

# ONE WEIRD BOOK

## INTRODUCTION

### A. What Comes To Mind When “The Book of Revelation” Is Mentioned?

1. Some words and phrases that are often heard in association with it: the end ... the rapture ... 7 ... four horsemen ... the antichrist ... 666 ... judgment ... vengeance ... the second coming ... heaven
  - a. interestingly, two of the words in this list most associated with Revelation (rapture and Antichrist) do not even appear in Revelation
  - b. some of the most important words in Revelation, such as witness, throne, and lamb, do not come to mind as quickly, yet they are central to Revelation
2. Others words that often come to mind reflect emotional reactions to the book: scary ... alarming ... confusing
  - a. Revelation is one of the strangest books in the whole Bible (Ezekiel and Zechariah are pretty strange also)
  - b. all the strange images is bewildering, to say the least
3. Revelation can indeed be a perplexing and difficult book
4. Greg Stevenson (who teaches NT at Rochester College) calls it dangerous (15)
5. There have been many irresponsible readings of Revelation

### B. Two Popular Responses To Reading Revelation

1. Some people read it once and never want to read it again, it's just too weird
  - a. they are content to leave Revelation alone
  - b. for many, Revelation has been functionally de-canonized
2. A second common response to Revelation is to obsess over it
  - a. these people have read it dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of times
  - b. they have also read all the novels and watched all the movies and listened to all the preachers that deal with Revelation
  - c. they are all things apocalyptic, convinced that we are living when and where all the predictions of Revelation are coming true
  - d. no other part of the Bible has provided such a happy hunting ground for all sorts of bizarre and dangerous interpretations

## I. HOW DOES ONE READ REVELATION RESPONSIBLY?

- A. Both Of The Popular Approaches Are Wrong

1. If we ignore the book
  - a. we miss out on the concluding chapter to the entire story of the Bible, a chapter full of hope and encouragement
  - b. who wants to read a whole book and not finish the last chapter?
  - c. **we miss** God's blessing – **Rev. 1:3** Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near
2. Great harm comes to the church when we try to make Revelation all about us (how to avoid the mark of the beast, when the rapture will occur, the West/United States, etc.)
3. **Revelation needs** to be read in its historical and literary context so that its message is not distorted
  - a. there is a way of reading the book in context that allows us to understand and live out its main message
  - b. instead of first asking how Revelation relates to the headlines on the internet, we want to ask how it relates to the situation of the Christians of John's time
  - c. Revelation is not a coded collection of secrets that will finally become intelligible at the end of time, for from the beginning it has been an open book that was designed to communicate with Christians living on earth
  - d. looking at ways in which the book addressed the situation of its first readers invites modern readers to explore ways in which it continues to address our situations today

**B. Revelation** Is A Unique New Testament Book Because It Appeals Primarily To Our Imagination (Gorman, 8; Bauckham, 159; Metzger, 11)

1. Not a freewheeling imagination, but a disciplined imagination
2. The book is about the conversion of our imaginations
3. It intends to purge and to refurbish the Christian imagination (this is important in an increasingly image based culture)
4. Revelation invites us to imagine and then practice following the Lamb (Christ) into the new creation

**C. Revelation** Is Fundamentally A Book About: (Gorman, 12)

1. God and Christ
2. **Worship** and discipleship
3. **Hope**

**II. WHAT TYPE** OF DOCUMENT IS REVELATION?

- A. Revelation Is A Hybrid Document

1. Revelation is simultaneously an apocalypse, a prophecy, and a letter
2. Revelation is a prophecy cast in an apocalyptic mold and written down in a letter form (Carson, Moo, and Morris, 479)

#### B. Letter – 1:4-5, 9; 22:21

1. NT letters were meant to be read aloud to believers gathered for worship (**1:3**; 22:18–19) and were written to address a particular situation or problem (Duvall, Commentary, 5)
2. Name of sender – **Rev. 1:4** John
3. Name of recipient(s) – **Rev. 1:4** to the seven churches that are in Asia
4. **Prescript** – **Rev. 1:4-5** Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, <sup>5</sup> and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth
5. **Introductory** formula – **Rev. 1:9** I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance *which are* in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus
6. **Benedictory** wishes - **Rev. 22:21** The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen
7. The main purpose of the epistolary genre elsewhere in the NT is to address problems that have arisen in the various churches
8. While the message of Revelation certainly extends beyond the seven churches, any approach to interpreting the book that ignores its message to the seven churches will distort its meaning significantly

#### C. Prophecy – 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19; 1:10; 9:17; 10:11; 19:10; 22:6, 9

1. Revelation explicitly calls itself a work of prophecy
2. **Rev. 1:3** Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near
3. **Rev. 22:7** And behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book
4. **Prophecy** is speaking words of comfort and/or challenge, on behalf of God, to the people of God in their concrete historical situation
  - a. its primary purpose is to give words of comfort and challenge to God's people then and now, not to predict the future, and much less to do so with precise detail
  - b. visions of the future, that is, are not an end in themselves but rather a means (both to warn and to comfort)

- c. prophets comfort God's people in crisis because they need assurance that, despite all signs to the contrary, God is God and will one day bring an end to all evil and oppression
- d. prophets warn the people about the coming judgment because the people may be participating in, or be tempted to participate in, the very evil for which the oppressive system and its perpetrators will be judged

#### D. Apocalypse - 1:1

1. **Rev. 1:1** The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated *it* by His angel to His bond-servant John
2. The term "apocalypse" identifies a kind of writing that was quite common among Jews and Christians for several centuries before and after Christ
3. "Apocalypse" is a term meaning "unveiling" or "disclosure"
  - a. Revelation is intended to reveal, not conceal (Gorman, 22)
  - b. its goal is not speculative foresight, but theological insight
  - c. apocalyptic is an intensification of prophecy (a heightening and more intense clustering of literary and thematic traits)
4. Apocalypses provide perspectives on the world that transcend the usual boundaries of space and time so readers can see their present situation in light of God's designs (Koester, AB, 107)
5. Usually articulated in symbolic language
  - a. the language of Revelation "works" by helping the reader to experience what John experienced
  - b. the world created by symbols is not fictive; it is a non-literal but real world
  - c. like a good political cartoon or poem, an apocalypse appeals to the imagination to address the most profound realities that God's people can experience or hope
  - d. they instruct our weak religious imagination using visual enhancement
6. Revelation should probably be understood as resistance literature (anti-assimilationist, or anti-accommodationist) – Gorman, 15
  - a. apocalyptic literature both expresses and creates hope by offering a scathing critique of the oppressors, passionate exhortations to defiance (and sometimes even preparation for confrontation), and unflinching confidence in God's ultimate defeat of the present evil
  - b. Revelation's message should be heard as confrontation by some and encouragement by others, depending on their circumstances (Bauckham, 15)

- 1) Revelation is a summons to first-commandment faithfulness, a call to faithful witness and worship in word and deed
  - 2) some readers were threatened by open hostility
  - 3) other readers dealt with questions of accommodation to culture
  - 4) still other readers were prosperous and complacent
- c. Revelation is not just a document that stands against something; it promotes true spirituality, expressed not merely in formal worship but also in faithful living (the practice of having no gods besides God)

### III. WHY WAS REVELATION WRITTEN?

A. "We Must Not Think Of It As A Kind Of Intellectual Puzzle ... Sent To A Relaxed Church With Time On Its Hands And An Inclination For Solving Mysteries" (Morris, 22)

**B. Revelation** Is Much More Than An Eschatological Scheme To Be Solved

1. Revelation is about more than "who wins in the end"
2. It is God's communication to the seven churches (and by extension to the universal church in every age) about how to live faithfully in light of the future He has in store
3. Revelation provides a transforming vision of spiritual reality that encourages believers to follow Jesus faithfully
  - a. a different view of the world, a heavenly perspective
  - b. hearing (or reading) Revelation is like putting on a virtual-reality helmet to see true spiritual reality
  - c. the book unveils reality from God's perspective
  - d. Revelation empowers readers to reenter their present world and persevere faithfully
  - e. Revelation proclaims hope
4. What type of congregation and individual Christian is the book attempting to form?

**C. Revelation** Answers The Most Basic Of All Questions: Who Is Lord Of The Universe?

1. Revelation was written to reassure Jesus's disciples that God is on His throne and that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord of all
2. The decisive spiritual battle has been won at the cross and resurrection
3. Believers should continue our faithful witness to the one true Lord no matter the cost

4. Those who are compromising with the idolatrous and immoral ways of the world are warned to repent or face judgment

**D. Revelation** Reflects The Dual Threat Of Opposition And Compromise

1. Revelation speaks to Christians facing pressure and persecution as well as those tempted to compromise
2. Revelation comforts and assures the faithful who are suffering but sternly warns those who are compromising with the world system
3. Revelation has a double message of comfort and warning
4. It is about how the church is to conduct itself in the midst of an ungodly world (Beale and Campbell, 6)

**IV. HOW HAS REVELATION BEEN EXPLAINED?**

**A. Preterist**

1. The word "preterist" refers to the past
2. It sees the book as arising out of the situation of the first Christians (it understands the book from a first-century historical setting)
3. It makes the book exceedingly meaningful to the people to whom it was written
4. This method views the book to have been fulfilled (except the specific happenings of the Second Coming) in the time of John and the years immediately following
5. Revelation is directed to first-century Christians, encouraging them with a message of hope of how God plans to deliver them from the evils of the Roman Empire

**B. Historicist**

1. This method views Revelation as an outline of the entire history of the church (from Pentecost to Jesus' return)
  - a. a sequential calendar of events written in advance
  - b. attempts to identify the various visions with specific battles, movements, individuals, and events
  - c. there is no agreement as to the correspondence of visions and historical events
  - d. it limits the history of the Christian movement to the West (especially Western Europe) and Roman Catholicism
2. They are anxious to determine what era we are living in
3. Most of the proponents of this method believe that we are nearing the end (instead of the third seal, for example)
4. This view presses history too far and makes most of the book meaningless to the original recipients

### C. Futurist

1. Revelation is mainly concerned with what will happen at the end of history, just before the second coming of Christ
  - a. the symbols deal with the events that immediately precede the second coming of Christ
  - b. nothing in the book has been fulfilled beyond the fourth chapter, and nothing will be fulfilled until just before the coming of the Lord
2. This approach insists that the normal assumption would be that the figures represent some literal happening (extremely literal)
3. This is the most popular understanding of Revelation in our time and place
  - a. includes the Premillennial and Dispensational interpretations
  - b. overtly promoted in the Scofield and Ryrie study Bibles and Dallas Theological Seminary
  - c. Hal Lindsey, John Walwood, Tim LaHaye (Left Behind)
4. Problems:
  - a. the literal interpretation of figurative and pictorial language is the most serious objection
  - b. **Rev. 12:5** And she gave birth to a son, a male *child*, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne
  - c. the value of the book to its original readers is insufficient
    - 1) **Rev. 1:1** The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place
    - 2) **Rev. 1:3** Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near
    - 3) **Rev. 22:6** And he said to me, "These words are faithful and true"; and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to His bond-servants the things which must soon take place
    - 4) **Rev. 22:10** And he said to me, Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near

### D. Idealist (Symbolic)

1. Revelation is a symbolic description of the ongoing battle between God and evil
2. The book offers timeless spiritual truths to equip Christians for persevering in a world filled with suffering and injustice
  - a. it looks at the forces behind the events and not the events themselves

- b. the truth of the book "fits" whenever the church is confronted by persecution or opposition
  - c. the book is concerned with ideas and principles on which God acts throughout human history
  - d. the beast from the sea (in Rev. 13) represents Rome, yet more than Rome
3. This method makes the book relevant for the church in any time period at the expense of almost a complete divorce from historical events
  4. No other Biblical book is just principle and not anchored in a historical situation

#### E. Eclectic

1. This approach attempts to combine the strengths of several approaches, taking the message seriously to the original readers, acknowledging portions of the book that await future fulfillment, and finding relevant spiritual messages for Christians of every age
2. We must take Revelation's picture language seriously but not always literally (Duvall, Commentary, 7)
3. Revelation communicates at several different levels:
  - a. vision level: what John saw
  - b. text level: the words written on the page
  - c. referent level: what the vision refers to in real life
  - d. rhetorical level: what impact the vision makes on the hearer

#### V. HOW IS REVELATION ORGANIZED?

##### A. Outlines Of Revelation Vary Perhaps More Than With Any Other Biblical Book (Osborne, 29)

1. There has been little agreement about how the book as a whole is to be outlined (Beale, 108)
2. Partly because of the subgenres combined in the book
3. By various recurring phrases
  - a. linguistic markers for hearers
  - b. phrases like: "and I saw," "I was in the Spirit," "come and see," "what must come to pass"
4. A seven act play patterned after the Greek theater

##### B. Chronologically Linear (Futurist)

1. The futurist position generally holds that the order of the visions, from 4:1 to 22:5, represents the chronological order in which the events described in the visions are to unfold



2. **Rev. 1:19** Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things (γράψον οὖν ἃ εἶδες καὶ ἃ εἰσὶν καὶ ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα)
- a. the past – “the things you have seen” (John’s initial vision of Christ – 1:9-18)
  - b. the present – “the things which are” (the situation of the seven churches of Asia – chs. 2-3)
  - c. the future – “the things which will take place” (events yet to come – chs. 4-22)
  - d. problems with understanding this text in the above way:
    - 1) “the things which you have seen” does not seem to be merely a reference to past time, or to what John has seen in the preceding verses, but to pick up on 1:11, where the angelic voice tells John to write “what you see” and seems to refer to the contents of the entire book
    - 2) “the things which shall take place after these things”
      - a) this clause is not to be limited to events of the far-off future, but rather encompasses all the events of the period between the resurrection and the return of Christ
      - b) God is communicating with John in words He inspired Daniel to speak six centuries earlier, where God shows Daniel what must take place “in the latter days” or “after these things” (Dan. 2:28, 29, 45) – Beale and Campbell, 28–29
3. **Rev. 12:5** And she gave birth to a son, a male *child*, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne

### C. A Chiastic Structure

1. The structure varies some, depending on the author
2. **Most have** chs. 12-14 in the middle of Chiasm (see Fair’s)

### D. Rebirth Of Images (Recapitulation)

1. What should be recognized is that it is a tightly woven, though complex, literary unity, which is apparent from the many phrases that are repeated throughout the book; these phrases are found at crucial literary junctions and throughout every major segment of the book (Beale, 108)
2. **The book moves** in a nonlinear way (more spiral) – Koester, 39
  - a. the visions are “cycles” because: (Koester, AB, 113)

- 1) they typically begin in the presence of God - 5:1–13; 8:2, 6; 15:1, 5–8
- 2) then depict a series of threats
- 3) conclude in the presence of God - 8:1, 3–5; 11:15–18; 19:1–10)
- b. each loop consists of a series of visions
  - 1) the messages to the churches, seals, trumpets, and bowls are numbered
  - 2) two cycles are not numbered
- c. visions celebrating the triumph of God occur at the end of each cycle - 4:1–11; 7:1–17; 11:15–19; 15:1–4; 19:1–10; 21:1–22:5
- d. the main parts are as follows (Koester, AB, 112):
  - 1) Introduction - 1:1–8
  - 2) Christ and the Seven Assemblies - 1:9–3:22
  - 3) The Seven Seals - 4:1–8:5
  - 4) The Seven Trumpets - 8:6–11:18
  - 5) The Dragon, the Beasts, and the Faithful - 11:19–15:4
  - 6) The Seven Bowls and the Fall of Babylon - 15:5–19:10
  - 7) From the Beast's Demise to New Jerusalem - 19:11–22:5
  - 8) Conclusion - 22:6–21 (the introduction and conclusion create a literary frame around the book)

3. The various series of judgments are parallel descriptions of the same events
  - a. the pattern is identical within each series
  - b. toward the end of each series, there is a description of judgment followed by a depiction of salvation
  - c. final judgment scene:
    - 1) **Rev. 11:18** And the nations were enraged, and Your wrath came, and the time *came* for the dead to be judged, and *the time* to reward Your bond-servants the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name, the small and the great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth
    - 2) **Rev. 20:12** And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is *the book* of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds
  - d. **the book** consists of a series of parallel visions in which God expresses the same truths in different ways (Beale and Campbell, 24)

- e. the sequence of short visions and narratives is somewhat repetitious, though always intensifying, with the seven seals and trumpets of judgment (6:1–11:19) paralleled by the seven angels and seven bowls (14:6–19:10) - Gorman, 58
- 4. **The reader** encounters visions that alternatively threaten and assure
  - a. with increasing intensity the visions at the bottom of the spiral threaten the readers' sense of security by confronting them with horsemen that represent conquest, violence, hardship, and death; by portents in heaven, earth, and sea; and by seemingly insuperable adversaries who oppose those who worship God and Christ
  - b. each time the clamor of conflict becomes unbearable, listeners are transported into the presence of God, the Lamb, and the heavenly chorus (these visions appear at the top of the spiral)
  - c. the threatening visions and assuring visions function differently, but they serve the same end, which is that listeners might continue to trust in God and remain faithful to God
  - d. the interludes create a delay between the threatening visions and the final scene of celebration, and they also explain the reason for the delay
    - 1) time has been provided for people to be redeemed - 7:1–17
    - 2) time has been provided for people to bear witness - 10:1–11:14

#### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is your reaction to reading Revelation?
2. What do you think Revelation is about?
3. Do you think it is necessary to identify the genre(s) of Revelation to interpret it responsibly? Why or why not?
4. How might understanding Revelation as apocalypse, prophecy, and letter (and as a hybrid of the three) affect our interpretation of it?
5. How have you normally heard? Revelation explained (Preterist, Historical, Futurist, Idealist, Eclectic)?
6. What do you think of the idea of reading Revelation as "resistance literature"?
7. What message does Revelation have for God's people today?

8. Why is it important to not ignore Revelation?