

The Book Of Revelation

1. Be aware of your lens.

Three interpretive lenses:

1. FUTURIST
 - a. Primarily about future events just prior to the coming of Christ.
 - b. Everything from Rev. 4:1 on refers to future (“come up here” represents rapture)
 - c. Judgements of the 7 seals, trumpets, bowls are yet to happen

Strengths and Weaknesses

- ↑ Preserves urgency re: 2nd coming
- ↓ Tendency to constantly speculate meaning in light of current
- ↓ Focus on demise of the world rather than Christ’s reign and victory

2. PRETERIST -
 - a. Primarily fulfilled in John’s day
 - b. About the destruction of the temple and/or
 - c. About judgment on the Roman Empire
 - d. But ultimately fulfilled in 2nd coming

Strengths and Weaknesses

- ↑ Starts with original context (“must soon take place, 1:1)
- ↑ Avoids speculation
- ↓ Could undermine appreciation of the book for today’s audience

3. TIMELESS SYMBOLIC
 - a. No specific fulfillment in history (neither in John’s day or in the future)
 - b. Symbolic picture of ongoing battle between good and evil
 - c. Re-fulfilled in every generation

Strengths and Weaknesses

↑ Meaningful for today

↓ Could become personal and subjective, devoid of any sense of final consummation

4. Combined
 - a. Rev 1:8 could serve as a paradigm for the interpreter who wants to glean the benefits of all three approaches outlined above: the Lord is the one “who is, who was, and who is to come”
 - b. This three-fold description of God might be seen as corresponding to the three interpretive models just discussed:
 - i. First, the *timeless symbolic* approach, which emphasizes the “is”;
 - ii. Second, the *preterist* approach that emphasizes the “was” of Revelation.
 - iii. Third, the *futurist* approach, which emphasizes the “will come” aspect.

2. Written FOR us, not TO us

Some interpreters believe that current events are the key to unlocking the meaning of Revelation.

Hal Lindsey, for example, in *There's A New World Coming*¹ wrote that generations prior to ours knew little about the meaning of the book, and it is only in our day that we can know the true meaning of the book.

Problems:

(1) Contradicts what Revelation says about itself

- Written to seven churches - must have made sense to the original audience to whom it was written
- Original audience promised a blessing (1:3)
- Was to be “unsealed” (22:10) for his readers meaning it’s meaning would be clear
- Deals with events that must “soon take place” (1:1; 22:6) and a warning that the “time is near” (1:3).

(2) Crystal ball approach does not have a good track record.

¹ Gordan Lindsey, *There's A New World Coming: A Prophetic Odysseys*. (Santa Anna, Calif.: Vision House, 1973).

Predictions of rapture, millennium, Armageddon, rise of an antichrist

- Ronald Duncan **1979**
- Mikkel Dahl **1980**
- Emil Gaverluk **1981**
- Hal Lindsey **1988, 1990**
- Edgar Whisenant **1988**
- John Walvoord **1990**
- Lester Sumrall **2000**
- Grant Jeffrey **2000**

Three questions when interpreting any book of the Bible:

1. What does the passage say?
2. What did the passage mean TO the original audience?
3. What does the passage mean FOR the current audience?

Let's focus on that first question as we consider the second tool...

3. Pastoral message to the original audience.

What we know about the original audience

- Facing persecution (2:2, 7, 13)
- Disappointed
 - After the resurrection the Church anticipated the triumph of the kingdom of God.
 - 50 years later Paul and Peter have been executed, John is exiled and the church is being persecuted
 - Not what they expected
- Needed to hear...
 - ... that although believers were going through tribulation in the form of persecution,
 - ... that through Christ's resurrection and ascension the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ.

TRANSITION: Three questions when interpreting any book of the Bible:

1. What does the passage say?

2. What did the passage mean TO the original audience?
3. What does the passage mean FOR the current audience?

Let's focus on that third question as we consider the second tool...

4. Put down the newspaper and pick up the Old Testament

Revelation is steeped in the OT:

- More OT references than any other NT book
- Hard to tally, but about 350 allusions (250 are unique)²
- More than half from Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel

If we fail to read Revelation through the lens of the OT we will likely be drawn to sensationalism and miss the point of the text.

In many cases, multiple OT allusions come together:

CASE STUDY: Rev 4

- 4:2 (Isa 6:1; 1 Kgs 22:9)
- 4:3 (Ezek 1:28)
- 4:5a (Ezek 1:13; Exod 19:16)
- 4:5b (Ezek 1:13; Zech 4:2, 6)
- 4:6a (Ezek 1:22)
- 4:6b (Ezek 1:5, 18)
- 4:7 (Ezek 1:10)
- 4:8a (Isa 6:2)
- 4:8b (Isa 6:3)
- 4:9 (Isa 6:1)

CASE STUDY: Sealing and marking (Rev 13)

- Unbelievers who embrace the earthly powers of the state (represented by the beast) are marked on their forehead with the number of his name (Rev 13).
 - Interpretations include speculation about computer chips, tattoos and SIN numbers.

² Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 101.

- But this kind of speculation side-steps one of the three fundamental questions we mentioned earlier: what did sealing and marking the forehead mean to the original audience?
- Answer: They would immediately think of multiple OT references where sealing and marking the forehead symbolized ownership or association (like a brand):
- Cain
- The high priest bore the name of the LORD on his forehead (Exod 26:36)
- Servants of God were marked on their hands and head for divine protection and blessing (Deut 6:6-8; Ezek 9:4-6)
- Believers are sealed on the forehead with God’s name (Rev 3:12; 7:4, 9:4, 14:1, 22:4)

CONCLUSION: The marks and seals of the NT echo the OT accounts where “sealing” and “marking” were symbols of ownership (like branding!) - showing who you belonged to. The symbol concerns spiritual fidelity or rebellion, not credit cards or ID systems.

This is why Paul used the exact same imagery when he said believers bore the “seal” or “mark” of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 1:21-22; Eph 1:13)

5. Realize that God doesn’t give visions to show us what things look like

We should interpret every passage of the Bible according to its literary style.

One of those styles is “apocalyptic.”

Features:

1. Heavenly source - throne room
2. Heavenly perspective - shows that what is happening on earth has corresponding reality in the spiritual realm (like pulling away a puppet stage to reveal how the strings are being pulled behind the scenes)
3. Dreams and visions
4. Symbolism - images and numbers - Symbols are not a “code” with straightforward “this means that” interpretations.

Like political cartoons

Numbers have meaning:

- ▶ 4
- ▶ 7
- ▶ 12 (24, 144,000)

- ▶ 666
- ▶ 1,000

CASE STUDY: Cosmic Disturbance (Rev 6:12-17)

- Some see nuclear war
- **PROBLEM:**
 - Goes against symbolic nature of apocalyptic (God is not showing what things look like)
 - We have to say John saw something in his vision which is different from what he said he saw (“stars of the sky fell to earth”)
 - If this is literally happening, then it defies reality. If a small meteor (never mind multiple stars) hit the earth, civilization as we know it would disappear. But in Revelation, after all this happens, people hide in caves and hope for protection.

What are we to make of this?

SOLUTION: This is common prophetic language to describe God coming in judgment:

- Fall of Babylon – 539 (Isaiah 13:9-10)
- Fall of Edom – 400-499 (Isaiah 34:4)
- Judgement on Samaria (Amos 8:9)
- Judgement on Egypt (32:7-8)

This rhetorical language is typical of the Middle East. Someone posted a video on Facebook of a radical cleric preaching against the infidels: “May the earth open beneath their feet. May the sky fall upon their heads. May the rocks of the hills crush their arms. May the sun go black before their eyes, etc.”

“Many who are deficient in a sense of poetry...have tried their hands on the Apocalypse, and made a mess of it.”³

6. Message of hope for every generation

1. Suffering is limited by the providence of God

This is even seen in the various plagues that are often not as horrible as they could be:

- Third seal brings economic hardship but “the oil and the wine” are not touched (6:6).
- Fourth seal death is given power to take “a fourth of the earth” (6:8) but not the whole earth!

³ Philip Carrington, *The Meaning of Revelation* (London: SPCK, 1931) 136.

- Fifth seal shows that persecution will affect the people of God but only “until the number...who were to be killed...had been completed.” (6:11).
- The same kinds of boundaries are present with the seven trumpets as well, where destruction and plagues affect 1/3 of the earth but not the whole earth (Rev. 8).
 - 1/3 is not mathematically precise, but symbolizes less restraint
 - See Ezek 5:2, 12; Zech 13:8-9 for precedent to read this symbolically

2. Prayer effects the world

- A. Although God is sovereign, in some mysterious way the actions of the church work to affect the “turbulent line of world history.”
- This is first seen in 5:8-9 where the 24 elders (the totality of the people of God) are depicted as “holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” (5:8).
 - The opening of the seals by Christ depicts the fact that Christ alone is able to give meaning to troubled history (as contained in the scrolls) and this meaning is received through prayer.
- B. The same image re-appears in chapter 8 during the interval between the seventh seal and the first trumpet.
- An angel with a “golden censer” filled with the “prayers of the saints” takes the censer and fills it “with fire from the altar” and then hurls it “on the earth” (8:3-5).
 - The judgements of the trumpets follow immediately.
 - Whatever other conclusions a detailed exegesis may bring us to embrace, one thing is sure, the prayers of God’s people play a vital role in the setting of boundaries.
 - We participate in the government of human affairs, and in the administration of God’s justice through prayer.

3. Worship opens the door to heaven

4:1 - Begins with John saying **I saw an open door**. Rev. 4 is a behind the scenes look at what happened when the Laodiceans opened the door of worship.

7. It’s all about Jesus

Remember, John is seeing these visions with the Lamb. He is “riding through the terrors on the back of Aslan” (Lewis). It’s like riding a scary ride at Disneyland with someone who’s

already been on it, “Don’t worry, I’ve already been on this ride.” The lamb is saying, “Don’t worry about all this terror. I’ve conquered it all.”

- Rev 5:4-6 - John then turns to see this Lion, this one who is at the centre of history.
- But instead of seeing a Lion he sees a **Lamb looking as if it had been slain**.

“That God is immense is no secret. All you have to do is look at the universe...what is the secret? That God is beautiful is no secret. It is written on every flower, on the sea and on the mountains. Here it is: God is a crucified God. God is the God who allows himself to be defeated, God is the God who has revealed himself in the poor. God is the God who has washed my feet, God is Jesus of Nazareth. We are not accustomed to a God like this.” (Carlo Carretto. (1987) *Why, O Lord?* Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, P45.)

- (1) Our view of power is not God’s view of power. God asserts his strength by becoming weak.
- (2) Lions inflict death; lamb’s absorb death.

Jesus could have come in power and judged the earth, but instead, he came in greater power, the power of humility, weakness, and sacrifice.

- b. In the Narnia tales Shasta asks Aslan, “Are you a giant?” Aslan responds, “You may call me giant, but I am not like the creatures whom you call giants.”
 - (1) God doesn’t exercise His power in the same way others do.
 - (2) God asserts His giantness, His Lion-ness, through a Lamb.
 - (3) This Lamb has **seven horns**, which speaks of complete power, and **seven eyes**, which speaks of perfect seeing.

8. Warfare

II. The Woman and Her Son (12:1-6)

A. The Story

1. A dramatic portrayal of the spiritual battle surrounding the birth of Christ and the church.

Note that in verses 1 and 3 we’re told that this is symbolic. In apocalyptic language it is not unusual for the same symbol to mean different things, and even for the meaning to change within the same vision. This occurs here.

2. The characters include a woman, her infant child, and a dragon.
 - a. Woman
May represent:
 1. Messianic community of faithful Israel (ie., Elizabeth, Zechariah, John the Baptist, Simeon, Mary and Joseph).
The Messianic community produces the messiah.
 2. Mary
 3. The Church
 - b. Infant Child = Jesus
- B. The Story Behind the Story
 1. Parallels in the myths and stories of the time:
 - a. Typical storyline:
 1. a divine or cosmic beast attempts to keep a young challenger from coming to power
 2. the beast will often attack the mother of the challenger while she is yet pregnant
 - b. Example: Myth of Python and Apollo
 1. Python (dragon) is the beast.
 2. Apollo is the challenger.
 3. Leto is pregnant with Apollo by Zeus.

4. Python pursues Leto, pregnant with Apollo, with plans of killing her.
 5. Zeus rescues her by commanding the north wind to carry her to an island. On the island she is protected when the god of the sea, Poseidon, hides the island by covering it with waves.
 6. Python eventually gives up on the search.
 7. Leto is safe and Apollo is born.
2. Compare the myth of Python and Apollo with John's story:

Characters	Myth	John's Vision	History
Comic Beast	Dragon	Satan / Roman Empire	Nero
Mother	The Woman	Woman	Mary
Young Challenger	Apollo	Child	Jesus

- a. Apollo was associated with the "golden age".
- b. Nero claimed to be the new "Apollo", come on the scene to usher in a new golden age of prosperity and culture for Roman Empire.
- c. Nero even claimed that as an infant his life was threatened by a serpent, just like Apollo.
- d. In the vision, instead of Nero playing the part of the young challenger, (who's life is threatened by the snake, but who will nevertheless usher in a new age), he is cast as the threatened beast, doing what he can to protect his power.

III. War in Heaven (12:7-17)

- A. Apocalypse means "unveiling" or "revealing."
 1. Focus – not revealing the future, but behind the scenes.
 2. Permitted through poetry and symbol to have the curtain lifted to see that conflict on earth was paralleled by conflict in the spirit realm.
 3. In John's day, there was conflict on earth:
 - a. RE, first through Herod, tried to kill Jesus.
 - b. Now through Nero, trying to destroy the church.
- B. What is the cause of the conflict on earth? Conflict in the heavenlies.
 1. 12:7-9 - Satan is defeated.
 - a. The hurling down of satan is not referring to his initial fall, but to his defeat during this battle, during his attempt to thwart the plan of God by using the RE to destroy the church.
 - b. Every time satan's work is reversed it can be described as a falling. ie., Luke 10:17-18
 - c. John is telling the troubled church that satan and the RE under

Nero will succeed. The words of Jesus are true – the gates of hell will not prevail against the church.

2. 12:10-11 - The basis of triumph is the death and resurrection of Christ.
 3. 12:12 - Even though satan has been defeated, we still battle.
- C. The war in the spiritual realm plays out on earth (12:13-17).
1. Now the woman represents the church.
 - a. Church = ekklesia = called out ones.
 - b. Church = Israel, Messianic Community, Body of Christ
 2. Just as the Lord preserved his people from Egypt, he will preserve his church.
 3. The warfare will continue until the Lord comes (v.17).

9. Know what the book says

Chp 1 Vision of Christ Enthroned

Chps 2-3 Letters to Seven Churches ending with Christ standing at the door knocking...

Chp 4 Vision of Worship in Heaven

- ▶ what happens when the Laodicean church (or any church), opens the door to Christ
- ▶ vision of heavenly worship offered to our Creator
- ▶ He is seen as the boundary of history, both Creator and Consummator.

Chps 5-6 The Seven Seals

- ▶ Scroll sealed with 7 seals, which no man can open
 - 1st Seal (6:1-2) The White Horse: war
 - 2nd Seal (6:3-4) The Red Horse: violence
 - 3rd Seal (6:5-6) The Black Horse: economic hardship
 - 4th Seal (6:7-8) The Pale Horse: death
 - 5th Seal (6:9-11) The Persecuted and Praying Church
 - 6th Seal (6:12-17) Human history culminates with the Day of the Lord!
- ▶ Meaning of the scroll and 7 seals is debated...
- ▶ Depends on which set of lens we read the book through:
 - Futurist: Primarily about the future just prior to Christ's second coming
 - Preterist: Primarily about events in John's day (destruction of the temple and the Roman Empire)
 - Timeless symbolic (idealist): Symbolic portrayal of battle between good and evil in every generation

Futurist

- ▶ 7 seals are first of a series of judgements (7 seals, 7 trumpets, 7 chalices) following the rapture of the church, pictured by John's catching up in 4:1.
- ▶ To be interpreted literally.

Preterist

- ▶ 7 seals are first of a series of judgements in John's day or soon after (destruction of the temple in AD 70 and/or the fall of the Roman Empire)
- ▶ symbolic images describing real events

Timeless symbolic

- ▶ The seals, trumpets, and chalices all have immediate fulfilment in John's day (as with the preterist view)
- ▶ but have ongoing fulfilment throughout history

Chp 7 The People of God - On Earth and in Heaven

The people of God are reminded that despite the challenge of living within history, Jesus is Lord and they will be saved.

(1) The people of God on earth - 144,000 sealed for ultimate salvation (7:1-8)

- ▶ Futurist – literal 144,000 Jewish evangelists who preach the gospel between the rapture and the 2nd coming.
- ▶ Preterist – Symbolic number representing all of God's people on earth in John's day. They are sealed by the Spirit, as belonging to the Lord (see Eph 1:13).
- ▶ Timeless symbolic – Same as preterist, but expands to include all of God's people on earth at any given time. (12 x 12 = 144 x 1,000)

(2) The people of God in heaven - thanking God for salvation (7:9-17)

Chps 8-11 The Bittersweet Co-existence of the Kingdom and Chaos

(1) The opening of the 7th seal gives way to the 7 trumpets, of which the first six further illustrate the turbulent nature of history (Chps 8-9).

(2) John takes comfort in the fact that this is no different than what was preached through the Word of God, whose message is both sweet and bitter (Chp 10).

(3) This is further illustrated by two witnesses who experience a mixture of power and persecution (Chp 11).

Chp 12

The Cosmic Battle

The great battle between good and evil, God and Satan, is played out through the incarnation, resurrection and ascension.

Chps 13-20 The Beast is Beaten!

The Beast (13:1-15) and the Mark of the Beast (13:16-18)

- Futurist – The beast is an anti-christ figure who will rule the world prior to the second coming. The mark of the beast is literal.
- Preterist – The beast is the Roman Empire of John's day, and specifically Nero. The mark of the beast is the symbolic equivalent to the sealing of the 144,000, a sign of ownership. Supporters point out that "Caesar Nero" has the value of 666.

Timeless symbolic – Same as preterist view, but expanded to include any period of time when believers are challenged to relinquish their faith to an anti-christ-ian figure.

The Millennium (chp 20)

Pre-millennial (millennium is literal and future)

- ▶ Second coming is followed by literal 1000 year period when Christ reigns on earth from Jerusalem.
- ▶ God fulfills any outstanding promises to Israel at this time.
- ▶ Preferred view of futurists.

Post-millennial (millennium is symbolic and future)

- ▶ the church brings in the reign of Christ.
- ▶ How? The world is disciplined, then Christ comes.
- ▶ Preferred view of preterists and timeless symbolists.

Amillennial (millennium is symbolic and here now)

- ▶ devil is bound now (through the cross)
- ▶ Christ is reigning now (through the church)
- ▶ Preferred view of preterists and timeless symbolists.

Chps 21-22 The Ultimate Kingdom The kingdom that is "already - but not yet" comes to fulfilment.

TRANSITION: Three questions when interpreting any book of the Bible:

1. What does the passage say?
2. What did the passage mean *TO* the original audience?
3. What does the passage mean *FOR* the current audience?

Let's focus on that second question as we consider the second tool...

10. Not primarily a chronological map of future events

Based on 1:19

- “things that you have seen” refers to vision of chp 1
- “things that are” refers to chs 2-3
- “things to take place after these things” refers to 4:1-22:5

Popular approach, allowing chs. 4-22 yield exciting insights into future events

Problems

- (1) Neglects genre (figurative)
- (2) Chs 4-22 includes repeated references to past, present, future (i.e., incarnation in chp 12) Chp 11, the sealing of believers – present reality)