

Revelation 1:1-8

Dr. David Ewert, in the introduction to his commentary on Revelation confessed that “For the first twenty years of my Christian life I avoided the book of Revelation. It was not because I disliked the book or questioned its inspiration, but I had the distinct impression that [it] was for experts only.” Yet when he finally immersed himself in a guided study of the book he found himself “upon occasion reduced to tears” by “the message of this last book of the Bible”. “More and more I came to realize that John wrote Revelation for ordinary Christians in Asia Minor, and....that the message of Revelation can be understood.”

Warm Up Question(s) – choose one

- What expectations or impressions do you bring to our study of Revelation? Why?
- What kind of book are you: *mystery? Sports? Technical? Adventure? Poetry? Unreadable? Sealed? Open?* Explain.

Discovering the Word

- 1) **Read Revelation 1:1-8.** The word “revelation” (Greek = *apocalypse*) means “to bring to light what was formerly hidden, veiled or undercover.” Who and what will be unveiled by the revelation given to John (vv. 1-3)?
- 2) Who is the writer of this document and what do we know about him (cf. 1⁹)? Who are the recipients (use a map)¹ and what do we know about them (1⁹)?
- 3) How should the three words John uses to describe this document (“apocalypse”^{1:1}; “prophecy”^{1:3}; letter^{4:1}; chs.2-3) guide how we read it?²
- 4) How does John describe God³ (vv.4-5, 8)? What significance and implications might these descriptions have for John (v.9)? For his original readers (v.4a, 11)? For us?
- 5) Inflexible hostility from Rome, persecution by the Jews and the pervasive influence for conformity to heathen practices had subjected the churches in the province of Asia to enormous pressures. What encouragement do you think believers in “the seven churches” would find in knowing Christ “made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father” (v. 6)?
- 6) John presents a vision of Jesus as both coming (v. 7) and already and always here (v. 8). What would it be like to have only one of these two perspectives?

Applying the Word

- John states that we will be blessed if we hear his message and take it to heart (v. 3). In what ways do you think he expects us to take this message to heart?

¹ <https://lifehopeandtruth.com/uploads/images/7-churches-of-revelation.gif>

² How does knowing you are reading a poem or a newspaper or science fiction or a political cartoon, guide how you read it? Often we make adjustments automatically based on the genre of what we are reading. They did too. For help on this read the “Apocalyptic Literature” second on pages 2-4.

³ Look for if/how John distinguishes God in Trinitarian ways (i.e. Father, Spirit, Son) and how the specific descriptions used for God here compare or contrast to descriptions you are most familiar with in your “God-talk”.

Apocalyptic Literature

Apocalyptic literature was extremely popular from the second century BC to the second century AD, although its roots lie much earlier than that. It gained popularity in response to the rise of the Greek and Roman empires, and flourished with the Jewish people because of the heavy persecution they experienced under these empires. It was subversive and prophesied cataclysmic judgments on their persecutors while recognizing that they had little to no hope without divine intervention.

In its broadest sense, the term “apocalyptic” is applied to parts of the writings of the Old Testament prophets, specifically to passages in Joel, Amos, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel, as well as to portions of the New Testament. But the grandfather of all apocalyptic books in the Bible is the book of Revelation.

The difficulty we have today in understanding apocalyptic literature stems from our unfamiliarity with the genre, which often leads us to draw conclusions that the genre doesn’t actually permit us to make. Imagine an alien from another galaxy landing on Earth, and in an attempt to learn something about our planet they read the story “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” But because they have no knowledge of nursery rhymes, they draw conclusions about bears sleeping in beds, loving porridge, and needing to beware of marauding little girls who love to break and enter. Crazy as that sounds, that’s the kind of mistake many make with apocalyptic literature, and understandably so, because it is a genre “alien” to most.

When you read a story that begins “Once upon a time,” you automatically recognize that you’re reading a nursery rhyme and not a book of history or science. Thus, you know not to conclude that wolves can huff and puff and blow houses down or that old women live in shoes. The same idea is true with apocalyptic literature. As soon a person in the first century AD picked up Revelation and read, in the Greek, “apokalupsis Jeshua Christos” (1:1) they would have instantly recognized what they were reading and how to apply it.

We could also use this analogy in our reading of poetry. Poetry is often used in the Bible to depict characteristics of God that other genres don’t afford. In Psalm 91:4, for example, we read that God will cover us “under his wings.” I don’t think many would conclude from this text that God has wings; rather, the Psalmist was intending to convey that God is a place of safety and protection like a mother bird is to her babies. We must not read it from a context that the genre doesn’t allow, but in a way that is consistent with its intent and genre.

What are the marks of apocalyptic literature? What are those things we need to know about it in general, and the book of Revelation in particular, and keep in mind as we move ahead?

Apocalyptic literature in general, and Revelation in particular, is full of **symbols and images**, which are striking—to say the least—and are used to convey broader ideas and truths. After all, a picture is worth a thousand words. Though we still use symbols and images to convey ideas today (e.g. a “bear” or “bull” market), it was even more common in the first century.

In Revelation images are used for the same purpose and show up again and again—images like a son of man, lampstands, stars, eyes of fire, thrones, horns, creatures, beasts, dragons, a lion, a lamb (we actually see a lamb who speaks like a dragon!), a woman clothed with the sun, another woman sitting

on a scarlet beast, and the Holy City as a bride. And that's just scratching the surface. The task of the reader in this is to determine what these images represent and convey.

Numbers also come up often in Revelation and most often represent something much more significant than their numerical value. The most common numbers used in Revelation are three, four, seven, ten, and twelve, or groupings thereof. What do these numbers convey?

The number **three** represents God, who's often described in three-part phrases ("who was, and is, and is to come") and ascribed triple attributes ("holy, holy, holy" or "glory and honour and power"). In addition, the one true God exists in three persons—God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The number **four** is the number of creation. It's represented by four living creatures in the heavenly throne vision, and it's also used in the description of four parts: heaven, earth, under-earth, and sea. The song of every creature credits four attributes to the Lamb: praise, honour, glory, and power. The following vision also symbolizes creation: "four angels standing at the four corners of the earth holding back the four winds."

The number **six** symbolizes man and human weakness, the evils of Satan, and the manifestation of sin. Man was created on the sixth day. Men are appointed six days to labour. A Hebrew slave was to serve six years and be released in the seventh year. Six years were appointed for the land to be sown and harvested.

Seven (four plus three, perhaps) represents perfection and completeness. God rested on the seventh day. In Revelation, the Lamb has seven horns and seven eyes, which symbolize his absolute power and knowledge. The scroll has seven seals because it contains the definitive judgments of God. The seven churches at the beginning of the book are symbolized by seven lampstands and seven stars. While these are actual churches, they're also representative of the church as a whole; what's written to them is also addressed to the wider community of Jesus's followers. The throne vision depicts the "seven spirits of God." As a translation note in the NIV explains, this is the "seven-fold" Spirit of God—the perfect (divine) Holy Spirit.

The angels, in their song, ascribe seven attributes to the Lamb, acknowledging his divine perfections. It is more than telling that Jesus said to Peter he should be willing to forgive "seventy times seven times." Jesus wasn't saying that Peter should be willing to forgive people 490 times, but whatever amount is necessary, perfect, and complete.

In the Old Testament the number **ten** represents completeness in the human dimension, since people usually have ten fingers and ten toes. That, more than likely, is why God gave an embodiment of the law in the Ten Commandments. The number is also used in this sense when Job says to his friends, "Ten times now you have reproached me." This is not a literal count, because the friends have only spoken five times to that point in the book; the number means "You've reproached me as many times as a human can bear." Ten, meaning what is complete or ultimate in human experience, is also seen in Daniel's vision of the four beasts; the last one, representing a supreme empire, has ten horns. The image and the number with its significance are echoed in John's description of the dragon in Revelation.

Since there were **twelve** tribes of Israel, the number twelve represents the covenant community in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Jesus himself appealed to this symbol when he chose twelve

apostles. Through this number he was declaring that a new kind of covenant community was coming into existence through his life and ministry. In Revelation the number twelve is used throughout the book to represent the community of God's people.

Take time to notice how often it's used in the depiction of the New Jerusalem in chapter 21, for example. Twelve can also be used in multiples and in combination with other numbers. For example, there are twenty-four elders in the heavenly throne vision, which some argue is used to depict the continuity of the first and the new covenant communities. The number 144,000, for its part, comes from $12 \times 12 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10$, representing the fullness of the community of believers throughout time and space from the first and new covenants. The New Jerusalem is measured out as a perfect cube in chapter 21—12,000 stadia (a stadia was a unit of measure) in length, width, and height. We are not meant to read this numerical layout and conclude that the city is literally built in a perfect cube but that it is a city that is literally perfect, complete, and the home of God's people.

An accurate understanding of Revelations rests heavily on a basic understanding of the Old Testament. Revelation uses the Scripture more than any other New Testament book. One scholar suggests that in the 404 verses in Revelation, allusions to the Old Testament occur in 278 of them—we say “allusions” because there is actually not one single explicit quotation of the Old Testament in Revelation.

It's vitally important to recognize the strong connection between Revelation and the Old Testament because the sheer mass of symbolism and the foreignness of the symbols can be overwhelming. Most of the symbols referred to in Revelation already occur in the Old Testament, making knowledge of it a crucial ingredient in understanding Revelation.

One example of the Revelation–Old Testament connection is seen in the Exodus event. Consider:

- The evil power that persecutes God's people is symbolically referred to as Egypt (Rev. 11:8).
- The plagues of darkness, hail, locusts, boils, frogs, water turning to blood, and so forth in Revelation all recall similar calamities that befell Egypt prior to the Exodus.
- As Christians are freed by the blood of Christ (Rev. 1:5), so too did the Jewish people's freedom come only after shedding the blood of the Passover lamb.
- The dragon that persecutes the woman (Rev. 12:3ff) recalls Egypt, which is referred to as a dragon in Ezekiel 29:3 and Psalm 74:13.
- After escaping from the dragon, the woman, like Israel, is nourished in the wilderness (Rev. 12:6 & 14).
- As Israel sang the Song of Moses after safely crossing the sea, so too do the redeemed sing “the song of Moses... and the song of the Lamb” (Rev. 15:3).

Just as it is important to read Revelation in light of the Old Testament, it's equally important to read Revelation in light of Revelation—meaning later parts of Revelation are often intentionally connected to earlier parts and vice versa. To read the first couple of chapters of Revelation, for example, and draw conclusions without having read the entire book would only lead to wild and error-filled landing points.