

Keys to Understanding Revelation

by Michael Kuykendall

Revelation is so difficult that modern readers neglect it. Others do worse than ignore it when they misuse it. Sometimes the misuse is nothing more than an exaggeration of minor details. Other times, however, the misuse is an abuse of power, making your particular interpretation of Revelation a test of faith and fellowship. Take the Revelation challenge. Don't allow neglect or abuse to discourage you. The central message of the book plumbs the depths of the Christian faith and portrays beautifully the ultimate victory of Christ and his followers. To understand Revelation, however, readers must understand its purpose, major themes, literary types, symbolic universe, methodologies, millennial views, interpretive steps, and structure.

Understand Its Purpose

The primary purpose of Revelation was to encourage Christians who faced pressure and persecution from the outside and to exhort Christians who faced an accommodation to heresy from the inside. Revelation challenges readers to persevere, to remain faithful, and to witness even to the point of martyrdom. This purpose applies to readers of every generation—not just the first or the last. The purpose of Revelation is not to give detailed blueprints for people to predict an end-time date (the batting average of every single prognosticator throughout history has been .000). The purpose is to challenge believers to endure patiently and witness for Christ until they die or Jesus returns.

Understand Its Major Themes

Three themes stand out.

Authority of God. A major theme of Revelation is the authority, sovereignty, and dominion of God. This is found in his roles as creator, his reign over history, and his end-time judgments. Jesus' resurrection and second coming ultimately defeats Satan.

Consistent perseverance. A key word is *hypomonē* which is translated consistent perseverance or patient endurance. This is seen in the emphasis upon the need to remain faithful in the midst of persecution.

On mission. Closely connected to the perseverance is the theme of witnessing for Christ. Believers are to witness until they die. Revelation calls all to salvation in light of the coming judgment of God. Believers are always on mission.

Understand the Types of Literature It Uses

Revelation is like reading the sports page, not the front page of the newspaper. There is a special vocabulary. So, when I read the headline of "Rockets Propel Past Thunder," "Devil Rays Burn Angels," and "Tiger Takes a Snowman," I know I must not take those words literally. I take them seriously, but if I take them literally then I misinterpret the purpose of the symbols. Revelation is composed of three literary types (called "genres").

Epistle. Revelation reveals itself as a typical letter written to seven churches in the province of Asia Minor (1:4; 2:1-3:22). The book concludes with an epistolary postscript (22:21). "Epistle" reminds

readers to accent the original audience and to follow the basic rule that “a text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or readers.” John’s images were certainly understood by his own audience. We must start with how *they* understood the symbols.

Prophecy. Prophecy is the second genre (1:3). Old Testament prophecy included prediction, but it mainly concerned itself with calling the prophet’s *own* generation to repentance and obedience. Thus, in such this-generational preaching, the prophet hints with less detail of a time in the future of one who was to come and make a new covenant (Jesus’ first coming), and in even less detail of an ultimate and eschatological end (Jesus’ second coming). The symbols and images which the prophets used for their prophecies must be interpreted primarily with the original audience in mind. The New Testament prophet, John, draws from his Old Testament counterparts for many of his symbols. He reinterprets and redelivers their prophecies for his own audience.

Apocalypse. The very first word of the book is *apokalypsis*—“revelation” (1:1). Apocalyptic literature was popular in John’s day. Its rules and guidelines for interpretation must be followed by modern readers. Apocalypses included several characteristics:

Visions. Apocalypses display a structure that revolves around multiple visions. Popular choices on the number of visions for Revelation include one, four, seven, and even twelve visions (my favorite).

Dualism. Two worlds are emphasized—heaven and earth; God versus Satan; present suffering versus future salvation; and present age versus the age to come. Humanity is divided into good and evil, those being saved and those perishing. There are no fence-sitters in apocalyptic literature. People are either believers or unbelievers.

Recapitulation. Apocalyptic literature often recycles or recaps its visions. When a new vision begins, the seer temporally goes back in time and marches forward toward the end again. There may be numerous “ends” in the book. Scholars note this literary technique in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and especially Daniel. Many scholars note recapping in Revelation. The seals, trumpets, and bowls, for example, are not three separate plagues. They offer an intensifying repetition. The seventh of each plague brings us to the edge of eternity.

Symbolism. In order to express the inexpressible scenes revealed, John abandoned common narrative and opted for apocalyptic images. Such language is filled with fantastic images, bizarre creatures, earthquakes, and supernatural upheavals. The symbolism also extends to numbers, colors, and place names as well.

Understand John’s Universe

The traits of apocalyptic literature mentioned above help us to see John’s universe. It is dualistic and symbolic. There are numerous names and titles for each group.

The Protagonists (Good Guys).

God—the one sitting on the throne, Lord God Almighty, the one who lives forever and ever, the one who was and is and is to come, etc.

Christ—Jesus, Christ, Son of Man, Alpha and Omega, King of kings and Lord of lords, Lamb, Lion of the tribe of Judah, firstborn from the dead, faithful witness, etc.

The Spirit—seven spirits, Spirit of prophecy, “in the Spirit” (inspirer of John’s visions).

Angels—these are messengers (angels of the seven churches) who carry out God’s will in judgment (Michael, mighty angel, seven angels, four angels), and lead the universe in worship (four living creatures, twenty-four elders).

Believers—bride of the Lamb, beheaded, brothers and sisters, God’s people, great multitude, one who is victorious, woman clothed with the sun, rest of her offspring, servants, tribes of Israel, two witnesses, virgins, 144,000, etc. Some interpreters seek to make distinctions between these groups, but they are all believers.

The Antagonists (Bad Guys).

Satan—the dragon, devil, Satan, ancient serpent.

Beast—beast from the sea; originates from the Abyss.

False prophet—the second beast; beast from the earth.

Demons—also Abaddon and Apollyon.

Unbelievers—inhabitants of the earth, the nations, great prostitute, cowardly, idolaters, liars, dogs, generals, kings of the earth, woman sitting on the scarlet beast, whole world.

If readers do not embrace John’s universe, his book makes little sense. We must see the world through John’s eyes. Under the inspiration of the Spirit, he chose this method and style to deliver God’s word.

Understand the Five Approaches to Interpreting John’s Symbols

There are five methodological options available for interpreting Revelation’s images.

Preterist. This approach stresses the historical context of John’s original audience. Its emphasis rests in the first century. All or almost all of its prophecies have already occurred. The catastrophic images most often refer to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Historicist. This approach attempts to trace history from John’s original audience to the second coming. Revelation serves as a chronological roadmap as each chapter advances temporally forward. Its symbols predict major events and persons who spanned church history. For example, chapter 6 is the middle ages; chapter 10 the Reformation era; chapter 16 is today. This view was popular among the Reformers. Today, Seventh Day Adventists are most often associated with it.

Futurist. This approach understands the majority of Revelation as events that will occur in the very last days. Revelation, therefore, mainly deals with prophecies yet to be fulfilled. The symbols refer to people and events which appear near the end of earth’s history. There are two futurist views—historic premillennialism and dispensational premillennialism. This view generally understands Revelation’s structure in sequential terms. In addition, John’s images refer to literal people and events in the near future.

Idealist. The idealist approach emphasizes searching for the meaning of Revelation’s images over any specific references to time or events. The symbols picture timeless truths, such as the struggle between good and evil that exists in each generation from the first to the last. Idealists, therefore, do not search for literal correspondence to Revelation’s images. Every generation should apply John’s symbols for

their own contexts. For example, the beast symbolizes any Antichrist-like person or movement in any generation.

Eclectic. The eclectic approach attempts to combine the strengths and limit the weaknesses of the aforementioned approaches. Few if any eclectics follow the historicist model. But most attempt to interact with the other approaches. Thus, like every other New Testament book, Revelation's original audience must be heard first (preterist). The symbols must have meant something to John's first readers. Yet Revelation's symbolic world presents timeless truths which every generation is challenged to reapply (idealist). Ultimately, interpreters recognize that future events such as the second coming, final judgment, and eternity await fulfillment (futurist).

Understand the Four Millennial Options

The five methods mentioned above help in understanding John's reference to a thousand years in chapter 20. Modern evangelicals normally accept one of the following four viewpoints.

Amillennialism. This means "no millennium." Actually, inaugurated millennialism is a more accurate term. Features include the understanding that the millennium covers the era between the first and second comings of Christ. The kingdom of God and Christ is happening now in an already-but-not-yet fashion. The kingdom consummates at the return of Christ. The church will go through the great tribulation. Thus, it rejects a rapture and a future earthly millennial period. It also stresses that Revelation's visions are primarily symbolic. Amillennialists are found among preterists, idealists, and eclectics the most.

Postmillennialism. This teaches that Christ will return after (post-) a one-thousand-year millennial kingdom concludes. Thus, the gradual success of the gospel message will eventually experience that much of humanity will be converted and society transformed. Christ will then return. Chapter 20, therefore, refers to the golden age that is established over a long period of time. Postmillennialists are found among preterists and historicists the most.

Historic premillennialism. This asserts the second coming occurs before (pre-) the start of an earthly millennium. Historic premillennialists affirm that Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in spiritual Israel, that is, church. Nevertheless, the prophetic symbols do refer to future, literal events. A great tribulation is coming but it may not be seven years. God will use Jews near the end in a mighty way, but Scripture is ambivalent on whether it will be as Jewish people or the Jewish nation. Historic premillennialists are usually post-tribulational. The church will pass through the great tribulation. This view draws primarily from futurists, but idealists and eclectics are often included.

Dispensational premillennialism. Dispensationalists stress reading Revelation in a sequential fashion. Thus, chapter 20 clearly indicates a thousand-year earthly reign of Christ after Armageddon and the second coming which occurred in chapter 19. The end of the millennium leads to another end-time battle before the arrival of the new Jerusalem. Other features include interpreting the prophetic and apocalyptic symbols as literally as possible. The symbols of Revelation must refer to actual things. Names, people, places, and numbers are understood literally. For example, the two witnesses are two real (Jewish) people instead of representing the witnessing church which the other views support. The church is not "spiritual Israel." God has separate end-time programs—one for the church and one for the nation of Israel. This distinction calls for a rapture of believers to occur before Christ's second coming. Most dispensationalists are pre-tribulational. This viewpoint is primarily futurist, but many dispensationalists accept a historicist understanding of the churches in chapters 2-3.

Understand the Seven Interpretive Steps

Readers must interpret the symbols according to John's intent. It is a better approach to assume symbolic meaning first and foremost in John's images. Readers must ask what is the meaning associated with this image? Here are seven helpful steps that provide a pathway for interpreting the symbols of Revelation.

Look for symbolic imagery. Interpreters must recognize that symbolic imagery permeates all of Revelation. Symbols are attached to names, people, beings, clothing, colors, numbers, time designations, heavenly bodies, nature, animals, places, institutions, and events. Readers must come to the text with symbolic readiness. A lion is not a lion; a head is not a head; a sickle is not a sickle; a mountain is not a mountain. These are symbols drawn from the animal kingdom, body parts, and cosmic imagery.

Look for intratextual connections. This means that readers must look for the interpretations of symbols within the context of all of Revelation. There are several examples where John or an angel interprets a symbol. When John interprets a symbol, it should become the fixed meaning of that symbol throughout the rest of Revelation. For example, how John interpreted the lampstand of chapter 1 should inform readers when lampstands reappear in chapter 11.

Look for intertextual allusions. This means that Bible students must determine if a symbol is drawn from an allusion to the Old Testament. John's book is saturated with Old Testament images. We must find out how John uses Jezebel, Balaam, exodus, plagues, wilderness, tabernacle, Sodom, Babylon, etc.

Look for extratextual allusions. This refers to writings outside the biblical text. We must compare Revelation's images with other similar writings to discover whether the image is a common symbol with a relatively standard meaning. For example, "blood to a horse's bridle" (14:20) was a common contemporary symbol for an end-time war.

Look for cultural-historical allusions. This step looks for possible connections between the symbol and the cultural-historical context of first-century Asia Minor. John wrote to people who shared common cultural assumptions. His images would be understood to the original audience. For example, the image of a woman flying on the wings of an eagle toward the desert (12:14) was understandable to John's audience. Today's readers must use John's cultural cues to interpret the image correctly.

Look to scholarly experts. Consult scholarly treatments in commentaries and other specialized works. How have Revelation's images been interpreted by the experts? By "experts" I mean those who have academic credentials, those who use critical thinking skills, those who are fair in their evaluations to all the options.

Remain humble in conclusions. This step reminds all readers of Revelation to remain open and honest and humble on their findings, and show respect toward opposing views.

Understand the Structure of Revelation

How interpreters structure Revelation underscores their chosen methodology. Futurists and historicists tend to emphasize chronological progression throughout Revelation. Preterists, idealists, and eclectic interpreters tend toward recapitulation. Most people, therefore, may be placed in one of the following two categories.

Sequential structure. Many interpreters understand Revelation's structure in sequential, linear terms. The seals chronologically lead to the trumpets which lead to the bowls which then lead to the second coming at the conclusion of Revelation. A modified sequential approach is another possibility. In this case, the seventh seal breaks to reveal the seven trumpets. Then the seventh trumpet sounds to reveal the seven bowls. Supporters of this approach recognize that it is impossible to be strictly sequential. Thus, phrases such as "John anticipates" and "John previews" assist in handling chronology that seems "out of order" (for example, 14:17–20 is understood as the second coming; 16:14 mentions "Armageddon" which does not happen until 19:17, etc.). The modified sequential approach recognizes that Revelation cannot be presented in strictly linear terms. Thus, it attempts to answer the problem by suggesting the visions preview or anticipate the end.

Recapped structure. Other interpreters follow some form of recapitulation. The seals, trumpets, and bowls cover the same chronological territory. So do the three interludes (7:1-17; 10:1-11:19; 14:1-15:4). There appear to be repeated features in the presentation of the beast and the eschatological earthquake. Nevertheless, there is sequence within the individual visions. However, interpreters must be cautious not fall into the trap of parallelism (for example, first seal equals first trumpet equals first bowl). Instead, a spiraling, ascending, expanding, and developing progress is made so that later visions describe more fully earlier visions. Subsequent visions expand and develop the same subject matter but from different, fuller, and deeper perspectives.

There are as many outlines as there are interpreters of Revelation. Here is an outline based on twelve visions that all the methodologies could use. Leaders might teach a vision at a time.

Prologue (1:1-8)

Vision One: Inaugural Vision (1:9-20) and Seven Letters (2:1-3:22)

Vision Two: Throne Room (4:1-5:14)

Vision Three: Seven Seals (6:1-17; 8:1-5)

Vision Four: First Interlude (7:1-17)

Vision Five: Seven Trumpets (8:6-9:21; 11:15-19)

Vision Six: Second Interlude (10:1-11:14)

Vision Seven: Third Interlude (12:1-15:4)

Vision Eight: Seven Bowls (15:5-16:21)

Vision Nine: Fall of Babylon (17:1-19:10)

Vision Ten: Rider on the White Horse (19:11-21)

Vision Eleven: Thousand Years (20:1-21:8)

Vision Twelve: New Jerusalem (21:9-22:9)

Epilogue (22:10-21)

Resources for Understanding Revelation

Beale, G. K. *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015.

Duvall, J. Scott. *Revelation*. Teach the Text Commentaries. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014.

Kuykendall, Michael. *Lions, Locusts, and the Lamb: Interpreting the Key Images of Revelation*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019.