

Introduction to Revelation

Genre of Revelation

What type of book is it? The Psalms are poetry. The Gospels are narratives. New Testament epistles are letters. And the way you read poetry is different than how you read a letter and that's different than how you read a narrative. If you picked up a fairy tale story to read, you would read that differently than you would a science text book. What is Revelation? We find out in the prologue (the first 8 verses) that there are three ways to describe Revelation. It is apocalyptic, it's prophetic and it's a letter. This is so crucial because if you don't keep this in mind then you will misread the book.

First, the letter is *apocalyptic*. The word for revelation is the word *apokalypsis* which means to reveal or uncover something. So in this book, God is pulling back the curtain to show us a divine perspective on history. Apocalyptic literature is a unique genre of literature that we see in a few places in the Bible in places like Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. This type of writing became more popular during the time period between the Old Testament and New Testament. There are several features of apocalyptic literature that we must be aware of:

1. **Highly Symbolic:** The first and most prominent feature of apocalyptic literature is its use of symbols. The word for "made known" in verse 1 is a word for "signify" or to "use signs and symbols." Revelation is a book of showing. The verb "to see" appears 52 times in Revelation. We are meant to "see" what we read on the pages. Apocalyptic literature intends to go beyond our intellect to shake our emotions and stir our hearts and fill our imaginations. Revelation is a book of symbols to picture God's reign and his coming kingdom. How do we know what the symbols represent?
 - a. We let the book of Revelation define them for us.
 - b. We look to the rest of the Bible. There are over 500 old testament allusions and parallels in the book of Revelation. Even though Revelation is about the future, it, more than any other book in the New Testament, only makes sense when seen through the eyes of the past. The primary reference to help us understand what is happening in Revelation is not current events but the Old Testament.
2. **Use of numbers:** You will see 4, 7, 12, 10, 6 and multiples of those numbers all over the book. This is crucial: these numbers need to be understood symbolically unless the context warrants otherwise because that's how apocalyptic literature works. John doesn't use numbers as secret codes to crack but as signs of completeness, totality, and perfection (or the lack thereof). The number 7 is used throughout Revelation to symbolize perfection and completion. 10 and its multiples (like 1,000) describe complete amounts of time. The number 4 points to universality or worldwide scope. 12 and its multiples (like 144,000) are used to symbolize God's people.
3. **Not chronological:** Apocalyptic literature is often not meant to be read chronologically. Revelation is not written in a linear way. We are told about something that will happen. The next section will often then circle back to explain the same period from a different angle. Its circular and repetitive. Revelation has a recursive structure to it.

Second, Revelation is a **letter**. This book was written around 95 AD by the Apostle John who was exiled to the island of Patmos for being a follower of Jesus. It was written to real people when Rome was the dominant world power. The Roman Empire lasted for 1000 years which is an amazing feat. It was incredibly powerful and quite seductive. Domitian was the emperor at the time, and he was an insecure man who lived in fear of being overthrown. And he demanded that everyone worship him as Lord and God.

If you didn't participate in the worship of Caesar there were financial and societal ramifications. Therefore, to express belief in Jesus as Savior and Lord was awkward, financially disastrous and politically treasonous. The empire was filled with imagery and symbols. Everywhere you looked there were images of power and authority: lions, eagles, massive buildings, ornate temples and a huge coliseum. The Romans would bring the children of conquered nations to the city of Rome because they knew it would overwhelm them and win

them over to Roman culture. The Christians would have felt a mix of fear and seduction. Following Jesus could mean so much loss...the loss of family, friends, influence, connections, businesses, money and even your life. To claim Jesus as Lord was costly. They had to fight the seduction of the Roman empire and its promise of blessing, money, pleasure and connections if they just conform. In every age, including ours, Christians face the same two dangers (opposition and seduction).

Third, Revelation is a **prophecy**. We are told in these opening verses that this book is about things that must “soon take place.” The events of this book are future for John but when exactly will these things take place? In the history of Christianity over the last 2000 years, there have been several different interpretations.

1. *Preterist*: This view says that these prophecies (at least most of the book) were fulfilled in the first few centuries of Christianity. Most of what is written in Revelation was fulfilled not long after it was written in the destruction of the temple in the first century or in the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century.
2. *Historicist*: This view sees Revelation as forecasting world history from the time of Christ onward. The different sections of Revelation describe different periods of church history chronologically leading up to the time of Christ.
3. *Idealist*: Revelation symbolizes the conflict between Christ and Satan and between the church and the forces of darkness throughout history until the return of Christ at the end. One major difference between this view and the historicist view is that this view doesn't see everything happening chronologically.
4. *Futurist*: This view sees everything from chapters 4-22 happening at the end of human history right before and after the return of Jesus Christ. The most popular iteration of this view is that the church is raptured or taken out of this world and then there is this 7 year tribulation of terrible judgment upon the earth followed by the return of Christ. This view is the one from the Left Behind series and further popularized by pastors like John MacArthur and David Jeremiah. While this particular view is popular today and almost assumed by many Christians, it's one that this series will not promote.
5. *A combination*: The approach of this series is somewhat of a combination. We think the best way to understand Revelation is that it describes the entire inter-advent period, the time period between the first coming and the second coming of Christ. This book certainly points us to the end of history when Jesus returns but it also describes the entire time period before and the conflict that the church is engaged in throughout history.

The message of Revelation: The message of Revelation is that Jesus reigns and he is coming to consummate his kingdom. He won a decisive victory over sin, death and Satan during his earthly ministry, death and resurrection. He is reigning right now. His kingdom has broken into the world already. But there is still a battle and its fierce. The kingdoms and philosophies and people of this world are opposed to Christ's rule. But His kingdom of light and life is pushing back the kingdom of darkness and He will win.

What does the church need to see in the midst of chaos, when it seems that evil wins, and when we question if it's worth it to follow Jesus? We need to see Jesus...His power, His glory, His beauty, His wrath, His love and His reign. We need to see His victory and our victory. We need to know that in the end all will be worth it. We will be victorious by the blood of our crucified yet victorious Savior. Our mission won't fail. Satan won't triumph over the church of Jesus Christ. Evil won't win the day. And one day SOON all will be made right. This book helps us live boldly in a world that often opposes and seduces us away from following Jesus.