

Week 8:

Revelation

Features of an Apocalypse:¹

1. Information is often communicated through visions.
2. The visions often make use of strange, even enigmatic symbolism.
3. The visions are often pessimistic with regard to the possibility that human intervention will ameliorate the present situation.
4. The vision usually ends with God's bringing the present state of affairs to a cataclysmic end and establishing a better situation.
5. The focus of Revelation is on comforting and sustaining the "righteous remnant."

Tips for Reading Revelation as John Intended:

1. Old Testament apocalyptic passages provide the most helpful background to understanding Revelation.
2. Revelation should be read from the perspective of the original audience. How would the early Christians of Asia Minor addressed in Revelation 1-3 have understood the later portions of the book?
3. The symbolic images in Revelation must not be taken literally (or even semi-literally). The symbols point to reality in an entirely figurative way.
4. Revelation is not meant to be read chronologically. It is almost entirely cyclical rather than linear.
5. The content of Revelation is delivered in the difficult, cryptic language of dreams, visions, numerology, and fantasy. This doesn't mean that it isn't God's word and that it isn't true. It just means that it is a good apocalypse.
6. When John himself interprets his images, these interpreted images must be held firmly and must serve as a starting point for understanding the others.
7. Symbols are symbols, not allegories. Don't over-press the details.

¹ I am greatly indebted to the following sources for my tips and methods of reading Revelation: Howard Hendricks and William Hendricks. *Living by the Book: The Art and Science of Reading the Bible*. Revised. Chicago: Moody, 2007; James D. Hernando. *Dictionary of Hermeneutics*. Springfield: Gospel Pub. House, 2005; Robert L. Plummer. *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010; and especially Henry A. Virkler and Karelyne Gerber Ayayo. *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.

Introduction to Revelation:

Authorship: The author of Revelation is almost certainly John the Apostle who was also the author of 1, 2, and 3 John, and the Gospel of John. Both the internal evidence from those works and the external evidence from church tradition point to this.

Date: Given the way that Revelation talks about the persecution of believers, the Jerusalem temple, and the state of the churches in Asia Minor, a late date is best. Most scholars prefer to put Revelation as late as possible in the life of John—early to late 90s.

Provenance: Early church testimony has Ephesus as the place from which John lived and wrote. The author's familiarity with the churches there is obvious in the first three chapters of Revelation. John discloses, however, that he was on the Isle of Patmos—a small island just off the coast of modern-day Turkey—was the place where John wrote Revelation. He was there as an exile for preaching the gospel.

Purpose: Revelation was written in order to encourage the churches in Asia Minor to endure hardship and to remain faithful. Revelation is intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future. God intends to use Revelation to change our lives.

Outline of Revelation:

Revelation is divided up into four visions, recorded for us by John the Apostle. The four visions are as follows:

- I. The 1st Vision: Christ – Rev. 1–3
- II. The 2nd Vision: Conflict with Satan – Rev. 4–16
- III. The 3rd Vision: The Final Victory of God – Rev. 17–21
- IV. The 4th Vision: The Heavenly Jerusalem – Rev. 21–22

Chapter Content of Revelation:

Chapter 1 - Introduction, the beginning of the first vision

Chapters 2-3 - The letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor

- Ephesus
- Smyrna
- Pergamum
- Thyatira
- Sardis
- Philadelphia
- Laodicea

Chapters 4-5 - The heavenly scene

- The One on the throne
- The four Living Creatures
- The 24 Elders
- The seven-sealed scroll
- The Lamb

Chapters 6-8 - The seven seals

- The White Horse
- The Red Horse
- The Black Horse
- The Pale Horse
- The Martyrs
- Cosmic Disturbances and the 144,000
- The Seven Trumpets

Chapters 8-11 - The seven trumpets

- 1/3 of all the trees burned up
- 1/3 of all the seas turned to blood
- 1/3 of all the waters poisoned
- 1/3 of all the lights darkened
- Demons from the pit loosed
- Angelic (demonic?) destroyers unleashed, the mighty angel and the book, and the two witnesses
- Christ's triumph proclaimed

Chapters 12-15 - The seven supernatural persons

- The Woman
- The Child
- Her Other Children
- The Dragon
- Michael the Angel
- The Sea Beast
- The Land Beast

Chapters 15-16 - The seven bowls

- Foul sores
- Sea turns to blood
- Water turns to blood
- The sun scorches the men of the earth
- Darkness and pain on the kingdom of the beast
- The Euphrates dries up
- The whole earth is shaken

Chapters 17-18 - The destruction of "Babylon"

Chapters 19-20 - The return of Christ

Chapters 21-22 - The new heavens and the new Earth

The Meaning of Revelation:

Revelation was written to encourage us to endure hardship and to grow in our faithfulness to Jesus. God intends this revelation to reassure us that he is in control. Jesus is returning, and when he does this world will be characterized by his mercy and his judgment. God's mission will prevail, and in the end, all nations and races and languages will be represented in the Kingdom of God.