

Introduction to 50 Days of Revelation

City Reformed will be reading through the book of Revelation during the 50 days before Easter, in the Spring of 2023.

When people first encounter the book of Revelation, it can be a bewildering experience. A good summary of the wild images contained in the book can be found in the beginning of the twelfth chapter. (We have used a painting of this scene from an ancient church as the image for our title page.)

“And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. ²She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. ³And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. ⁴His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth.” - Rev. 12:1-4a

Doesn't that seem strange? A seven-headed dragon attacking a woman who is standing on the moon. You may be wondering if this is science fiction, or medieval sorcery, or a psychedelic hippy dream. You may be further wondering how any of this can be helpful.

While it is true that the book of Revelation feels very unfamiliar, it is not impossible to understand. In the opening chapter, we are informed that this is book of *prophecy* (1:3.) As such, it relates to other types of prophecy found in the Bible. Furthermore, it is a particular type of prophecy, which is called an *apocalypse*. “Apocalypse” is a Greek word found in the opening verse of the book. The literal meaning of the word is “revelation.” It is associated with other types of writing that are in a similar style and were found among Jewish and Christian communities around the first century. Apocalyptic books used vivid symbolic images to point to the spiritual truths behind human events. As one author says, “an apocalypse offers a divine perspective on history.”¹ Again, this is good news. The very title of the book, “Revelation” shows us that something that is hidden is meant to be uncovered. Although it can be challenging to understand, the very title of the shows that its purpose is to *reveal* truth.

But how can we sort through the vivid images and cryptic signs to grasp hold of something useful?

As we prepare to launch into the book of Revelation, I would like to offer two keys which can help unlock this book that initially seems so perplexing. **The first key, is to recognize that the book is grounded in the context of the Bible, and in particular, the Old Testament.** It is absolutely full of references to the rest of the Bible. One scholar notes that “Revelation has more allusions to the Old Testament than all of the other books of the New Testament put together.”² Understanding the background for the symbols goes a long way toward helping us figure out what is going on.

The second key is to recognize that the book was first written for real people to provide pastoral comfort. In the opening chapter, the book is addressed to “seven churches in Asia.” (v.1:4) These seven churches are part of what we now call *Asia Minor* which is now in modern day Turkey. The second and third chapters of the book address these churches in direct and personal ways. Mostly they are encouraged to endure in the face of coming persecution. The rest of the book then goes on to show heavenly visions which were meant to be an encouragement for them as they faced opposition. Like all

¹ Tim Chester, *Revelation for You* (Good Book Company 2019), page 9.

² G.K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Eerdmans 2015), page 17.

books of the Bible the message for the original audience is meant to help all of God's people, down through the ages. For example, Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, addressed a real church in ancient Corinth, but it is used by God to shape all of God's people throughout history and throughout the world. Many people are used to thinking in these terms for other books of the Bible, but lose sight of this principle when they get to Revelation – perhaps because they are distracted by exotic images. If we take time to think of this in its *biblical context* and do some of the work to approach the book from its *historic context* many of the initial problems will become more manageable. Don't get me wrong, the book of Revelation is still quite challenging and there will be sections where the meaning still seems opaque. But the grand picture is easier to grasp than it may appear to be at first glance.

Finally, I want to address a potential “key” that we will not be using. **We will not be interpreting the book of Revelation through the newspaper (even an online newspaper.)** Often when would-be-interpreters tackle the book without regard to historical context or biblical context, their interpretations become wildly subjective. The most eye-catching interpretations are ones in which the text is applied to *current events*. I want to be clear that a good interpretation of this book draws out principles that very much relate to our current situation – and to every Christian in every life situation between the beginning of the Church and the return of Jesus. But that is not what I am warning about now. Some of the most popular interpretations of this book seek to connect the symbolic visions found in this book to events we can read about in the (online) newspaper. Every generation is tempted to believe that the cryptic symbols in this book are meant to be decoded specifically for the contemporary events of their lifetimes. The obvious problem with this approach is that it renders the true meaning of the book completely useless to the original audience. If – as some have suggested – the book of Revelation is really about the Soviet Union, or Operation Desert Storm, or the Obama Presidency (yes, I have read each of those things), and if that is the primary meaning of the prophecy, then it would have been absolutely no help for the first century Christians who were living in Asia Minor, facing the fearsome prospect of imperial Roman persecution. It may sell lots of books³ to tell people that you know when the end of history will occur, but it misses the real point of the book. Unfortunately, this approach is what people often think of first when they approach Revelation. Wrong attempts at matching prophecy to current events can essentially become a form of false prophecy. It dishonors God and

³ One of the most famous attempts to use biblical prophecy, like that found in the book of Revelation to try to predict the end of the world is found in a pair of pamphlets by Edgar C. Whisenant. The first pamphlet was titled, “88 Reasons Why the Rapture (return of Jesus) Will Be in 1988”, and the second was called “On Borrowed Time” which is quoted extensively below. Apparently, this really sold well in 1987. It did not find nearly the reception in 1989. Hearing how the text was used, can help illuminate the approach that I am seeking to warn against.

“All the verse in the book of Revelation now have the dates of occurrence assigned by Scripture. We now know which seven years will be the Tribulation. Every major event of the Tribulation is known, as well as the dates on which these events will occur. We know the exact day that the Millennium begins and ends, as well as the dates of the events in between... According to these calculations, the Judgment of the Nations begins at sunset, Nov. 8, and continuous 45 days to sunset Dec. 23, 1995. Satan is to be chained 1000 years, from sunrise, Oct. 4, 1995, to sunrise, Oct. 4, 2995. This date is 81 days before the end of the Millennium, just as he was chained 81 days before the Millennium started. After the thousand years, Rev. 20:3 says that Satan must be loosed for a short while. Rev. 12:12 defines a short while as 1260 days. Satan is released for 1260 days, from sunrise Oct. 4, 1995, to sunrise March 17, 2999 (Rev. 20:3). March 17, 2999, therefore, is the date of the last great war on earth spoken of in Rev. 20:9 when Satan and his army are defeated. Sunset, March 17, the start of the Jewish day March 18, 2999, is the start of the Great White Throne Judgment which continuous for 1280 days. It takes 280 days to come into this world and 280 days to go to the second death.”

harms the church. By contrast, we are reminded that Jesus clearly told his disciples that *no one knows the time of his return*. (Matthew 24:36.) Instead, we are told to live with lively anticipation of his return, and confidence that God is working in history for his glory and for the good of the church. When we read Revelation in its biblical and historical context – that is exactly the encouragement that we receive.

Further Questions and Considerations

Who wrote Revelation? The book itself identifies the author as “John” (1:4, 1:9) who was writing from his exile on the island of Patmos (1:9.) The early church connected this John with the Apostle who wrote the gospel and three letters of the same name.⁴ There are some thematic connections between the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation (particular, the presence of “I am statements”), but it is important to note that the author does not specifically claim to be the Apostle John. We can follow the early church and assume that the John of Revelation is the same John who wrote the gospel and the letters, but absent a direct link in the text we should make that assertion with humility.

When was it written? There are debates about proper dating for the book, but if (as early church historians tell us) the Apostle John was exiled to Patmos at the end of his life, which was toward the end of the first century, then the book would have been written during the last decade of the first century. This is relevant as we consider the frequent warnings about persecution, as the first wave of empire-wide persecution⁵ broke out under Emperor Domitian in the 90’s. (Persecution for the early church was sporadic during the first three centuries of its existence, with periods of relative peace and programs of oppression brought by certain emperors for limited periods of time.)

How should we understand the use of symbols and numbers? The book of Revelation is full of many symbols. Even numbers are often used symbolically. It is important to recognize that saying something is symbolic does not mean it is less true. *Symbolism* is simply one way to communicate an idea. A true idea can be communicated symbolically. (Conversely, a false idea can be stated *literally*.) If we think back to the introductory reading from Revelation 12:1-4, the only rational interpretation of the text takes the vision to be symbolic. John does not want us to think of a *literal* dragon flying through outer-space, or a *literal* women who is standing on the moon. In fact, the way we picture a woman on the moon, after the 1969 moon walk, would have no connection to how the original audience would picture that story. Instead, John is seeing a vision about conflict set against a starry backdrop. In this instance, the dragon can be clearly seen to represent the devil, and the woman the church. Thus, we can see that the vision is a conflict between the devil and the church.

Furthermore, the use of numbers is also highly symbolic. This is common throughout the Bible, but it is a key component of the communication style used in this book. When the text speaks of the “seven Spirits before the throne of God” (v.1:4) we are not meant to think that the Holy Spirit has *literally* divided into seven and we now need to expand our understanding of the Trinity. Rather, we are meant to understand that the Spirit of God is present in “seven-fold fulness.” Likewise, the number twelve

⁴ Many modernist scholars doubt that the Apostle John is the author, but without strong evidence to support their claim. (Often it is assumed that a different style of writing, such as that found in this prophetic book could not be produced by someone who wrote history, like the Gospel of John. Of course, this same skepticism would conclude that it was impossible for the Beatles to compose all of their albums given the range of styles found within.)

⁵ Earlier persecution under Nero, during the 60’s was believed by the early church to have killed both Peter and Paul, but it was limited to Rome, itself.

regularly refers to the church. (Twelve tribes, twelve apostles, etc.) When we read of a special group of Christians called the 144,000 (v.7:4) we are not meant to think of a literal number of people. (The Jehovah Witnesses made this mistake.) Instead we see the fullness of the church squared and multiplied by a common number for expansiveness (12 x 12 x 1,000.) This means that the full number of God's people are present. Which, even the JW's had to eventually admit will certainly be larger than that literal number. In a parallel vision, the people of God are described as being "a great multitude that *no one could number*." (v.7:9) This clearly militates against a literal reading of 144,000, since they are a multitude that *no one could number*. Similar use of symbolism is found throughout the book. Fortunately, the biblical context usually makes the symbols understandable.

What is the structure of Revelation? While scholars can debate the details, there are a lot of clear patterns in the book, many of them orienting around groups of seven.

1:1-4	Prologue
1:9-3:22	Address to Seven Churches
4:1-5:14	Vision of the Throne Room of Heaven
6:1-7:17	Seven Seals are Opened
8:1-11:18	Seven Trumpets
11:19-15:4	(Seven ⁶) Visions of Heavenly Conflict
15:5-16:21	Seven Bowls of Wrath
17:1-20:10	The Final Defeat of God's Enemies
20:11-15	The Final Judgment
21:1-22:21	The New Heavens and the New Earth

When does this all happen? Well, that is the big question. There are two clear points of reference for timing in the book. The first, is the original audience and the composition of the book (ca 90 AD.) The second is the end of the book which clearly chronicles the end of the world and the return of Jesus. In between a bunch of stuff happens in which God shakes the earth and establishes his unshakeable kingdom (to use the language of Hebrews 12:27-29.) Considerable debate exists among Christians about how the events of Revelation relate to those two timeframes. Here are some of the ways people approach it.

- (i.) *Preterist view*. This is the least familiar to modern people, but has been popular in other periods of Church history. While it is agreed by everyone that the Final Judgment (Rev 20:11-15) is the end of the history, the Preterist position holds that most of the action (seals, trumpets, bowls, etc.) relates to things that actually happened in the first century. Often they date the book earlier and relate the cataclysmic images to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.
- (ii.) *Futurist view*. This is probably the most common approach to the book for modern people. It holds that the events of the book (after the seven churches are addressed) all relate to things that will happen at the end of the world and that none of them have happened yet. When people think about reading the book of Revelation, they often think about the series

⁶ Unlike the churches, seals, trumpets and bowls, the visions are not numbered. But the introductory formula for each vision ("then I looked and saw") can be observed to mark off seven visions, which continued an interesting pattern of sevens.

of judgments (seals, trumpets, bowls) and think of things that *have not yet happened, but may start happening at any time.*

- (iii.) *Redemptive-historical (idealist) view.* This view does relegate the prophecies to events in the past or the future. Rather, it understands that the bulk of the prophecies in the book are describing events that are characteristic of the entire church age. In other words, it describes things that *started to happen* in the first century, and are continuing throughout church history, and will eventually *culminate in the return of Jesus and the final judgment.* This view has a different approach to understanding the function of the prophecy. The term “idealist” is meant to explain that the prophecies are not connected to specific historic events, but are largely *types* of things which happen as the church struggles to be faithful. Since, I find this view to be the most persuasive and will generally write and preach from that perspective, it is worth explaining a little more.
- a. The redemptive-historical view takes into account the relevance of this book for the original audience, and for successive audiences. The preterist view locates the primary events of Revelation in the past and has little relevance for the church today. Furthermore, because most preterist views relate the cataclysmic prophecies to the destruction of Jerusalem, it is hard to see why they would have been relevant for the 7 churches of Revelation which are located in Asia minor. On the other hand, the futurist view locates the primary events of Revelation in the future which means that they had no relevance for the original audience. It is hard to image John sending this book to seven churches and then adding, “by the way, none of this will mean anything for another 2,000 years or so.” By contrast the book is full of statements that the events are “happening soon.” (Rev.1:1)
 - b. The redemptive-historical view fits well with biblical teaching about the church age. Usually advocates of the futurist approach see the prophecies of Revelation related to a period of final tribulation which marks the end of the church age and culminates with the return of Jesus. While it may be the case (and even seems likely) that a period of great unrest would precede the return of Christ, the New Testament focuses on the entire period of time between the resurrection of Christ and his return as the “Last Days.” (Acts 2:17, Heb 1:2) In fact, when John introduced himself, he saw himself as being a “partner in their tribulation.” (Rev. 1:9) In other words, John understood the “tribulation” to be something that he was already experiencing at the end of the first century, not something that would suddenly happen 20 centuries later.
 - c. Looking specifically at the book of Revelation, chapter 5 shows a scene from the heavenly throne room in which a sealed scroll is opened by the “lamb who was slain.” The opening of the seven seals on the scroll trigger the cataclysmic events of judgment on the earth. The events unfold over time and culminate in the return of Jesus. The redemptive-historical view understands the period of the seven scrolls to cover the entire church age. They are triggered by the resurrection of Christ, but extend all the way until his return. Therefore, they characterize the period of life for the first century churches in Asia Minor *and* apply to our situation today, 20 centuries later. The function of these prophecies is *not* to help us identify the mysterious final tribulation which precedes the return of Christ (after all no one know the hour or the day – Matt 24:36.) Rather the judgments associated with the seven seals characterize the entire church

age, in which God shakes the earthly kingdom and establishes his heavenly kingdom. (Heb 12:26-29)

- d. A key part of this approach is to lean away from trying to match the episodes of prophetic judgment (seals, trumpets, bowls) with particular events in human history. We are not trying to say... "the 4th trumpet corresponds with a plague in 147 AD, or the 3rd bowl of wrath is the Korean War. Instead, we are viewing these judgments as characteristic of things that happen throughout the entire church age.
- e. This does not mean that the visions are unrelated to particular historic events. While they point to a general trend of shaking and establishing (Heb 12), they do take on a particular flavor or first century life in Asia Minor. Many of the bad-guys look a lot like Roman Emperors, and the challenges faced in the book look a lot like the challenges that members of the seven churches would have faced. What we see is that the enduring forces of evil are manifested in every age in particular ways. The concern of Revelation is to show the enduring power of evil behind our worldly conflicts. (And to show that God will win ultimate victory over them, though they are allowed to operate during this present age.) Theologian Greg Beale describes it this way:

"Various parts of John's vision find a measure of fulfillment in actual historical events. The fact is, however, that their meaning is not linked exclusively to those particular events, for Revelation finds fulfillment in countless events throughout the church age." - Revelation: A Shorter Commentary

- f. With this in mind, we are free to draw applications to every period of Church history. Seeing parallels from Revelation to our contemporary situation does not mean that we are uniquely positioned at the end of history. (Of course, we may be... "no one knows the hour or the day...") Rather, we can recognize that the kingdom of God is advancing even as the world, the flesh and the devil shift and morph to advance their own opposition against God.
 - i. An example may be in order here. One of the phrases that people most associate with end times prophecy is "the anti-Christ." It may be a surprise to learn that the book of Revelation has no reference to the term "anti-Christ", though there is a similar idea in the portrayal of a beast that rises from the ocean to war against God's people. The term "anti-Christ" is actually found in the book of 1 John, and where it appears John uses it to talk about the "many anti-Christ who have already gone out into the world." (1 John 3:18) For John this is evidence that the period of time in which he lived (later first century) was "the last hour." Clearly, that term "last hour" cannot refer to a short period of time immediately before the return of Christ. Rather, it must refer to the entire period of the church, between the resurrection of Jesus and his return, similar to the term "last days." Rather than trying to match biblical prophecies to current events, we can say; *in this age there is always a spirit of anti-Christ at work in the world, and until Christ returns there will always be demonic opposition, and the power of the "beast" (Rev 13) and the "harlot" (Rev 17) will be present in every age, taking different forms and manifesting in different ways.* Or, as on seminary professor used to say in regard to applying the anti-

Christian imagery to various diabolical powers in human history... “if the horns fit, then wear them.”

What does it all mean? The approach which I outlined above combines future expectation with present-day endurance. When considered from that position, Revelation has a great deal to say about how we live now. The simple truth is that Christians are meant to live in the present out of a confidence we have for the future. Fortunately, this same message is found everywhere throughout the Bible. In particular, in our recent study through the book of 1 Peter, we saw that one of the pivotal passages connected our future hope to our present discipleship.

“Set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ...as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct.” – 1 Peter 1:13-15

The principle is this: *Present faithfulness flows from future certainty.*

In the book of Revelation, the present challenges of the church are pictured against the backdrop of God’s redemptive historical work. In particular, the present challenges are meant to be viewed against the certainty of God’s judgment and his coming restoration. What John *reveals* in this book is the nature of the spiritual battle that lies behind our current struggles. The seven churches (Rev 2-3) who struggle with compromise from within and opposition from outside can see encouragement in the visions throughout the rest of the book. If we do not have a redemptive historical framework we can miss the connections between the seven churches (Rev 2-3) and the rest of the book. For example, we see that the imperfections of the seven churches (which we still share today) are fulfilled in the future perfected church (Rev 21-22).⁷ Furthermore, the demonic opposition which threatens them is ultimately defeated⁸ and the worldly powers of seduction and intimidation are destroyed when Babylon is symbolically defeated (Rev 18.) Finally, we can see that the promises made to the overcomers in the seven churches are fulfilled in the new creation.⁹

To summarize, the Bible teaches us to live our present daily lives in light of eternity. Revelation takes that paradigm and presents it to us in vivid apocalyptic imagery. The lessons that we learn go something like this:

⁷ Summarized from Beale, *Revelation a Shorter Commentary*. False apostles (2:2) contrasted with true apostles (21:14). False Jews (2:9, 3:9) contrasted with the tribes of true Israel (21:12.) Christians (Pergamum) dwell where Satan has his throne (2:13) contrasted with Christians dwelling where God has his throne (22:1.) The church is an earthly lampstand (1:20, 2:5), but in the New Heavens & Earth God and the Lamb are the lamps (21:23-24; 22:5.) The churches in Pergamum and Thyatira are corrupted by idolaters (Rev 2:14-15,20) but the perfected church has no idolatry or lying (21:8.) (etc.)

⁸ From Beale, *Revelation a Shorter Commentary*: “In Pergamum, Satan is said to have his throne (2:13), and there appears to be a false prophet there called Balaam (2:14.) Satan later appears as the dragon (12:9) who is thrown out of heaven and attempts to establish his rule (throne) on earth. He is accompanied by a second beast described later as a false prophet (13:13-17), 16:13, 19:20.) A Jezebel appears at Thyatira in 2:20-23, and Jezebel is used as a model for the harlot of chapter 17.

⁹ Ibid. Beale also shows how the promises made to the overcomers in the seven churches are fulfilled in the renewed earth. They are promised to eat from the tree of life (2:7), which happens in Rev 22:2. They are promised to be part of the heavenly Jerusalem (3:12), which descends to earth in Rev 21. They are promised to have the name of God (3:12), which is depicted as being on their foreheads in the new creation (22:4.) Similar connects are made between white clothing, pillars in the temple, names written in the book of life, and the morning star.

Our enemies will not last. In fact, God is shaking this present earth, so many will meet their downfall in this present age. At the same time, we can be assured that the final judgment will bring every human face to face with their own actions. We will all give account, but those who are trusting in Christ have their names written in the lamb's book of life and will pass through the judgment.

So too, our present faithfulness will be connected to future beauty. We are called to overcome all opposition by trusting Jesus even if it costs our lives. That is a radical call. Revelation assists us in faithful endurance by showing that the eternal kingdom which God is establishing will exceed our wildest dreams. The renewed creation offers us everlasting glory, and God himself will comfort us, wiping away our tears. Faithfulness is worth it in the end.

Closing thoughts. So, let's buckle up and take this ride together. Revelation is not an easy book, but it is full of gracious assistance for our daily discipleship struggles. In a world full of fiery trials (1 Peter 4), God has given us a book that uses vivid prophetic imagery to stir our hopes and captivate our imagination. It is not easy, but it is worth it.