

Mid Week Study to Air on February 10, 2021
Reading Revelation Responsibly

(or) How to Study the Book of Revelation (and all End Time Texts)

READING REVEATION RESPONSIBLY-RIGHTLY
There are Five Major Ways to Read Revelation

ONE: Revelation was fulfilled in the past, during the time of the readers and/or shortly after their time. The technical name for this interpretation is called Preterist, which comes from the Latin word - past. Many of the leading scholars of Revelation strongly hold to this way of interpreting it.

TWO: Revelation was fulfilled in the successive ages/stages of church history. And this looks at the entire book as an allegory. An allegory is where something literal has a spiritual explanation. A famous example of allegory is the Parable of the Sower that appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke 8:1-15.

THREE: Revelation would be mainly fulfilled in the future. The large majority of Revelation would not be clear or understandable to audiences until the time when the statements in Revelation would have their observable manifestation in history.

FOUR: Revelation is mostly symbolic and has fulfillment all through the centuries. It has new fulfillments in every generation. It is a theological explanation of good and evil, spiritual conflict, the work of the devil and the work of God, the experiences of sin in the world, the saving work of God in the world, judgments on evil, the mission of God... This is sometimes called the Idealized interpretation of Revelation.

FIVE: The Hybrid view which believes interpretation is not either-or, but a both-and approach is the best way to interpret Revelation. This Hybrid view expands how we understand Revelation, it prioritizes how we understand Revelation, and it reframes mistake in understanding Revelation.

The Hybrid view begins with the past and says you must understand the original context, history and culture, of author and readers. All responsible interpretation of the Bible starts there.

It then understands the nature of apocalyptic literature. That includes the OT meaning that shapes the images, symbols, and numbers. It does this knowing that the past author and audience would have lived in that understanding... and

It then says, what is the symbolic, theological, spiritual, representative meaning we can take and use as insights, lessons, and applications for the church throughout all history. In particular, how can we take that meaning for today. It also watches to make sure there are not wrong interpretations that create distortions of interpretation for today or the future.

And it wonders about future fulfillment still to come. And of course, that question is left open ended, knowing that there are parts of God's redemptive plan - still to come.

That is how I interpret Revelation and how I want to help you interpret Revelation. And this is how you will "take to heart" the heaven that John saw standing open to him and made known to us. But it will take some intentional and diligent study.

WORKING WITH APOCALYPSE, the OLD TESTAMENT, and the FIRST CENTURY

1. The Book of Revelation is both prophecy and apocalypse. It is therefore, doubly difficult to understand.
2. The Book of Revelation is loaded with references and origins based in a wide diversity of OT passages. When a modern reader does not know the OT very well, they will miss the meaning of themes and texts that were obvious to John and his audience.
3. Revelation was written to an audience living in a historically and culturally specific time. Many of the things John writes, are infused with 1st century specific meaning. When a modern reader does not understand that first century context (history and culture), they miss the meaning of themes and texts, that were again, clear to John and his audience.

POINT: The first audience would have understood most of what John said. It was not a mystery to them, even if it is to us. And we must begin with learning WHAT IT MEANT TO THEM.

ONE: The Redemptive-Historical Principle.

Simply, this principle means there is a history to the redemptive work of God. That redemptive work grows and expands, always building on what went before it, but always adding to it. God progressively adds insight, as the centuries go by.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. Matthew 5:17

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. Hebrews 1:1-2

Jesus clarifies and advances many themes from the OT. The rest of the NT builds on Jesus fulfillment.

- ⇒ The Kingdom of God and the way that Jesus is King.
- ⇒ The People of God - their true identity, nature and purpose.
- ⇒ The Place of God's Presence, i.e. the City of Jerusalem and the Temple in Jerusalem.
- ⇒ The Nature of Heaven and Eternity
- ⇒ The Work and Destiny of Satan
- ⇒ The Victory of God and How God is Victorious
- ⇒ The Plan God has to Reach and Redeem all the Nations (or) the Nature of Mission

John, in Revelation, deals with all these themes and adds to each, a great deal. But to understand what John does with them, you must understand the redemptive-historical progress on each of these themes... and depending on the extent of understanding, your interpretation and application will be good, or not so good.

TWO: CONTEXT IS VITAL

Every word is in a verse. Every verse is in a paragraph. Every paragraph is in a chapter. Every chapter is in a book. Every book is in a Testament. The Testament is in a Bible. You understand a word by understanding the whole verse. You understand a verse by understanding the paragraph and so on.

John is profoundly and constantly rooted in the OT and John is a prophetic interpreter of the OT. It has been said that every verse in Revelation has an OT source.

EXAMPLE ONE:

8:13. The eagle crying out in a loud voice, woe, woe, woe. This is a simple example.

EXAMPLE TWO - Babylon

Babylon is the focus of three chapters in Revelation 17-19. Babylon was the enemy of God's people in the OT.

EXAMPLE THREE - the Plagues in Revelation are dependent on how John uses and applies the plagues on Egypt. The Egyptian plagues function as a "model" for future and even more powerful plagues.

THREE: AS A PART OF CONTEXT, THE IMMEDIATE HISTORICAL SITUATION IS KEY.

If location, location, location is the key to real estate, it is also key to Bible interpretation. John, he is writing in a very specific historical context, with clear references to events and people that would be naturally identified by the first audience.

EXAMPLE: The war of Rome and Israel, the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 66-70 AD. This is the definitive historical experience for Jews and Christians of 2nd half of the 1st century.

EXAMPLE: The most crucial immediate circumstance is this. Rome is an empire. Rome is steadily antagonistic to the Christian faith. Rome seems supreme. Suffering is happening and more is to come. What are God's people to do? Where is Jesus? How will the church find strength to be faithful in these times of tribulation?

EXAMPLE: Tribulation. The word to the 7 churches in chapters 2-3 about overcoming and being victorious through being faithful, takes on new urgency and clarity as John steadily describes the church as the faithful witness to the Jesus Lamb of God that was sacrificed.

EXAMPLE: The Nero legend or myth was profoundly important both to the Roman Empire, and to many of the nations of that empire, who wanted freedom from Rome. The Nero legend is powerfully used by John in Revelation 13 in talking about the beasts of sea and land.

FOUR: THE ORIGINAL MEANING

This one is an extension of the previous two points. Generally, a text must mean for us today, what it meant to the writer of the text and to the first audience who heard it. The "exceptions" to this rule of interpretation are when later authors, inspired by God, add a fuller understanding to what was only partially known (for example many prophecies about the Messiah) or when progressive redemption and revelation make obsolete things that were necessary previously.

EXAMPLE: Daniel would not know that his vision of empires referred to the Persian-Medes, then the Greeks, and then the Roman empire - for two of those empires did not at the time of prophecy exist.

EXAMPLE: The Messiah would not be a conquering King who killed the enemies of Israel, but a suffering servant who would die, not only for Israel, but also for the enemies of Israel.

FIVE: For the original meaning, THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE with all the RULES OF LITERATURE APPLYING TO HOW IT IS INTERPRETED. And Revelation is Apocalypse with the rules of that "genre" applying to it.

USE OF SYMBOLS:

(5:1) A scroll with 7 seals.

(6:1-8) There are four riders on four horses who bring destruction, war, famine and death.

(6:9) Souls under an altar.

(6:12-14) In these verses the sun turns black, the moon turns blood red, stars fall to earth. The heavens recede, and EVERY mountain and island are removed. Are these literal happenings? The OT uses language like this to describe catastrophic events involving God's judgment on earth (see Isaiah 13:10-13; 24:19-23; 34:4; Ezekiel 32:6-8; Joel 2:10, 30-31; Habakkuk 3:6-11). The same language, always used symbolically to describe calamity and judgment.

- Some images are actual and symbolic.
EXAMPLE: Is the mighty angel of Rev 10:1.
- Some images have clear identifications with specific realities.
EXAMPLE: The dragon of Rev 12 is not an actual dragon, just symbolic for Satan?
- The woman of Rev. 12 is not quite as clear, but likely - the church.
- Other images are (probably) symbolic referring to 1st century people and places.
- Some are symbolic, and most likely working as a representative or type. For example, Babylon is a representation of evil cities and empires.
- And some are just harder to know exactly what they mean. For example, the locusts and the mounted horses of chapter 9, the 5th and 6th trumpets.

USE OF NUMBERS IN REVELATION. What is true for symbols is also true for NUMBERS. Are the numbers literal numbers or do the numbers have symbolic value? In the ancient world of both Jews and the Roman Empire, numbers had very powerful symbolic meaning and were frequently NOT actual. Or when they were actual, they also included a representative meaning. And some numbers seem to have overlap of meaning.

The two most famous, complicated (and most debated) numbers in Revelation are:

- 666 - the number of the antichrist (and one that is easily understood once you understand culture and history)
 - 1000 year millennial period.
- **Three** is the number of perfection, used mainly for God... but also, in Revelation, used as a parody of God. The dragon, the beast from the sea, and the beast from the land are a “pretender” Trinity of Evil.
- **Four** is the number for scope and comprehensiveness often applied to the world. After seven, it is the most often used number in Revelation. (7:1; 9:13-15; also, the use of four - people, tribe, language, nation - that is used with slight variations SEVEN times - 5:9).
- **Six** is the number that falls short of completeness. And the number 666 has some amazing symbolism and also the use of other numerology that was the practice of the cultures of that time.
- **Seven** is the number of completeness (not perfection) and therefore the number 3 ½ is very important. It is the opposite of completeness - it means partial, limited, whether it is used as years or months or days.
- There are THREE rounds of SEVEN judgments (seals, trumpets, and bowls).
 - The THREE rounds of SEVEN are broken into sets of FOUR and THREE. The first FOUR judgements affect the four parts of the world (6:8; 8:7-12; 16:2-9)
 - There are SEVEN trumpets blown by SEVEN angels.
 - SEVEN plagues in the SEVEN bowls.
- SEVEN Churches
 - SEVEN Blessings (1:3; 4:13; 16:15; 19:9; 22:7; 22:14)
 - SEVEN times the nations, peoples, language, tribes are talked about.
 - Jesus is used 14x, or 7 x 2 = 14.
 - Christ is used 7x
 - Lamb is used 28x or 7 x 4.
 - God and Lamb together occurs 7x

→ **Eight** is the number of renewal or a new beginning.

→ **Ten** stands for “the entirety” of a thing.

→ **Twelve** refers to a complete divine arrangement.

- 12 tribes, 12 elders, 12 apostles, 12 foundations, 12 gates, 12 precious stones.

→ **Multiples** of numbers and numbers **squared** continue the original meaning of a number only to striking levels. 144,000 is not the actual number...

- 10,000 is a myriad, $10 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10$.
- 9:16 has an intriguing number. 200,000,000 or twice ten thousand times ten thousand. Actually double myriad times a myriad. “I heard the number.” A number beyond conception.
- 21:15-17: 12,000 stadia as a cube. Wide, long, high. The new city is a city that is bigger than the entire Roman Empire! A cube city about 1400 miles wide, long, high. In other words - beyond conception.

Point - the great majority of time, the fuller meaning of a number is not actual but symbolic and having ongoing meaning and application for all time.

EXAMPLE: The SEVEN churches of Revelation 2 & 3 were actual churches. And the SEVEN specific, historic churches are also representative for all churches. The messages to these churches are to all churches everyone, at all times.

- Jesus speaks to his church.
- Jesus has clear expectations for faithful obedience from his church.
- Jesus has words of warning for churches that are not faithfully obedient.
- Jesus promises blessings to those churches that are faithfully obedient.

SIX: ONGOING MEANING

Generally, the principle is this. The ongoing meaning is the same as the original meaning. However, there are lessons and points in the original meaning that are capable of ongoing application and experience, and even new insight.

EXAMPLE: Antichrist. In 1 John 3:18-27 we read about the antichrist and antichrist(s) [plural].