

how to read the Bible

Lizzie Groom helps us to understand Revelation



This series is summarised from Fee G, Stuart D. *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth* (3rd ed). Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003

Seven golden lamp stands? A beast with ten horns and seven crowns? A dragon chasing a pregnant woman? Confused? We often view Revelation with apprehension, seeing it as a book for the highly academic Bible scholar or science fiction fanatic. This next chapter in our series helps us gain confidence when unravelling the rich theological truths in this often overlooked book.

The key to understanding is to work out what the original hearers should have understood when hearing Revelation read. If we immediately apply Revelation to our situation today without understanding the context and nature of the book, we are likely to end up making poor interpretations and reaching wrong conclusions.

Revelation - style

Revelation contains a unique blend of three different types of

literature - apocalypse, prophecy and epistle. Apocalyptic writing is seldom seen today; however it was a common form of literature between 200BC and 200AD. This type of literature is full of imagery, often quite fantastical, which can make it difficult to understand the meaning of what John says. Since Jesus' first coming we are living in the 'last days'; this creates a balance as some of the book is eschatological (containing doctrine concerning last or final matters)¹ whereas other sections are God's words to John's readers regarding their present situation, future salvation and judgment. Revelation is written in the form of a letter so is in part addressed to specific people in particular situations.

historical context

Revelation was written to the churches of Asia Minor. The churches are facing persecution, which John expected to increase. He writes to prepare these Christians for coming

trials, but also to remind them to look ahead to the end of history when Jesus will return triumphant to save his church and judge those who have opposed her. Keep this big picture in mind as you read to avoid getting lost in the detail!

literary context

Unlike the Old Testament prophecies, which often started as stand alone spoken words from God and were later assembled, the individual visions in Revelation are highly ordered in sets that are arranged to create a structured whole.

structure of Revelation

Fee and Stuart recommend trying to visualise the scenes as you read Revelation imagining the book as one vast play where scenes are acted out in front of you. The visions are not arranged chronologically; rather the author zooms out to show the big picture in chapters 8-11 and then goes back and zooms in at various points to add more detail in chapters 12-22.

- **Chapters 1-3** - introduce the main characters.
- **Chapters 4-5** - give you the backdrop.
- **Chapters 6-8** - the drama starts.

- **Chapters 8-11** - overview of story.
- **Chapter 12** - A key chapter! Conflict between Christ and Satan is depicted in two different visions. In Satan's attempt to destroy Christ, he himself is defeated and Christ is raised up to rule. Satan although ultimately defeated is still defiant and vows to 'make war' against the church on earth.
- **Chapters 13-14** - Satan and the powers of this earth demand the worship of the world and persecute the church.
- **Chapters 15-16** - God's wrath is poured out on the powers of earth.
- **Chapters 17-22** - the eternal fate of those in opposition to God is contrasted to those whose names are in the Lamb's book of life.

tips for understanding imagery

- The images used are taken from a wide variety of sources, but their meaning may be altered from their original context.
- Some images are fixed - for example the beast from the sea - while others are fluid, an example being the Lion which becomes a Lamb.²
- Some images refer to specific

things or events, while others are more general.

- John interprets some images explicitly - use these interpretations to guide your understanding of the others

six interpreted images

- **Son of man**³ = Christ
- **Golden lampstands**⁴ = Seven churches
- **Seven stars**⁵ = Seven angels/messengers of churches
- **Great Dragon**⁶ = Satan
- **Seven heads**⁷ = Seven Hills on which woman sits
- **The prostitute**⁸ = The Great City (many see this as representing the world in opposition to God)

- Try not to get lost in attempting to interpret all the details of the images. Details in themselves often have no specific significance but are there to create a dramatic atmosphere or help aid our understanding of the overall image.
- Keep your eyes open for images plucked from the Old Testament and look at their Old Testament context. This will often help in working out how John is using the image in Revelation.
- Invest in a good commentary! Fee and Stuart suggest Osborne⁹ and Mounce.¹⁰

hermeneutical questions

We can run into difficulties when applying the pictures in Revelation to our lives today. There are areas of ambiguity, such as the identity of the antichrist. Pictures are just that - there may not be a literal fulfilment. Don't get too caught up trying to work out the details of how our contemporary history fits into the prophetic visions of Revelation.

Putting the difficulties of interpreting how God will bring about the end of history aside, Revelation tells us with confidence that Satan and the powers of this world are limited, Christ is reigning and will return in judgment; and that we, the redeemed, can look forward to eternity with him in glory. How important it is to be reminded of our great and certain hope in these last days!

Lizzie Groom is a student intern with CMF in London

REFERENCES

1. [dictionary.reference.com/ browse/eschatology](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/eschatology)
2. Revelation 5:5-6
3. Revelation 1:13
4. Revelation 1:20
5. Revelation 1:20
6. Revelation 12:9
7. Revelation 17:9
8. Revelation 17:18
9. Osborne G. *Revelation*. (Baker Exegetical Commentary on NT.) Grand Rapids, 2002
10. Mounce R. *The Book of Revelation (New International Commentary on the New Testament)*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977