

Methods of Interpretation: Eisegesis or Exegesis

7 Tips for Understanding Revelation

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The Book of Revelation is notoriously hard to understand. Over the centuries, the church has presented countless interpretations and theories about the meaning and significance of this work. To understand it you have to look at the big picture and then the details. Like other prophecies or parables, see the flow of what God is doing as he “unveils and makes known,” or reveals in this vision of his plan of salvation and provision for people of faith. It is a message of trouble in the world, a battle of good vs evil, promises fulfilled, rewards to the faithful, victory in Jesus and eternal peace.

Whether you find that intimidating or enticing, we need help to keep us from getting lost in Revelation’s prophecies, metaphors, and apocalyptic imagery. Here are some tips for studying Revelation from 5 approaches to interpreting Revelation

Like all books of the Bible, Revelation was written in a particular time and place to a particular people. It is a message saturated with symbolism and prophecy, which point to realities. Questions still arise about the many colors, symbols and numbers of the book. What is to be taken literally, and what points to an eternal truth, as parables do? It is tempting to read into the text what we may want to hear, or to see in current events or to fit a particular theological premise - **eisegesis**. Understanding the time, context and audience helps us hear the unveiled message that comes from the text itself – **exegesis**.

Because of the complexity of apocalyptic language, read coded language, it has led to a variety of methods of interpretation. Written during a time of intense persecution by Roman emperors, particularly Domitian. The message was written in dramatic language that was familiar to its audience in Asia Minor. There the Greek Theater was a very real part of the culture. Traditionally, interpreters have approached Revelation in four primary ways. Let’s explore all four, and then introduce a fifth.

Preterist

The preterist approach emphasizes the historical context of Revelation and tries to understand it as John’s audience would have understood it entirely in the context of current events around AD 90. Yet it fails to take seriously the idea that the Holy Spirit can reveal what’s going to happen. It would be like understanding Isaiah 7:14 as only for the days of Hezekiah. We now understand it to point to the virgin birth of the Messiah, Jesus, who gives hope not to a single point in time, but for all generations eternally. The central character of the entire Bible is Jesus. The Old Testament points to him, and the New Testament declares who he is in fulfillment of the OT, his teaching, new covenant, death, resurrection, and return.

Historicist

Many of Revelation’s events seem to have been fulfilled in the first century. The historicist approach treats Revelation as a map or outline of what has happened or will happen throughout church history from the first century until the return of Christ.

Among the historicist there are various opinions about the chronology of the events. Some may emphasize that more was fulfilled around AD 90 and some would emphasize more modern fulfillments. All through history there have been natural disasters, earthquakes, volcanic catastrophes, famines, plagues and wars. Generation after generation have declared, "Jesus has to be returning soon." We need to read 2 Peter 3:1-13 for context.

Futurist

The futurist approach considers most of the book related to future events immediately preceding the end of history. Its strength is in its strong emphasis of a literal return of Jesus and a new creation. Its weakness is in not acknowledging the historical messages in 1:9–3:22 to the churches, turning those historical messages into ages or dispensations, with us currently living in the church age of Laodicea. Then it declares that at 4:1 or at least by 6:12, the sixth seal, the church is no more, Israel returns to be the people of God under Christ, and that everything else is about the final period of earth history before Christ returns. It makes it all about the future.

Idealist

The idealist approach doesn't interpret Revelation in terms of any particular reference to time, but rather relates it to the ongoing struggle between good and evil. While acknowledging that there is a historical context for the message, the focus is on the symbolic truth or ideals for all generations of Christians.

Eclectic

An eclectic approach to reading Revelation attempts to combine the strengths of several of the other approaches:

- Revelation seems to address the first-century Christians directly, so we should read Revelation the same way that we read every other book of the Bible—by taking its historical context seriously, especially chapters 1-3.
- Revelation also presents timeless truths for surviving the struggle between good and evil. The visions of Revelation challenge us to forsake our complacency and stay faithful during times of persecution.
- Revelation also clearly has something to say about future events. Some events it describes await future fulfillment (such as the return of Christ, the great white throne judgment, and the arrival of the holy city).

Principles for reading this prophetic-apocalyptic letter

In addition to these general approaches to Revelation, specific principles can help us faithfully read this prophetic-apocalyptic letter. Here are seven suggestions:

1. Read Revelation with humility.

We should resist "Revelation-made-easy" approaches or anyone who sets dates forcing scripture into a time lock based on their interpretation of "end time signs". One of the talked about signs of the end is the reestablishment of "Israel" as a nation.

May 14, 1948 the modern secular state of Israel declared independence so one popular evangelist announced Jesus' return by 1988. It didn't happen. Many of the generation that was alive in 1948 are still alive. Could it still happen? We will see. Revelation is not easy! If you're unwilling to live with any uncertainty, you're more likely to read into Revelation things that are not there. Beware of interpreters who appear to have all the answers to even the small questions. "Experts" who claim absolute knowledge about every detail of Revelation should raise suspicion.

Read Revelation with an open mind: be willing to admit that your interpretation could be eisegesis and be prepared to change your view as the Holy Spirit opens biblical evidence or points in a different direction.

Do not call others non-Christian, see them as ignorant or a heretic, if they see Revelation differently! Interpreting the truth of God's word requires yielding to the Holy Spirit, study, and humility. Focus on points of agreement: Jesus is returning as he said for his church - John 14:1-3, and as the angels declared - Acts 1:11. Views on the tribulation or millennium, do not affect salvation, so don't lose friendships or fellowship over it. In non-essentials, leniency.

2. Try to discover the message to the original readers.

Discovering the message to the original audience is the top priority with any book of the Bible, but especially with this one. The first Christians were blessed for obeying Revelation (1:3) and the book is described as an unsealed (or open) book, even for people living in John's day (22:10). When it comes to reading Revelation, the tendency is to ignore the first Christians and jump directly to God's message for us. That is what the "dispensations" of Charles Darby as interpreted in 1827 do. They turn the seven churches into seven ages, ignores those early churches and their struggles, and then builds an interpretation on what the Bible does not say. The book of Revelation was written to the seven churches and is included in the Bible for the people of God of the future is a people made up of Gentiles and Jews united in Christ. The whole book, for the whole people of God, who see Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

Some people use today's newspapers as the key to interpreting Revelation. As Craig Keener notes in his commentary, this approach doesn't fit well with a high view of Scripture. The "newspaper" approach assumes that we must be living in the last Christian generation. It also implies that in Revelation God wasn't really speaking to the very first Christians. Isn't that arrogant on our part as contemporary interpreters? What if Christ doesn't return until AD 4000? Would Revelation still have a message for us since we wouldn't be the last generation?

If our interpretation doesn't make sense for the original readers, we've probably missed the meaning of the passage. **We must understand what Revelation meant in John's day in order to understand what it means today.**

3. Don't try to discover a strict chronological map of future events.

Revelation doesn't progress in a neat linear fashion. Eisegesis would say, if it does not happen this way, then I can't trust the Bible. The Bible is the standard, not my

reading into it. The book is filled with prophetic, apocalyptic visions designed to make a dramatic impact on the reader, not to present a precise chronological sequence of future events. For example, notice that the sixth seal (6:12–17) takes us to the end of the age.

"I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?" (NIV)

But when the seventh seal is opened, there's a whole new set of judgments—the trumpets—and the seventh trumpet (11:15–19) also takes us to the end of the age:

Revelation 19–22 paints the most colorful and detailed picture of the end, but, as you can see, this isn't the first time the readers have been transported to the very end.

4. Take Revelation seriously. It is God's Word of truth, relevant for all generations, but don't always take it literally.

Understand the different types of literature in the Bible, such as poetry, prose, proverbs, historical, parables, and prophetic and apocalyptic. Each is God's word for the ages, but we treat them differently.

Some people say we should interpret Scripture symbolically because they deny the reality of a scriptural truth or a historical event. When they say something is figurative or symbolic, they mean it isn't real.

Picture language, with its symbols, images, and figures, is capable of conveying literal truth and describing literal events. It's just another language vehicle, another way of communicating reality. In our way of thinking, Revelation uses picture language to emphasize historical reality rather than deny or diminish it.

Our method of interpretation should always match the literary genre the author used. For Revelation, this means we should avoid taking picture language literally. When we try to force literal interpretations on picture language, we run the risk of perverting the author's intended meaning. Does Jesus have seven horns and seven eyes [5:7] or a sword for a tongue [19:15]? Pictures, symbols, colors and numbers all have a place and a truth to tell for dramatic affect.

Revelation 1:1 says that God "signified" (KJV) the book to John. The word translated "signify" (NIV, "made it known") suggests that God communicated the book to John

through signs or symbols. According to G.K. Beale, the background of this term is Daniel 2, where God “signifies” to the king what will occur in the latter days by showing him a pictorial revelation (Daniel 2:45).

5. Pay attention when John identifies an image.

John occasionally defines images for his readers or gives clues to identify them. Here are a few examples:

- In Revelation 1:17 the one “like a son of man” (1:13) is Christ
- In 1:20 the golden lampstands are the churches
- In 5:5–6 the Lion is the Lamb and the Lamb is Jesus
- In 12:9 the dragon is Satan
- In 21:9–10 the heavenly Jerusalem is the wife of the Lamb or the church.

We have to be careful because the same symbol may have different meanings. For example, the seven stars refer to the angels of the seven churches in four passages (1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1). But the image of a single star also refers to other things:

- God’s agents of judgment (8:10–12) Jesus (22:16)

In the same way, the image of a woman can represent different things in different passages: The false prophetess (2:20) The messianic community (ch. 12) The harlot city or empire (ch. 17) The bride of Christ (19:7; 21:9)

6. Look at the Old Testament and historical context.

Historical context of Revelation

According to the [*Zondervan Handbook to the Bible*](#), “The first Christians lived in eager expectation of Christ’s return. But sixty years after his death it still had not happened, persecution was increasing, and some were beginning to doubt. So Revelation’s letters to the churches, and the book as a whole, were needed to encourage them to stand firm. God is in control, no matter how things may look. Christ, not the emperor, is Lord of history. He has the key of destiny itself. And he is coming again to execute justice. There is a glorious, wonderful future for every faithful believer—and especially for those who lay down their lives for Christ.”

There’s evidence within the text that the early church was being persecuted:

- John himself claims to suffer alongside his audience (1:9)
- The church at Ephesus has endured hardship (2:3)
- Jesus acknowledges the suffering of the church at Smyrna (2:9–10)

We also know from other writers of the time that first-century Roman emperors often had titles similar to those Christians gave to Jesus. Emperor Domitian wanted his subjects to address him as *dominus et deus noster* (“our lord and god”) and the earliest, most basic Christian confession was “Jesus is Lord.” When Christians refused to confess “Caesar is Lord” in worship of the emperor, they were considered disloyal to the state and were subject to persecution. At this time in history the pressure to

bow to the emperor was becoming more widespread and systematic, and not all Christians responded with defiance.

Revelation shows us that Christians were dealing with persecution in several ways when the letter was written:

- Ephesus had forsaken her first love (2:4).
- Some in Pergamum and Thyatira followed false teachers (2:14–15, 20).
- Sardis had a reputation of being alive, but it was dead (3:1).
- The Lord was about to spit Lukewarm Laodicea out of his mouth (3:16).

Old Testament references

Although there's no explicit Old Testament quotation in Revelation, the book is filled with echoes and allusions to the Old Testament. Revelation contains more Old Testament references than any other New Testament book—almost 70 percent of its verses contain Old Testament references. Psalms, Isaiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel make the most important contributions to Revelation.

In Revelation 1, John draws on the following symbols from book of Daniel to describe his vision of Jesus:

- *White like wool* (Daniel 7:9)
- *One like a son of man, coming with the clouds* (Daniel 7:13)
- *Belt of the fine gold* (Daniel 10:5)
- *Eyes like flaming torches* (Daniel 10:6)
- *Arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze* (Daniel 10:6)
- *Like the sound of a multitude* (Daniel 10:6)

Here's Revelation's vision of Jesus:

*"I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was **someone like a son of man**, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a **golden sash** around his chest. The hair on his head was **white like wool**, as white as snow, and his **eyes were like blazing fire**. His **feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace**, and his **voice was like the sound of rushing waters**." (Rev. 1:7, 12–15 [emphasis added])* The vision for Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar was historically fulfilled, but as in other places, it is a foreshadowing of what was to come and be ultimately fulfilled by Jesus. Colossians 2:16-17

As we struggle to identify what the vision is about, we should turn to both the historical context and the Old Testament.

7. Focus on the main idea and don't get lost in the details.

Read a section of Revelation and try to capture the main idea in a short statement. For example, the main idea of Revelation 4–5 relates to the ascended and exalted Lord, who alone is worthy to execute the divine judgments. Resist the temptation to

focus so much on the details that you miss the main idea.

If the central interpretive rule is to grasp the main idea of each vision, it becomes important that we have a general understanding of how the book unfolds. We see the book unfolding in seven broad movements, with an introduction and a conclusion.

James Blevins in *Revelation as Drama* sees the book written as a Greek drama script with seven acts, for the Ephesian theater and its seven windows, as a God sent message to encourage a persecuted church and give them hope for the present and for the future. It was as it says in Hebrews 11: 13 *These all died in faith, although they had not received the things they were promised. **But they saw them from a distance**, greeted them, and confessed that they were foreigners and temporary residents on earth.*

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Millennialism (from millennium, Latin for "a thousand years") is a belief advanced by some theologians that a Golden Age or Paradise will occur on Earth prior to the final judgment and future eternal state of the "World to Come".

Premillennialism, in Christian eschatology, is the belief that Jesus will physically return to the Earth (the Second Coming) before the Millennium, a literal thousand-year golden age of peace. The doctrine is called "premillennialism" because it holds that Jesus' physical return to Earth will occur prior to the inauguration of the Millennium. Premillennialism is based upon a literal interpretation of Revelation 20:1–6 in the New Testament, which describes Jesus' reign in a period of a thousand years.

The premillennialist view is not shared by all Christians. Mainline denominations such as Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Catholic are generally amillennial and interpret this passage of Revelation as pertaining to the present time, when Christ reigns in Heaven with the departed saints; such an interpretation views the symbolism of Revelation as referring to a spiritual battle rather than a physical battle on earth.

Amillennialists do not view the millennium mentioned in Revelation as pertaining to a literal thousand years, but rather as symbolic, and see the kingdom of Christ as already present in the church beginning with the Pentecost in the first book of Acts.

Premillennialism is often used to refer specifically to those who adhere to the beliefs in an earthly millennial reign of Christ as well as a rapture of the faithful coming before (dispensational) or after (historic) the Great Tribulation preceding the Millennium.

Historic school

Historic, or Classic, Premillennialism is distinctively non-dispensational. The churches in ch.1-3 are churches and not ages. This means that it sees no radical theological distinction between Israel and the Church. Look to passages like Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 2:15, 3:6, 4:4-6; 1 Peter 2:9-10.

It is often post-tribulational, meaning that the rapture of the church will occur after a period of tribulation. Historic premillennialism maintains chiliasm because of its view that the church will be caught up to meet Christ in the air and then escort him to the earth in order to share in his literal thousand year rule. Proponents of the view include R.C. Sproul, Charles Spurgeon, James Montgomery Boice, George Eldon Ladd, John Piper, Albert Mohler, Francis Schaeffer, Carl F. H. Henry, Harold Lindsell, D. A. Carson, Bryan Chapell, and Gordon Clark.

Dispensational school (Most popular with Evangelicals)

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), a former priest in the Anglican Church of Ireland, and an early leader of the Plymouth brethren, developed a new variety of futurist premillennialism first written in 1827. He called it *dispensationalism*, after the division of history into dispensations or eras. C.I. Scofield and Charles Ryrie popularized dispensational premillennialism in their study Bibles.

Dispensational premillennialist generally holds that Israel and the Church are distinct entities. It also widely holds to the pre-tribulational return of Christ, which believes that Jesus will return to take up Christians into heaven by means of a rapture immediately before a seven-year worldwide tribulation. This will be followed by an additional return of Christ with his saints.

Recently dispensationalism has been popularized through Hal Lindsey's 1970s bestseller, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* and through the *Left Behind* Series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Popular proponents of dispensational premillennialism have been John F. MacArthur, Ray Comfort, Jerry Falwell, Dwight Pentecost, John Walvoord, Tim LaHaye, Norman Geisler, and Erwin Lutzer.

As we have currently moved into a "time of uncertainty," a challenge to our present realities, our nation moving away from God, churches struggling, and signs of the end seemingly all around, people are wondering are we in the end times. Will Jesus come rapture us and rescue us from the tribulation? Many evangelical Christians are counting on not experiencing any oppression, persecution or intense circumstances from earthquakes, famines, diseases, or wars. What if the church does? Are you prepared? If we do not, praise God!!

What can we absolutely know from the book of Revelation?

What is its main theme?

What message did the early church hear in their context?

What message do you hear in your context today?

What if you lived in Mozambique, China or Iran as a Christian? Would you see the book of Revelation, or Hebrews any differently?

To simplify, next week we look at Jesus' Teaching on the End Times in the Gospels.

Eschatology in the Gospels - Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21