

Interpreting Revelation

Expectation and Interpretation

By [Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr](#)

In this chapter, I will introduce two vital and foundational issues for properly understanding Revelation. In the next chapter, I will focus on John's stated theme, then trace in broad strokes how his theme unfolds in Revelation. Consequently, my first two chapters are designed to provide the basic tools for handling Revelation.

The two issues so crucial to grasping John's meaning are: (1) his stated expectation regarding when his prophecies will transpire, and (2) his declared method regarding how his prophecies should be interpreted. As we will see, these matters are absolutely essential to "handling accurately" this portion of the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15). And though they may surprise you, I urge you to "examine the Scriptures to see whether these things are so" (Acts 17:11).

Surprisingly, both of these matters are found in John's opening chapter. They are not hidden away later behind all of the fantastic, front-stage drama, lost in the glare of the startling imagery. Unfortunately though, the modern Revelation enthusiast tends to run right past them in his desire to "get to the good stuff" in later chapters. But once these two issues are carefully considered, they both will simplify and revolutionize your understanding of this book, which will truly then become for you a "revelation."

JOHN'S EXPECTATION

Before I actually declare John's expectation, I will build my case for properly discovering it.

Revelation, like most of the New Testament epistles, is "occasional." An occasional writing deals directly with the historical occasion and circumstances of the original audience. For instance, in 1 Corinthians, Paul directs the Corinthian church in how to handle the various problems that have so buffeted their community. When he writes that someone there has his own father's wife (1 Cor. 5:1), he is not declaring a universal principle prevailing in all churches. Indeed, it is a rather rare occurrence, peculiar to the Corinthians. Understanding the historical situation of John's original audience is fundamentally important to comprehending his meaning.

AUDIENCE RELEVANCE

The first step in getting at John's meaning is to recognize who his audience was. As we shall see, Revelation is clearly written to a particular people.

The Churches Addressed

In Revelation, John is writing a letter (see Rev. 2-3) to those whom he knew and in a way emphasizing their peculiar historical circumstances. We really must put ourselves back in his original audience's sandals to feel the full force of his teaching. John specifically names the church communities to whom he sends Revelation:

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne. (Rev. 1:4)

Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea. (Rev. 1:11)

Not only do we know these cities from ancient sources, but we are even aware that the order in which they appear in Revelation follows a known Roman postal route. These are historical cities containing historical first century churches.

In Chapters two and three, John addresses short letters to each of them. In those letters we discover numerous historical, geographical, political, cultural, and religious allusions fitting perfectly with what we know of these regions. These are real first century Christians. We must keep that in mind.

The Churches Afflicted

John is not only writing to actual first century churches, but to churches undergoing great suffering. We also discover this fact in the first chapter:

I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. (Rev. 1:9)

In fact, all the way through Revelation we discern a martyr theme quite in keeping with their "tribulation" and their need of "perseverance" (e.g., Rev. 2:9-10; 3:9-10; 6:9-11; 11:7-8, 11-13, 18; 12:10; 13:10; 14:11-13; 16:5-6; 17:6; 18:20, 24; 19:2; 20:4, 6). These people are suffering grievously. For instance, later in

Chapter 6, we learn of God's special blessings upon those who have actually been slain for their faith:

And when He broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, should be completed also. (Rev. 6:9-11)

So then, John not only writes to particular first century churches, but churches in dire circumstances. What does John expect from these suffering churches as he writes his Revelation?

The Churches Instructed

As John opens his letter to these seven churches, he emphatically declares that he intends them to understand him. Indeed, the opening verse (a portion of which becomes the title by which we know the book reads:

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants... and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John. (Rev. 1:1)

He expressly states that he intends to "reveal," "to show," to "communicate" something to them-not to hide information from them.

Then two verses later, he directs them to hear with understanding so that they might keep the obligations found in his book:

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it (Rev. 1:3a).

They are to "hear" and to "heed," which obviously require that they understand.

Thus, John writes to original first century churches who are suffering in order to give them directives they must understand and act upon. As we will see, this becomes a crucial piece of evidence toward grasping John's expectation.

CONTEMPORARY EXPECTATION

We come now to perhaps the most important matter for properly interpreting Revelation. I believe that to understand this book you must start in its first three verses. John expressly informs his readers that he expects the prophesied events to occur soon. Let us note three angles emphasizing his contemporary concern.

John's Varied Expressions

John uses two terms when he speaks of his temporal expectation: "shortly" (Gk., *en tachei*) and "near" (Gk., *engus*). If, for some reason, his original audience could not understand one term, they had another nearby to elucidate it.

The word translated "shortly" appears as an explanation for his writing to them:

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must shortly take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John. (Rev. 1:1)

I urge you: Check any modern English translation. Consult your own favorite version. You will discover that they all speak of temporal nearness. This term also appears later in Revelation 2:16; 3:11; and 22:6.

The word translated "near" follows quickly upon the other term, just two verses later. And once again, John expresses the approaching nearness of the events as the very reason for his writing to them:

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near. (Rev. 1:3)

This word commonly speaks of events near in time, such as an approaching Passover (Matt 26:18), the coming of summer (Matt. 24:32), and a soon occurring festival (John 2:13). Again, check any modern version; the results will be the same.

If you are not sure about one of the terms, then you have another! These terms are mutually supportive: that something is "shortly" to come to pass means that it is "near." And only one verse separates them. They clearly demand that the events of Revelation are impending when John writes. Think of it: How else could John have declared that the events were near? He uses two of the most common, familiar, clear words expressing temporal proximity.

Now keep in mind our previous comments: John is writing to real, historical first century churches. These are churches who are suffering grievous "tribulation." Is John taunting these men and women who are under such trials by using familiar terms speaking of temporal near-ness? Surely not! He is ministering to them—

and he expects them to understand and act upon his directives, for the time is near (Rev. 1:3).

OPENING: Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near (Rev. 1:3).

CLOSING: And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near" (Rev. 22:10).

John's Strategic Placement

Not only does he employ two very common and clear terms expressing temporal nearness, but he places them in both his opening and closing comments. Thus, they appear in his introduction and his conclusion. He states his expectation to his audience as they enter the book and as they exit it. He literally gets them coming and going.

This becomes all the more relevant when we realize that these temporal indicators appear before and after the difficult visions. They are not in the symbolic sections where we might wonder if they require special interpretive rules. Rather, they are in the clear, straightforward, didactic portions of Revelation.

John's Significant Instruction

Scholars recognize a literary relationship between Revelation and Daniel, with Daniel being one of the leading sources of John's imagery and thought. In each book, an angel appears to the writer. Interestingly, though using very similar language, the angel instructs John to take action exactly opposite that to Daniel. These contrary directives arise from the widely separated places in history where John and Daniel find themselves. Note the literary similarity of the commands, but their opposite historical actions:

But as for you, Daniel, conceal these words and seal up the book until the end of time. (Dan. 12:4)

And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near" (Rev. 22:10).

Daniel lived several hundred years before John, and the angel directed him to "seal up the book." But much later in history, a similar angel instructed John (writing a similar, apocalyptic work) not to seal up the book-"for the time is near" (Rev. 22:10). What could be clearer? Daniel's expectations are long term; John's are short term.

When all is said and done, John writes Revelation while anticipating events looming in his own day. He is not writing about events two or three thousand years distant. He would be mercilessly taunting his original first century audience, who is suffering grievous tribulation and who is being told the divine judgments upon the evildoers are "shortly to come to pass" or "near."

Our understanding of the main thrust of Revelation, then, must be "preteristic" rather than "futuristic." "Preterism" is based on the Latin word *praeteritus*, which means "gone by." The preterist approach to Revelation teaches that John was prophesying events future to his own day, but which are now in our past. Futurism teaches that all the events of Revelation (from ch. 4 on) are still in our future. As we will see, the catastrophes John anticipates fit perfectly with the historical circumstances of the first century.

Another problem tripping up the modern would-be interpreter is the assumption of literalism when approaching Revelation. Too many contemporary prophecy students resist the symbolic approach to John's glorious prophecy. "Literalism!" becomes the rally cry for those who believe Revelation lies in our approaching future.

I would point out that despite the popular claim of literalism, no one takes Revelation literally. We take it as God's truth, to be sure. It certainly deals with factual historical events. But we cannot take it as God's truth in literal form. Let us see how this is so.

When interpreting any literary work, we should always listen carefully to the author himself, especially if he provides information affecting the proper approach to interpreting his work. Certainly, Revelation is considered the most difficult New Testament book to interpret. Given the widespread interest in Revelation, this exacerbates the difficulties in presenting John's message in the modern context. Consequently, hermeneutic methodology becomes a paramount concern for the would-be interpreter. Interestingly, in his Gospel, John shows the problem of literalism among Christ's early hearers: by thinking in a rigidly literal way, they misconstrue Jesus' teaching regarding the temple (John 2:19-22), being born again (3:3-10), drinking water (4:10-14), eating his flesh (6:51-56), being free (8:31-36), being blind (9:39-40), falling asleep (11:11-14), and his being king (18:33-37). This problem is exacerbated in Revelation with its rich imagery field.

INTERPRETIVE CLUES

As I have shown, Revelation opens with powerful statements declaring the near-term fulfillment of its prophecies. Likewise, in the very first chapter, we find the first clues to John's presentational method. He specifically informs his readers of the symbolic nature of his visions, and provides insights into how the reader should transpose his visions to understand his point.

John wastes no time in alerting his readers to his symbolic approach. In the very opening sentence, he declares:

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must shortly take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John. (Rev. 1:1)

Here he informs us that Revelation is given "to show" (Gk., deixai) the message being "signified" (Gk., esemanen) by His angel (Rev. 1:1, NKJV).

As Friedrich Düsterdieck notes: "The deixai occurs in the way peculiar to semainein, i.e., the indication of what is meant by significative figures." In fact, forty-one times John says he "sees" these prophecies (e.g., Rev. 1:12, 20; 5:6; 9:1; 20:1). Premillennial commentator Robert Mounce observes in this regard:

The revelation is said to be signified to John. The Greek verb carries the idea of figurative representation. Strictly speaking it means to make known by some sort of sign (Hort, p. 6). Thus it is admirably suited to the symbolic character of the book. This should warn the reader not to expect a literal presentation of future history, but a symbolic portrayal of that which must yet come to pass.

John encourages his readers to expect figurative symbols rather than literal events.

John's Opening Revelation

In fact, John's first vision sets the pattern for later symbolic interpretation by presenting a vision then interpreting its key elements in a non-literal way. In Revelation 1:12-20, he records a vision of Christ walking among lampstands. On the literalist assumption, the vision should be teaching that the Lord walks among candles in heaven.

However, John will not allow that. In verse 20, Jesus interprets the vision for us:

As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lamp-stands are the seven churches. (Rev. 1:20)

So then, even though John himself actually saw seven stars and seven lampstands, the stars represent "the angels of the seven churches" and the lampstands represent "the seven churches." This is what John himself teaches; we cannot dismiss this important clue to symbolic interpretation.

John's Continuing Practice

What is more, John does not simply provide us one sample of his symbolic method. Several times in Revelation, he stops to provide interpretive insights into the visions.

In Revelation 5, John sees a lamb with seven eyes. Even the most naive literalist recognizes this Lamb represents Christ the Lord, for he is called (not literally!) "the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David" (Rev. 5:5). After all, the angels of heaven sing his praise as the Redeemer of God's people (5:9-10) and as glorious because of his work (5:12). In the next verse, he is praised equally with God the Father (5:13). In Revelation 14, the Lamb's name is associated with God's name on the elect of God (14:1).

John also provides interpretive directives on one of the more unusual features of the vision of the Lamb. He explains the "seven eyes":

And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth. (Rev. 5:6)

The vision's seven eyes do not mean that the Lamb literally has seven eyeballs in his head. John tells us so himself.

Despite John's speaking of "incense" in the angelic bowls in heaven, he re-directs our understanding. He clearly states that the incense John saw really represented the "prayers of the saints":

And when He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, having each one a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. (Rev. 5:8)

In Revelation 17:7, 9-10, the interpreting angel clears John's confusion by noting that one image really represents two altogether different realities:

And the angel said to me, "Why do you wonder? I shall tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, which has the seven heads and the ten horns. ... Here is the mind which has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits, and they are seven kings; five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain a little while." (Rev. 17:9-10)

So then, not only do the seven heads not portray seven literal heads on one actual beast, but they symbolize two other realities: seven mountains and seven kings.

And what shall we say of the horns on the beast? They are not horns at all—even though certain mammals do actually possess horns made up of a bony core covered with a sheath of keratinous material. The interpreting angel interprets this for John and for us:

And the ten horns which you saw are ten kings, who have not yet received a kingdom, but they receive authority as kings with the beast for one hour. (Rev. 17:12)

Even the water John sees should not be understood as referring to H₂O. Rather, the angel explains:

And he said to me, "The waters which you saw where the harlot sits, are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues." (Rev. 17:15)

As we can see, John provides us with enough explanatory samples for interpreting Revelation that we should be able categorically to declare that the book should not be interpreted according to the principles of literalism.

John's Literalistic Absurdities

Even if we set aside John's own opening announcement regarding the symbolic nature of his prophecy, and his explanation of his very first vision, and his interpretive practice elsewhere in Revelation, we should avoid literalism on the basis of common sense. Consider the following absurdities that would arise on the literalist approach.

We should expect bizarre and rather grotesque angels in heaven:

Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. (Rev. 4:6)

And this is despite the fact that when men actually see angels on the earth, they can be confused with humans (e.g., Gen. 19:1, 5; Dan. 9:21).

Though John actually sees a lamb in some of his visions, we know that he is not literally teaching us about the actions of a mammal of the genus *Ovis* in the family Bovidae.

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. (Rev. 5:6)

I noted previously in this chapter that this "Lamb" is actually worshiped and praised as the Redeemer of God's people.

Nor should we expect a time in the future wherein the world witnesses a global assault by four literal horsemen, each riding upon an *Equus caballus*:

I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest. When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword. When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!" When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth." (Rev. 6:1-8)

Elsewhere in Revelation, John speaks of men actually washing robes in blood in order to make them white:

And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." (Rev. 7:14)

And what shall we say of the locusts he sees?

And the appearance of the locusts was like horses prepared for battle; and on their heads, as it were, crowns like gold, and their faces were like the faces of men. (Rev. 9:7)

Or of the horses and their riders?

And this is how I saw in the vision the horses and those who sat on them: the riders had breastplates the color of fire and hyacinth and of brimstone; and the heads of the horses are like the heads of lions; and out of their mouths proceed fire and smoke and brimstone. (Rev. 9:17)

Do we really expect a literal multi-headed dragon to pull down one-third of the trillions of stars in the Universe, throwing them upon the earth?

Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. (Rev. 12:3-4)

On the literalist approach, who is the winged woman who stands on the moon? And the serpent that vomits out a river of water?

The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. (Rev. 12:14-15)

Will John's dreaded beast literally look like a compound of three representatives of the mammalian order Carnivora?

The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. (Rev. 13:2a)

Is the second beast John sees literal?

Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. (Rev. 13:11)

Is the angel of God actually going to reap the earth with a literal sickle?

Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, "Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." (Rev. 14:15)

Do demon spirits literally appear in history in the form of frogs coming from the mouths of evil beings?

Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. (Rev. 16:13)

Is the Great Harlot really a vampire who drinks blood to the point of intoxication?

I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. (Rev. 17:6)

Will Jesus physically ride out of heaven and through the sky on horse, while clamping a sword in his teeth?

Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. (Rev. 19:15a)

Do we expect a literal city (complete with plumbing and electricity?) to descend to the earth from heaven?

And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. (Rev. 21:10)

And will it be so gigantic that it will extend from the earth's surface upwards of 1500 miles, about 1200 miles higher than the Space Shuttle orbits?

And the city is laid out as a square, and its length is as great as the width; and he measured the city with the rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal. (Rev. 21:16)

Surely, no one would interpret Revelation in this way. As we have seen, Revelation confronts the literalist with one problem after another. To paraphrase Mark Twain, we might say of Revelation's absurdities if taken literally: "Revelation is just one darned thing after another."

JOHN'S CONFIRMATION

Since I claim that Revelation expects a near-term fulfillment, I must be able to specify when, where, and how it transpires. One of the most helpful historical documents demonstrating its fulfillment is written by Josephus. Since I will be referring to him in the course of this study, I will provide a brief biography on him and his significance.

Flavius Josephus was a prominent, wealthy Jewish (and non-Christian) historian who lived from A.D. 37 to A.D. 101. He was of priestly descent and lived in Palestine. To get our historical context we should recall that Christ was crucified in A.D. 30 and the Temple at Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70.

Josephus served as a general in the Jewish defensive forces during the Jewish War against Rome in A.D. 67-70. During the War, he was defeated by the Romans at Jotapata, surrendering to the Roman general Flavius Vespasian. He befriended Vespasian by interpreting a prophetic oracle to mean that Vespasian would one day be emperor of Rome. Shortly thereafter, he began working with Vespasian in urging the Jews to surrender to the Romans and to cease their

hopeless and self-destructive cause. He failed, of course, and because of his attempt, Jews have historically considered him to be something of a Benedict Arnold.

Vespasian, who became emperor of Rome in A.D. 69, sponsored the writing of Josephus' famous book *The Jewish War*. This work was written about A.D. 75 (just five years after the fall of Jerusalem). Josephus' name was changed from the very Jewish Joseph Ben Matthias to the more Roman Flavius Josephus, taking on Flavius Vespasian's name as his benefactor.

In his multi-volume work (published as seven books), Josephus writes as an eyewitness historian who happened to be in the Jewish War on both sides of the conflict. His work is extremely helpful for providing historical insights into the names and events of the war, so many of which are foretold in John's prophecy in Revelation. Many of the correspondences between John's prophecy and Josephus' history may be found in my chapter in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*.

I highly recommend reading the Book of Revelation, Chapters 6 through 19, then reading Josephus, *War*, books 4-7.

CONCLUSION

John's Revelation is almost universally misinterpreted because the keys to unlocking its mysteries have been overlooked—even though they were left in the front door by John long ago. John states early and clearly that the events he prophesies "must shortly come to pass" because "the time is at hand" (Rev. 1:1, 3; cp. 22:6, 10). As strange as it may seem to the modern Christian, the further we move into the future, the farther we move away from the events of Revelation.

John repeatedly directs his reader to understand the prophecies in a non-literal, symbolic fashion. And though we cannot understand the actual images of Revelation literalistically, we can interpret them historically. As just noted, one of the most helpful tools for discerning the historical fulfillment of Revelation is Josephus' *The Jewish War*. We will find his historical notations very important for discovering the historical realities lurking behind the symbolic images of John. In fact, my approach to Revelation is quite historical.

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