

Road Trip: Journey Into the Bible

Midweek Part 7: How to Read the New Testament Revelation

As we approach this introduction to the Book of Revelation, we are not going to diverge from the interpretive principles which we have used in other parts of the Bible, we're going to apply the same principles to Revelation that we have applied to the rest of scripture to get a proper interpretation, examining the historical and literary elements in order to gain a proper understanding of what Revelation would have meant from the original author to the original audience. We will let the interpretive principles determine how we read the book, not reading the book with any preconceived notions in mind, forcing any one interpretation on it.

My goal is not to CHANGE what you believe about Revelation, but it is to CHALLENGE the way you think about the book in order to see it first through its original context.

I. What is the Revelation?

The Book of Revelation is the most controversial, confusing, and unique book in the New Testament. Many believers are drawn to it, yet many others are repelled by it. Therefore, there's usually two extreme responses to the Book of Revelation: an unhealthy obsession with it, or an ignorance of it.

Description: The Book of Revelation is an apocalyptic letter, based on a series of prophetic visions, written to seven first-century churches in Asia Minor about their current conditions as well as coming tribulations and persecutions as a means of encouragement and hope in the light of Christ's victory over His enemies.

Author: The author identifies himself as John, a servant of God who bears witness to Jesus Christ and who is exiled for his faith (1:1, 9). He was well known to all the churches of Asia and carried sufficient authority that he could write a letter of this nature to these churches and expect it to be heeded.

Date: Traditionally, Revelation has been given a "late date" of around AD 95 during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian. The evidence for this date is: 1. a quote from the early church father Irenaeus, 2. the extent of persecution by Domitian, 3. the conditions of the churches which seem to be more favorable to a late date writing.

As of late, an early date (pre AD 70) for the writing of Revelation has been gaining much attention because of the lack of true evidence for a late date as well as internal evidence such as the command to measure the temple (which would have still been standing), the number of Roman Emperors, and prophetic allusions relating to the Emperor Nero.

II. Unique Features

1. Complex and Symbolic Imagery: Revelation is filled with complex symbols and images, such as the seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, the Beast, the Dragon, the Four Horsemen, and the New Jerusalem. These apocalyptic images have symbolic meanings, and many images draw from Old Testament prophetic literature. The use of symbolic imagery invites multiple layers of interpretation and emphasizes the depth and mystery of God's revelation. The imagery also connects Revelation with Old Testament themes, creating continuity with the broader biblical narrative.

2. Visions and Heavenly Journeys: Revelation is structured around a series of visions that John, the author, experiences. These visions include heavenly journeys where John is shown the throne room of God, the scroll with seven seals, and other celestial events that reveal the spiritual realities behind earthly events. These visions provide a transcendent perspective on history, showing that earthly events are part of a larger, divine plan. The heavenly journeys underscore the theme of God's sovereignty and the ultimate victory of Christ.

3. Structured Use of Numbers: Numbers play a significant role in the structure and symbolism of Revelation. The number 7, representing completeness or perfection, is used frequently (e.g., seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets). The number 12 and its multiples (e.g., 144,000) symbolize the people of God (12 tribes of Israel, 12 apostles). The structured use of numbers reinforces the sense of divine order and completeness in God's plan. It also highlights the symbolic nature of the book, where numbers often convey more than their literal value.

4. Contrasting Themes: Revelation presents a stark contrast between good and evil, light and darkness, Christ and Satan, the Lamb and the Beast, the New Jerusalem and Babylon. These dualistic themes are woven throughout the narrative, depicting the cosmic struggle between God's kingdom and the forces of evil. This dualism emphasizes the moral and spiritual choices facing humanity and the clear distinction between those who follow Christ and those who oppose Him. It also underscores the inevitability of God's victory over evil.

Here are some of the contrasts to consider.

- Two Women: Harlot – Bride
- Two Cities; Babylon – New Jerusalem
- To Ruling Animals: The Beast – The Lamb
- Two Marks: The Mark of the Beast – The Seal of God
- Two Allegiances: That Who Worship the Beast – Those Who Worship the Lamb
- Two Trinities: The Trinity of Evil (Satan, Beast, False Prophet) – The Trinity Godhead
- Two Meals: The Feast of God – The Marriage Supper of the Lamb
- Two Destinies: The Lake of Fire – Ruling with Christ

5. Old Testament Allusions – It is difficult to understand Revelation without understanding the Old Testament. Revelation is heavily intertextual, drawing extensively from Old Testament imagery, symbols, and themes, particularly from books like Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Zechariah. However, Revelation often uses these references in new and creative ways. Scholars estimate that as many as 278 out of 404 verses in Revelation contain references to the OT and that over five hundred allusions to OT texts.

Some of these allusions echo the story of the Exodus; for example, the great city being equated with Egypt, the plagues that include hail, darkness, locusts, frogs, boils, and water turning into blood, etc., people singing the "song of Moses and the Lamb," and a woman that is nourished in the wilderness.

We also see pictures from the tabernacle: golden lamp stands, hidden manna, the altar of incense, Holy of Holies, and the Ark of the Covenant.

Echoes of the Babylonian exile: a. Euphrates dries up (16:12) b. Babylon is fallen (14:8/ chapter 18) Ministry of "two witnesses" mirrors ministry of Christ: a. Duration of ministry: 3.5 years (11:3) b. Slain in the city "where our Lord was crucified" (11:8) c. Resurrected after 3 days [actually 3.5] (11:11) d. Ascend to heaven (11:12)

The Old Testament allusions in the Book of Revelation run deep and are often overlooked because, while there are hundreds of them, there are no direct quotations from the Old Testament text. The reason these allusions are so important is because the Old Testament passages give a foundation and framework to the Book of Revelation.

6. Emphasis on Martyrdom: Revelation frequently references the suffering, persecution, martyrdom, and ultimate vindication of believers, portraying them as faithful witnesses (e.g., the souls under the altar in Revelation 6:9-11). This emphasis on martyrdom highlights the principle that even death itself does not bring defeat for the Christ. The book points to Christ, the Lion of Judah who was the slain lamb as an example of one who 'conquered through death'. And ultimately God will win the victory over His enemies and the believers will rule and reign with Christ, thus reversing the earthly roles of the persecutor and persecuted.

III. An Outline of the Book Revelation

Revelation is structured around a series of cycles, each presenting different aspects of the same overarching narrative—the cosmic conflict between good and evil, culminating in the ultimate victory of God. These cycles are not necessarily sequential but are overlapping and repetitive, each offering a different perspective on the same events.

1. Introduction and Letters to the Seven Churches (Revelation 1:1-3:22)

- **Summary:** The book opens with a vision of the glorified Christ, who instructs John to write letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor. These letters contain commendations, rebukes, and exhortations tailored to the spiritual condition of each church. These letters are often seen as addressing the specific historical situations of these churches, but can also carry timeless lessons for the church today about faithfulness, repentance, and perseverance.

2. The Throne Room Vision and the Opening of the Seals (Revelation 4:1-8:1)

- **Summary:** John is taken up into heaven where he sees a vision of God's throne. The Lamb (Christ) is the only one worthy to open a scroll sealed with seven seals. As each seal is opened, it reveals a different aspect of divine judgment on the earth. This section underscores the sovereignty of God and the Lamb over history and judgment. The seals represent the unfolding of God's plan, with the emphasis on the inevitability of divine justice.

3. The Seven Trumpets (Revelation 8:2-11:19)

- **Summary:** Following the opening of the seventh seal, seven angels blow trumpets, each of which brings a plague or disaster upon the earth. These judgments are increasingly severe, serving as warnings to humanity. The trumpets are often interpreted as a call to repentance, reminding readers of the consequences of rebellion against God. They emphasize God's patience, as the judgments are partial, giving time for repentance.

4. The Woman, the Dragon, and the Beasts (Revelation 12:1-14:20)

- **Summary:** This section presents a cosmic drama featuring a woman (representing God's people), a dragon (Satan), and two beasts (representing corrupt political and religious powers). It portrays the ongoing spiritual battle between good and evil. The imagery here reflects the persecution of the church and the struggle against evil forces. The message is one of hope, as it reassures believers that despite appearances, Christ will ultimately triumph.

5. The Seven Bowls of Wrath (Revelation 15:1-16:21)

- **Summary:** Seven angels pour out seven bowls of God's wrath, bringing final and total judgments upon the earth. These plagues are more severe and universal than those of the trumpets. The bowls represent the full and final outpouring of God's wrath on a rebellious world. This cycle emphasizes the certainty of divine judgment and the ultimate defeat of evil.

6. The Fall of Babylon and the Final Judgment (Revelation 17:1-20:15)

- **Summary:** This section describes the fall of Babylon (symbolizing corrupt human empires in opposition to God), the defeat of the beast and the false prophet, and the final judgment of the dead. Babylon's fall serves as a warning against placing trust in worldly powers and systems.

7. The New Heaven and New Earth (Revelation 21:1-22:5)

- **Summary:** The book concludes with a vision of the new heaven and new earth, where God dwells with His people in a restored creation. The New Jerusalem descends from heaven, and all things are made new. This final cycle offers a vision of hope and ultimate restoration. It affirms the promise of eternal life and the final victory of God, encouraging believers to live with the end in view.

IV. The Genre(s) of Revelation

1. Epistle – First of all, the Book of Revelation is an Epistle. As an epistle, Revelation was written to an original audience with occasion and purpose. It has the form of an epistle with its Author, Audience, Greeting and Conclusion (1:4, 11; 22:21). Because it is an epistle it is primarily relevant to original readers in their time. So we first must ask ourselves, ‘what this book meant to the original audience.’ Any by using proper interpretive principles of epistles, we then ask, ‘what does it mean to us today?’ Epistles, though not originally written to us, however they are written for us, so they have abiding relevance, to all readers who find themselves in similar circumstances.

2. Prophecy – the book of Revelation is a prophecy because it foretells events to come in the future. Whether those events were to happen soon or far off, from the time John wrote Revelation, these prophetic events were in the future.

3. Apocalypse – Apocalyptic writing is a literary style using “over-the-top,” doomsday, “end-of-the-world” type symbolism, cosmic imagery, and visions. Apocalyptic literature and language is often tied to prophetic writing and is seen in the tradition of the Old Testament Prophets (see Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and in Jesus’ Olivet Discourse of Matthew 24/Mark 13/Luke 21).

Between 200 BC and 100 AD, the Jews produced a large number of uninspired books which, because of their similar style to this book, have been called apocalyptic. (e.g. The Book of Enoch, The Apocalypse of Baruch, The Book of Jubilees, The Assumption of Moses, etc.)

In the following respects, Revelation is like other apocalyptic books: 1. It arose during a time of great persecution. 2. It portrays the conflict between good and evil using vivid images and symbols. 3. The writer is guided by and receives interpretations from angels.

Apocalyptic language uses cosmic metaphors and symbols to convey major cataclysmic events such as national wars, calamities, political upheaval, divine judgments, and disasters. Some of these images are stars falling from the sky, the sun not shining, the moon turning into blood, God coming on a cloud to a nation, and the clouds rolling up as a scroll. It uses pictures of exaggerated animals to speak of people, rulers, and nations. You might recall seven-headed beasts, locusts with men’s faces, and a lamb slain.

These images are never meant to be taken literally, but symbolically to convey a message in a cryptic way. One must understand apocalyptic language so we will not misinterpret and abuse the scripture.

V. How the Book of Revelation Has Been Historically Viewed

Many people that grew up in Evangelical Christianity in the 20th century have probably only been aware of *one interpretation* of the Book of Revelation (think ‘Left Behind’, John Hagee, and Jack Van Impe, etc.), and are often shocked to find out that the Book of Revelation has not always been viewed or interpreted in the way it has in our day in recent times. The modern interpretation of the Book of Revelation has been highly influenced by the theological position known as ‘Dispensationalism’ which was formed in the mid-19th century by a man named John Nelson Darby, and became popularized in the 20th century through people like C.I. Scofield, and Clarence Larkin.

However, the church has viewed Revelation differently throughout its history. In the first few centuries of the church, Revelation was interpreted as an encouragement to Christians in persecution and the eventual defeat of the Roman Empire. In Medieval times, the book was mainly allegorized to show Christ’s kingdom as a present and spiritual kingdom. Later in the Middle ages, a historicist approach would become popular as an ‘unfolding’ of the history of the church. During the Reformation, Revelation was used as a critique and a way to criticize the Roman Catholic Church as Babylon and equating the Beast to the Pope, etc. To take the head off of the Papacy, a new ‘futuristic’ interpretation arose by Catholic scholars like Francisco Ribera who put the prophecy into the distant future. These ideas were picked up by John Nelson Darby and he came up with what’s known as the modern Dispensational view.

So as you can see, the Book of Revelation has been interpreted in various ways throughout history, and four major approaches have emerged: futurist (dispensational), preterist, historicist, and idealist. Here's a brief summary of each:

1. Futurist (or Dispensational) Interpretation

- **Overview:** The futurist view, particularly in its dispensational form, interprets Revelation as a prophetic blueprint of future events that will occur primarily at the end of history. According to this view, most of the book, especially chapters 4-22, deals with events that are yet to come, including the rise of the Antichrist, the Great Tribulation, the Second Coming of Christ, the Millennium, and the final judgment.
- **Key Features:** Emphasizes a literal interpretation of the prophetic symbols. Sees the church as distinct from Israel, with Revelation focusing on God's future dealings with Israel and the world. Popularized by dispensationalist theology, which includes concepts like the Rapture and the seven-year Tribulation.
- **Impact:** This view has influenced much of contemporary evangelical thought, especially in the United States, and is often associated with works of prophecy fiction like the "Left Behind" series.

2. Preterist Interpretation

- **Overview:** The preterist view interprets most of Revelation as a description of events that took place in the first century. The particularly the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the persecution of Christians under the Roman Empire. This view argues that Revelation was written to address the immediate concerns of the early church.
- **Key Features:** Emphasizes the historical and cultural context of the first century. Views the symbols and imagery as representing events and figures from the time of the Roman Empire. Sees the book as a message of hope and encouragement to early Christians enduring persecution.
- **Impact:** This interpretation highlights Revelation's relevance to its original audience and offers a historical perspective on the text, making it more accessible as a document of encouragement for early Christians.

3. Historicist Interpretation

- **Overview:** The historicist view interprets Revelation as a symbolic history of the church from the time of the apostle John to the end of the world. According to this approach, the book's visions and symbols represent successive events throughout church history, including the rise of the papacy, the Reformation, and other significant historical developments.
- **Key Features:** Sees Revelation as a timeline of church history, with each event or figure corresponding to a specific historical period. Often associates the Antichrist with historical figures such as the pope or other political leaders. Was a dominant interpretation during the Reformation, where Protestant interpreters often saw the Roman Catholic Church as fulfilling many of the book's negative prophecies.
- **Impact:** While less popular today, the historicist approach played a significant role in shaping Protestant thought, particularly during the Reformation, and was used to interpret current events in light of biblical prophecy.

4. Idealist Interpretation

- **Overview:** The idealist (or symbolic) view interprets Revelation as a timeless allegory of the spiritual struggle between good and evil. Rather than tying the symbols and events to specific historical incidents, the idealist view sees them as representing the ongoing conflict between God's kingdom and the forces of Satan throughout all of history.
- **Key Features:** Focuses on the moral and spiritual lessons of the book rather than specific predictions or historical events. Interprets the imagery and symbols as representations of the eternal truths of God's sovereignty, the victory of Christ, and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Emphasizes the applicability of Revelation to Christians in every era, seeing it as relevant for spiritual encouragement and exhortation in the face of trials.
- **Impact:** The idealist approach appeals to those who view Revelation as a source of spiritual insight and encouragement, rather than a roadmap of historical events or future prophecy.

VI. Keys to Interpreting Revelation

There are four interpretive principles that I have used in which I believe that the book itself lays out for us, which basically gives us the original context of Revelation: **Revelation was written to seven literal churches in Asia Minor, in signs and symbols, during a time of tribulation, about things which must shortly come to pass.**

1. Written to seven literal churches Asia Minor - Audience Relevance

See above comments under the 'Genre of Epistle'. As an epistle, Revelation has to have a meaning first of all to its original audience then secondly to the rest of us.

2. In sign and symbols - Symbolism in Revelation:

One of the keys to a correct interpretation of Revelation lies in its very first verse, which introduces and sets the tone for the entire book: Revelation 1:1 KJV *The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and **he sent and signified it** by his angel unto his servant John*

Renowned Revelation scholar GK Beale details this word used in the bold letters above as a word that means "to communicate by symbols" and not a mere general conveyance of information. The reader is to expect that the main means of divine revelation in this book is symbolic. Therefore, most of the things that are about to unfold are not to be taken literally (lions, lambs, beasts, women, etc.), but each refers symbolically to another reality or set of realities.

Beale says, "*We understand Revelation, therefore (at least, outside the letters to the seven churches in chs. 2 and 3), as a series of revelatory visions which are to be interpreted symbolically. Unless there is strong evidence in the text to the contrary, the visions (whether, for instance, those of the beast, the false prophet, the seven kings, the ten horns, the army of two hundred million, the twenty-four elders, or the millennium) are for the most part to be taken non-literally. This does not mean that they have no meaning or historical reference, but that the meaning is to be found symbolically — and almost always within the context of OT references which run through the visions God gave to John*"

Here are some of the possible symbolic references:

- Characters: Jezebel, 24 Elders, Seven spirits, slain lamb, four horsemen, 144,000 servants of God, Abaddon, two witnesses, woman clothed with sun, moon, and stars, great red dragon, a man child, beast from the sea, beast from the land, three unclean spirits, a blasphemous harlot
- Places: Heaven's throne room, river Euphrates, bottomless pit, Egypt and Sodom, Mount Zion, Babylon, Armageddon, lake of fire, new Jerusalem.
- Events: Breaking of seals, blowing of trumpets, pouring of bowls, frequent cosmic disruptions: sun darkened, stars falling, 100-pound hailstones, appearance of the beast, destruction of Babylon, wedding of the lamb, a one thousand year reign.
- Numerology:
 - 7 = completeness, perfection.
 - 1/3 represents significant minority (see Zech. 13:8-9)
 - 12, 24 represent God's people
 - 144,000 probably symbolic
 - 1000 years = long time (1000 always used symbolically in the bible)
 - 10 days = probably a short time

3. During a time of tribulation - The Climate of the Church

Revelation 1:9 *I, John, your brother and partner **in the tribulation** and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos don account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*

The early church suffered persecution from the Jews and the Romans, many of them being martyred because of their faith. This is the historical time setting of the Book of Revelation. It was written to encourage the believers who were being persecuted. Here is a prime example of ongoing relevance: while the prophecies in the book may have been fulfilled in the past, there are believers that have suffered persecution in all ages of the church.

4. About things soon to take place - Time Statements

This is one of the most important and overlooked interpretive keys to Revelation. Just as we have seen in other epistles, there is a sense of imminence in the Book of Revelation. It promotes the idea of something that is soon coming as opposed to thousands of years in the distant future.

Let's look at some of these time statements (emphases mine):

- The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants **things which must shortly come to pass** (Rev. 1:1) KJV
- 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) KJV
- Behold he cometh with clouds; and **every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him:** all kindred's of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen. (Rev. 1:7) KJV
- And he said unto me, these sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to show unto his servants **things which must shortly be done. Behold, I come quickly:** blessed is he that keepeth the saying of the prophecy of this book. (Rev. 22:6-7) KJV
- And he saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: **for the time is at hand.** (Rev. 22:10) KJV
- And **behold, I come quickly;** and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. (Rev. 22:12) KJV
- He which testifieth these things saith, **Surely I come quickly.** Amen. (Rev. 22:20a) KJV

Concluding Tips on Interpreting Revelation:

1. Don't be intimidated by the book, approach it with knowledge and an open mind.
2. As with all Epistles, let the historical and literary context drive the interpretation, not the other way around.
3. Recognize the goal of reading Revelation is 'prophetic interpretation', not 'prophetic speculation'.
4. Don't get lost in the details – too many people get consumed with figuring out every single symbolic detail instead of finding the overall message.
5. Let scripture interpret scriptures, stay away from 'Newspaper Exegesis'.
6. Don't interpret literally what's meant to be interpreted symbolically.
7. Don't let the Book of Revelation scare you, the book was written as a comfort and hope not to bring about fear of the future.
8. See how the book spoke to first century Christians who were suffering persecution at the hands of the empire.
9. Let the book challenge you on how you can live out your faith in a bold way in the face of persecution and powers that are 'anti-Christ'.
10. Approach the book with humility... we all might be wrong in the end.