
5 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE BIBLE'S FINAL BOOK



REVELATION IS NOT ABOUT THE RAPTURE



EVERY TIME SOMETHING BIG HAPPENS in the news, especially if it involves the Middle East, it seems a new set of books, reinterpreting the book of Revelation, is published. It is, therefore, no surprise when the reader begins to get the impression that the book of Revelation is a very dark, mysterious book that is difficult, if not downright impossible, to understand.

REVELATION IS ABOUT JESUS.

The basic message of the Scriptures is clear to anyone who can read them. This does not mean that every part of Scripture is equally clear. Some passages are, indeed, difficult to understand and it helps to have the consensus of the Church through the centuries to correctly interpret them. But the basic message of what man's condition is, who Jesus is and what He's done for us, and how I can be saved, is perfectly clear.

The Scriptures are about Christ. This is no less true of Revelation than it is of any other book of the Bible. This is not to say that everything in Revelation is as plain as the Gospel of John, nor do I claim to understand everything in it perfectly. After all, the book of Revelation is part of the genre known as apocalyptic literature, that is to say, it is full of symbolism.

But Revelation, like the rest of Scripture, is about Christ, and any interpretation that ends up with something else as central has not only missed the entire message of the book but, to put it simply, is wrong. By, "about Christ," I mean that it is about his person (he is both fully God and fully man), and his work (his life, death, and resurrection) on our behalf, and not merely about his second coming.¹

REVELATION IS ABOUT ALL OF HISTORY.

Revelation is a beautiful vision of God's reign over history that will reach its apex at the second coming of Christ. The reality is that Revelation is a book about all of history, not just the end times. It is also a book for the church of all times and all places, not just a guide to humanity's last years. It was relevant and applicable to the original seven churches to whom it was addressed, it has remained relevant to the present day, and it will continue to be so until Christ returns.

The central theme that holds these visions together is that they demonstrate God's rule over all creation and history. These visions all point to the climax of God's plan of redemption, the return of Christ, and the creation of the new heavens and new earth.²

¹ Adapted from Richard Gilbert, "Christ & The Book of Revelation" [Modern Reformation](#), Mar/April 1993. (Also at [Core Christianity](#).)

² Adapted from the Core Christianity Bible Study, [How to Read the Bible](#).

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REVELATION HAS A CLEAR STRUCTURE



IT'S WIDELY AGREED UPON by biblical scholars that the book of Revelation can be divided into seven clear sections.³ These sections are sometimes described as parallel or cyclical. This is because each section portrays the same events from a different point of view. They each tell the story of God's power over history from the first coming of Christ to his second coming. As you read through the seven sections of Revelation, you will find that they focus more and more on the second coming of Christ, the final judgment, and what comes after.

Here's an outline of the seven sections:⁴

1. Lamb and Scroll (Rev. 4:1–8:1)
2. Angels and Trumpets (Rev. 8:2–11:18)
3. Woman, Son, Dragon, Beast (Rev. 11:19–14:20)
4. Bowls (Rev. 15:1–16:21)
5. Babylon the Prostitute (Rev. 17:1–19:10)
6. Defeat of the Beasts, Drago, and Death (Rev. 19:11–20:15)
7. New Heavens and New Earth (Rev. 21:1–22:5)

Understanding the structure of Revelation is key. If we don't realize that John's vision tells what will happen between Christ's first and second coming seven times, then we might read Revelation as if it only applied to the original readers. Or we might think that it only applies to those in the future who live in the actual end times.

While this may seem a bit confusing at first, it really is quite helpful and frees us from some speculative and potentially frightening ways of reading Revelation.⁵

³ William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1967), 21.

⁴ Outline adapted from *Introduction to Revelation*, *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2462.

⁵ Adapted from the Core Christianity Bible Study, [How to Read the Bible](#).

3

REVELATION IS VISUAL PROPHECY: TIME IS FLUID AND NUMBERS ARE SYMBOLIC



REVELATION WAS GIVEN TO JOHN IN A SERIES OF VISIONS:

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write what you see." (Rev. 1:10–11)

The fact that John was “in the Spirit,” and that God says to him, “Write what you see,” both point to the fact that John is writing is direct revelation from God communicated through visions, making the book visionary prophecy (Rev. 22:16). As with the other visions, like Joseph’s dreams for instance (Gen. 37:1–11), much of what John sees is strange and needs interpretation.

Because it’s a vision, time is fluid, not strictly chronological. Like in a dream, time doesn’t work the same way as in the real world. Revelation is a visual picture of things, some of which are past, some of which are present, and some of which are future. Revelation is primarily a visual representation, making it more like scenes that switch around to different times to show different things rather than showing one long

chronological story. And, as we’ve seen with the structure, there’s actually a lot of repetition in the book that operates like different chapters of a book or scenes of a movie. One chapter may talk about an event from the perspective of one or two characters, and another chapter will discuss the same event but from a different perspective or angle or talk about different parts of the event.⁶

Revelation also employs numbers and images that were very familiar to 1st century Jews and Christians to get its message across. To understand the book of Revelation it is essential to have some knowledge of what these numbers and images represent.

Most people are familiar with some of these already (3 is the number for the triune God, 4 is the number for creation, 6 is the number for man, 7 is the number for perfection, 12 represents the tribes of Israel or the apostles, 1000 is a number for completeness. So when a number like 666 is used, it means always coming short of perfection, or a number like 144,000 is 12 squared times 1000, meaning a great multitude—everyone who’s meant to be included is, with no one left out).⁷

⁶ Adapted from Leah Baugh, “6 [Tips For Reading the Book of Revelation](#),” Core Christianity.

⁷ Adapted from Richard Gilbert, “Christ & The Book of Revelation” [Modern Reformation](#), Mar/April 1993. ([Also at Core Christianity](#).)

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REVELATION'S SYMBOLISM IS ILLUMINED BY THE OLD TESTAMENT



AS FOREIGN AS REVELATION'S SYMBOLIC SCENES MAY SEEM TO US TODAY, God had been unveiling his plans in vivid, visual imagery long before John reached Patmos. Joseph's and Daniel's dreams and visions in the Old Testament illustrate this (Gen. 37; Dan. 7–12). God also spoke in pictures to other Israelite prophets such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah, and even to pagan rulers, though they needed God's spokesmen to interpret their disturbing dreams (Gen. 41; Dan. 2). These biblical precedents to John's visionary experience and the genre of his book introduce an important principle that will guide us as we seek to understand Revelation: The Old Testament gives us a key to unlock the symbolism we meet in Revelation.

The dreams of Joseph and Daniel are just two of many examples. The imagery of sun, moon, and stars in Joseph's dream represented his parents and brothers, who constituted God's covenant community at that point in history. The meaning was obvious to Joseph's jealous brothers and even to his doting father Jacob. The same imagery—sun,

moon, stars—reappears in Revelation 12:1, where John sees the covenant community portrayed as a mother who gives birth to the Messiah. Daniel's dream and vision showed four vicious beasts, followed by a son of man who receives everlasting dominion from the Ancient of Days. Aspects of the beasts reappear in Revelation's description of the beast that wages war on God's saints (13:1–9). Before that horrific scene, however, John sees Jesus, the church's champion, radiating glory as “one like a son of man” (1:12–18). Throughout the Old Testament, not only in visions granted to prophets but also in history's concrete events (Creation, Exodus, etc.), the Spirit of Christ was introducing a symbolic “vocabulary” that he would employ in the visions to John, the “climax of prophecy.” It's tempting to look to 21st century current events for clues and cues to unlock Revelation's mysteries. But the reliable keys that fit the locks are those that God embedded in his ancient Scriptures, as accessible to Revelation's first-century hearers as they are to us today.⁸

⁸ Adapted from the [Core Christianity Bible Study, Revelation](#), by Dennis Johnson.

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REVELATION IS WRITTEN FOR THE CHURCH'S COMFORT



REVELATION DEPICTS THE CURRENT BATTLE BETWEEN SATAN AND GOD'S PEOPLE.

Much of Revelation is a visual picture of a cosmic battle. Satan, depicted as a dragon, wars against God's people on earth, with the help of the beast and the harlot (Rev. 12:17; 13:7–10, 12; 17:5–6). The Christian life is, for the most part, very ordinary, unglamorous, and full of suffering while everything around us in the world seems to glitter with tempting alternatives. Consumerism, materialism, power, money, sex, and many other things tug at our hearts, calling us away from following the Faithful and True (Rev. 19:11). Revelation helps us see that our battles are part of the greater cosmic conflict between Satan and God.

REVELATION SHOWS CHRIST'S POWER OVER HIS ENEMIES.

When we consider the picture Revelation gives us of Christ the victorious Lamb surrounded by singing saints, the great warrior mounted upon a white horse with a sword, we see his victory in all its glory (Rev. 19: 11–13).

In contrast to the spectacle of Christ's suffering and death on the cross, Revelation shows us Christ's victory over Satan, sin, and death. Even now Christ walks with his church, protects his church, and conquers his bride's enemies (Rev. 1:12–20; 19:1–2; 11–16).

He is the victor, Faithful and True, who has redeemed a people out of the world (Rev. 17:14). Nothing can escape God's wrath except those who believe and hold fast to Christ (Rev. 17:15–18). Christ's redeemed people are called blessed and

inheritors of the springs of living water (Rev. 7:17; 22:1–4). The persecution and hardships the church endures are not without end, giving Christians hope in their warrior champion and confidence in their future glory.

REVELATION ENCOURAGES THE CHURCH TO PERSEVERE AND ENDURE.

Revelation calls the church to endure the battles with confidence that the war's outcome has already been determined (Rev. 2:2, 2:19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12–13). Despite all the warfare around them that results in suffering, persecution, and martyrdom, those who belong to God have a mark on their foreheads that seals them as God's beloved people and fellow victors with Christ (Rev. 7:3).

The various songs and hymns throughout the book remind us that we have a great hope in an almighty and faithful God who is worthy of our praise, admiration, and trust (Rev. 5:9; 14:3; 19:1–2, 6–8). Christians share in Christ's victory even though they may die in this life (Rev. 12:11). Death is no longer to be feared for those united to Christ's resurrection, for they will be given eternal life in heaven (Rev. 21:2–4, 6–7).

The picture of heaven given to us in the final chapters urges us to keep in mind our heavenly home. C. S. Lewis in the last book of his *Narnia* series describes his characters' reaction to heaven this way: "I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life."⁹

The new heavens and new earth will be like nothing we've ever known, but we do know that they'll be wonderful (Rev. 21:1–5; 22:1–4).¹⁰

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*.

¹⁰ Adapted from Leah Baugh, "[How The Book of Revelation Encourages the Church](#)," Core Christianity.

