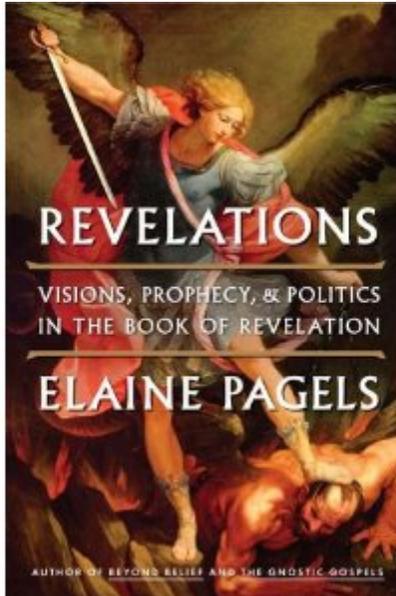


A Review of Elaine Pagels' *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation*.

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Reviewed by Mike Jones

The New Testament book of Revelation has always been a mystery to me. Every time I try to read through the entire book I get bogged down in the dreams, ideas, prophecies and visions of the writer "John of Patmos". I lose track of whether or not John is speaking to the people of my generation or a select circle of readers in his own time. Revelation seems to be this weird puzzle that countless readers attempt in an effort to figure out what it means. Whenever I try to read the document I often give up and move on to something else.

And that's too bad because whether we want to admit it or not the book of Revelation has had a tremendous impact on humanity throughout its history. Poetry and art is filled with allusions to Revelation. In our present day Revelation has served as a wakeup call for the Christian church so that we can "prepare the way of the Lord" in our own time. To this end an entire series of books about how the predictions of Revelation are going to come true has sold millions of copies.

So regardless of whether or not we find the experience frustrating and difficult it is important to make the effort to both read through and understand the book in its entirety.

Elaine Pagels has published a book that helps reading and understanding Revelation a more interesting and helpful experience. Entitled simply *Revelations* Pagels offers an introductory resource that both introduces the highly controversial book and also suggests helpful ways of both interpreting and using the information contained within.

Pagels begins *Revelations* with a brief summary of the book of Revelations. She also sets Revelations in its historical context. Perhaps one of the most interesting points she makes is that the book of Revelation is one among many efforts to reveal or display the will of God among the people God calls to gather for a particular way of life. One of the reasons why early church leaders had such trouble deciding whether or not it should be included in the New Testament canon was because there were so many competing texts available. There was almost too much choice and many found that overwhelming.

Pagels accomplishes her enormous task with the least amount of complexity. She addresses basic questions such as "Who really wrote Revelations?" and "Who was this John of Patmos?" She also raises more detailed questions surrounding events occurring during the writing and circulation of Revelations and the coded language John uses when communicating with his readers. A good example is the use of place names. Pagels is clear that John uses "Babylon" as a code word for Rome. Another example is the use and meaning of the number 666. Is John referring to a future incarnation of Satan or simply the Emperor Nero? All of this cloak and dagger writing seems to be an effort by John to bypass the Roman authorities who would be reading and assessing this document.

For me, one of the most important things to remember about Revelation is that John is not necessarily predicting the future. From what Pagels has to say in *Revelations* he is more concerned about his faith community and their fate more than he is about the twenty-first century reader. For me, the conclusion for contemporary readers is simple: God will act in God's own time and obsessing about the future is not necessarily a helpful way of living out our Christian commitment and calling. We have better things to do. What Revelation can do, however, is provide us with a picture of how the church grew in an extremely troubled time and from that traumatic journey we can learn how they survived and thrived.

This is an excellent survey of and introduction to the book of Revelations. It's also an excellent resource outlining the issues of John's day and describing the often difficult relationship between the Romans and the growing community of Christians throughout their empire. Clergy, students and lay worship leaders will find reading Pagels' book a critical step before consulting more detailed commentaries. I commend it to both church leaders and lay people. I also commend it to those who are curious about scripture and the more difficult writings contained within both testaments.