; and from his mouth comes a sharp, two-edged sword. The narrative continues with One seated on a throne who is described with precious jewels. He is surrounded by twenty-four elders and four living creatures. In the throne area a Lamb appears and looks as if he has been killed. But the Lamb is alive, and he takes a scroll from the right hand of the One on the throne. Action in Revelation intensifies with seals opening, trumpets sounding, and bowls pouring. Strange creatures appear: a beast with the qualities of a leopard, bear, and a lion; a woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head; an enormous red dragon with seven heads, ten horns, and ten crowns on his head; an army of locusts with human-like faces and tails that sting like scorpions; and a rider riding a white horse and wearing a robe dipped in blood. Readers of Revelation encounter frequent use of numbers such as seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, ten horns, and ten crowns. They wonder about a beast numbered 666, a reign of a thousand years, and the appearance of 144,000 people surrounding the One on the throne. The book of Revelation closes with the appearance of a celestial city with streets of gold and gates of pearl. Though Revelation is a strange book, it is intended to be an understandable book. Do you think God would have given a message to John that the seven churches of Asia could not understand? The reason Revelation seems so different to modern readers is because of its unusual language. The kind of writing is called apocalyptic literature. First-century readers knew about Jewish apocalypses and the messages they conveyed. The writer of Revelation adopted the figurative and symbolic language of apocalyptic literature to communicate God's message to seven churches. Revelation was understandable to its first-century readers. It can be understood by any reader who takes the time to learn the book's life situation and its unique, apocalyptic style. Under God's inspiration John writes to believers in an alien, hostile environment. These readers desperately needed the message of Revelation. They suffered persecution from the Roman authorities. It was a time of chaos, uncertainty, and fear. The future seemed extremely dark and painfully hopeless. God instructed John to lift the veil so the readers could look beyond the visible. The central truth John wants to communicate is that the world and all its events are under the control of God.

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