

7 Tips for Understanding Revelation

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The Book of Revelation is notoriously difficult to understand. Over the centuries, the church has presented countless interpretations and theories about the meaning and significance of this enigmatic work.

Even modern scholars approach Revelation in several different ways.

Whether you find that intimidating or enticing, we need some guardrails to keep us from getting lost in Revelation's prophecies, metaphors, and apocalyptic imagery. Here are some tips for studying Revelation from Scott Duvall, who, along with J. Daniel Hays, teaches the [Biblical Interpretation online course](#).

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5 approaches to interpreting Revelation

Like all books of the Bible, Revelation was written in a particular time and place to particular people. But it's also saturated with symbolism and prophecy, which has led to a variety of methods of interpretation. Traditionally, interpreters have approached Revelation in four primary ways. Let's explore all four, and then introduce a fifth.

Preterist

The preterist approach emphasizes the historical context of Revelation and tries to understand it the way John's audience would have understood it.

Historicist

Many of Revelation's events seem to have been fulfilled in the first century. The historicist approach treats Revelation as a map or outline of what has happened or will happen throughout church history from the first century until the return of Christ.

Futurist

The futurist approach considers most of the book related to future events immediately preceding the end of history.

Idealist

The idealist approach doesn't interpret Revelation in terms of any particular reference to time, but rather relates it to the ongoing struggle between good and evil.

Eclectic

An eclectic approach to reading Revelation attempts to combine the strengths of several of the other approaches:

- Revelation seems to address the first-century Christians directly, so we should read Revelation the same way that we read every other book of the Bible by taking its historical context seriously.
- Revelation also presents timeless truths for surviving the struggle between good and evil. The visions of Revelation challenge us to forsake our complacency and stay faithful during times of persecution.
- Revelation also clearly has something to say about events still to come. Some events it describes await future fulfillment (such as the return of Christ, the great white throne judgment, and the arrival of the holy city).

Principles for reading this prophetic-apocalyptic letter

In addition to these general approaches to Revelation, specific principles can help us faithfully read this prophetic-apocalyptic letter. Here are seven suggestions:

1. Read Revelation with humility.

We should resist -Revelation-made-easy- approaches. Revelation is not easy! If you're unwilling to live with any uncertainty, you're more likely to read into Revelation things that are not there. **Beware of interpreters who appear to have all the answers to even the small questions.** Experts who claim absolute knowledge about every detail of Revelation should immediately raise suspicion. Read Revelation with an open mind: be willing to admit that your interpretation could be wrong and be prepared to change your view if the biblical evidence points in a different direction.

2. Try to discover the message to the original readers.

Discovering the message to the original audience is the top priority with any book of the Bible, but especially with this one. The first Christians were blessed for obeying Revelation (1:3) and the book is described as an unsealed (or open) book, even for people living in John's day (22:10). When it comes to reading Revelation, the tendency is to ignore the first Christians and jump directly to God's message for us.

Some people use today's newspapers as the key to interpreting Revelation. But, as Craig Keener notes in his commentary, this approach doesn't fit well with a high view of Scripture. The newspaper approach assumes that we must be living in the last Christian generation. It also implies that in Revelation God wasn't really speaking to the very first Christians. Isn't that arrogant on our part

as contemporary interpreters? What if Christ doesn't return until AD 4000? Would Revelation still have a message for us since we wouldn't be the last generation?

If our interpretation doesn't make sense for the original readers, we've probably missed the meaning of the passage. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart remind us of how important it is to discover the message to the original audience: *As with the Epistles, the primary meaning of the Revelation is what John intended it to mean, which in turn must also have been something his readers could have understood it to mean.*

We must understand what Revelation *meant* in John's day in order to understand what it *means* today.

3. Don't try to discover a strict chronological map of future events.

Revelation doesn't progress in a neat linear fashion. The book is filled with prophetic, apocalyptic visions designed to make a dramatic impact on the reader, not to present a precise chronological sequence of future events. For example, notice that the sixth seal (6:12-17) takes us to the end of the age.

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it? (NIV)

But when the seventh seal is opened, there's a whole new set of judgments the trumpets and the seventh trumpet (11:15-19) also takes us to the end of the age:

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said:

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.

And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying:

“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign.

The nations were angry, and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your people who revere your name, both great and small and for destroying those who destroy the earth.

Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a severe hailstorm.

Revelation 19-22 paints the most colorful and detailed picture of the end, but, as you can see, this isn't the first time the readers have been transported to the very end.

But even some of the smaller details present challenges to creating a chronological order.

In Revelation 6:12-16 we're told that the stars in the sky fell to earth. . . . The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Yet in 7:3 the four angels are told not to harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God. It doesn't make sense if we try to force a strict chronological sequence on this.

Instead of searching for a chronological map of future events in Revelation, try to discover the main message in each vision.

4. Take Revelation seriously, but don't always take it literally.

Some people say we should interpret Scripture symbolically because they deny the reality of a scriptural truth or a historical event. When they say something is figurative or symbolic, they mean it isn't real.

But picture language, with its symbols, images, and figures, is capable of conveying literal truth and describing literal events. It's just another language vehicle, another way of communicating reality. In our way of thinking, Revelation uses picture language to emphasize historical reality rather than to deny or diminish it.

Our method of interpretation should always match the literary genre the author used. For Revelation, this means we should avoid taking picture language literally. When we try to force literal interpretations on picture language, we run the risk of perverting the author's intended meaning.

For example, what happens when we try to take the reference in Revelation 17:9 to the woman who sits on seven hills literally? To force this image into a literal mold results either in one very large woman or in seven very small hills. But when we say that the woman in 17:9 is not a literal woman, it doesn't deny the reality of Scripture. First-century Christians would naturally understand the woman to represent Rome, a city built on seven hills. The text probably also looks beyond Rome to powerful pagan empires opposed to God. We take picture language seriously, but not literally.

Revelation 1:1 says that God signified (KJV) the book to John. The word translated signify (NIV, made it known) suggests that God communicated the book to John through signs or symbols. According to G.K. Beale, the background of this term is Daniel 2, where God signifies to the king what will occur in the latter days by showing him a pictorial revelation (Daniel 2:45). For most of the Bible, the general rule is to interpret literally except where the context clearly calls for a symbolic reading. The word signify in Revelation 1:1 suggests that the general rule is the reverse: **interpret symbolically unless the context calls for a literal reading.**

5. Pay attention when John identifies an image.

John occasionally defines images for his readers or gives clues to identify them. Here are a few examples:

- In Revelation 1:17 the one like a son of man (1:13) is Christ
- In 1:20 the golden lampstands are the churches
- In 5:5-6 the Lion is the Lamb
- In 12:9 the dragon is Satan
- In 21:9-10 the heavenly Jerusalem is the wife of the Lamb or the church.

When images that John has already identified are repeated elsewhere in the book, we can probably assume that they refer to the same things they did before.

Still, we have to be careful not to confuse John's direct identification of an image (those mentioned above) with his fluid use of images. **John is not shy about using the same image to refer to different things.** For example, the seven stars refer to the angels of the seven churches in four passages (1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1). But John also uses the image of a single star to refer to other things:

- God's agents of judgment (8:10-12)
- Jesus (22:16)

In the same way, the image of a woman can represent different things in different passages:

- The false prophetess (2:20)
- The messianic community (ch. 12)
- The harlot city or empire (ch. 17)
- The bride of Christ (19:7; 21:9)

Even though John is free to use images to refer to different things, we should still pay attention when he identifies an image.

6. Look at the Old Testament and historical context.

Revelation uses language at several different levels:

- **Text level:** words written on the page
- **Vision level:** the picture that the words paint
- **Referent level:** what the vision refers to in real life

One of the hardest parts of reading Revelation is knowing what the images and symbols refer to. Even when we understand what's happening at the text and vision levels, we may not know what's going on at the referent level. We usually know what Revelation is saying, but we're often not sure what it's talking about.

The two places to go for answers are the first-century historical context and the Old Testament.

Historical context of Revelation

According to the [Zondervan Handbook to the Bible](#), The first Christians lived in eager expectation of Christ's return. But sixty years after his death it still had not happened, persecution was increasing, and some were beginning to doubt. So Revelation's letters to the churches, and the book as a whole, were needed to encourage them to stand firm. God is in control, no matter how things may look. Christ, not the emperor, is Lord of history. He has the key of destiny itself. And he is coming again to execute justice. There is a glorious, wonderful future for every faithful believer and especially for those who lay down their lives for Christ.

There is evidence within the text that the early church was being persecuted:

- John himself claims to suffer alongside his audience (1:9)
- The church at Ephesus has endured hardship (2:3)
- Jesus acknowledges the suffering of the church at Smyrna (2:9-10)

We also know from other writers of the time that first-century Roman emperors often had titles similar to those Christians gave to Jesus. Emperor Domitian wanted his subjects to address him as *dominus et deus noster* (our lord and god) and the earliest, most basic Christian confession was Jesus is Lord. When Christians refused to confess Caesar is Lord in worship of the emperor, they were considered disloyal to the state and were subject to persecution. At this time in history the pressure to bow to the emperor was becoming more widespread and systematic, and not all Christians responded with defiance.

Revelation shows us that Christians were dealing with persecution in several ways when the letter was written:

- Ephesus had forsaken her first love (2:4).
- Some in Pergamum and Thyatira followed false teachers (2:14-15, 20).
- Sardis had a reputation of being alive, but it was dead (3:1).
- The Lord was about to spit Lukewarm Laodicea out of his mouth (3:16).

All of this feeds into how we read Revelation.

Old Testament references

Although there's no explicit Old Testament quotation in Revelation, the book is filled with echoes and allusions to the Old Testament. **Revelation contains more Old Testament references than any other New Testament book almost 70 percent of its verses contain Old Testament references.** Psalms, Isaiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel make the most important contributions to Revelation.

In Revelation 1, John draws on the following symbols from book of Daniel to describe his vision of Jesus:

- *White like wool* (Daniel 7:9)
- *One like a son of man, coming with the clouds* (Daniel 7:13)
- *Belt of the fine gold* (Daniel 10:5)
- *Eyes like flaming torches* (Daniel 10:6)
- *Arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze* (Daniel 10:6)
- *Like the sound of a multitude* (Daniel 10:6)

Here's John's vision of Jesus:

*I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was **someone like a son of man**, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a **golden sash** around his chest. The hair on his head was **white like wool**, as white as snow, and his **eyes were like blazing fire**. His **feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace**, and his **voice was like the sound of rushing waters**. (Rev. 1:7, -15 [emphasis added])*

In this passage, understanding Daniel helps us understand Revelation. John often uses the Old Testament language to describe what he's seen and heard. As we struggle to identify what the vision is about, we should turn to both the historical context and the Old Testament.

7. Focus on the main idea and don't get lost in the details.

With most literary genres in the Bible, we begin with the details and work toward an understanding of the whole text. With Revelation, however, we should start with the big picture and work toward an understanding of the details. As we try to identify theological principles in Revelation, we should focus on the main ideas.

Read a section of Revelation and try to capture the main idea in a short statement. For example, the main idea of Revelation 4-5 relates to the ascended and exalted Lord, who alone is worthy to execute the divine judgments. The details of any particular section increase the impact on the reader but don't change that main idea. **Resist the temptation to focus so much on the details that you miss the main idea.** Don't let the main point of each section or vision fade. As has been said, when reading Revelation, the main thing is to make the main thing the main thing!

If the central interpretive rule is to grasp the main idea of each vision, it becomes important that we have a general understanding of how the book unfolds. We see the book unfolding in seven broad movements, bracketed by an introduction and a conclusion.

Read Revelation with these things in mind

These seven principles will give you a lifeline as you study your way through this famously challenging text. They won't do the hard work of interpretation for you, but they can keep you focused as you humbly explore John's revelation.