

UNDERSTANDING REVELATION

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

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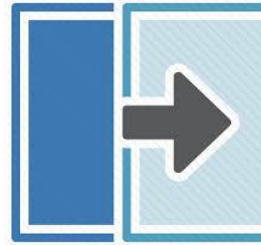
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MAIN IDEA

Revelation is first and foremost a revelation about the return of Jesus Christ (1:1).

BACKGROUND

Title: Revelation (Greek *apokalupsis*) means “an uncovering,” an “unveiling,” or a “disclosure.” In the NT, this word describes the unveiling of spiritual truth (Rom. 16:25; Gal. 1:12; Eph. 1:17, 3:3). The word revelation refers to something or someone, once hidden, becoming visible. What this book reveals or unveils is Jesus Christ in glory and his return as King of kings.



Author and Date: John the Apostle, written ca. A.D. 94-96.

Setting: The Apostle John, the last surviving apostle, and an old man, in exile on the small, barren island of Patmos, located in the Aegean Sea, southwest of Ephesus. The



Roman authorities has banished him there because of his faithful preaching of the gospel (1:9). While on Patmos, John received a series of visions that laid out the future history of the world. When John was arrested, he was in Ephesus, ministering to the church there and in the surrounding cities.¹

THE STRUCTURE OF REVELATION

The structure of Revelation has been argued for many years, primarily because of the different hermeneutical approaches used by interpreters. Following are three ways the structure of this book can be viewed.

The “Show” Structure: Using the phrase “I will show you,” and others like it, such as “show his servants,” the beginning of a major section can be used to break the book into the following five sections:

- Prologue (Rev. 1:1—3:22)
- Scene 1 (Rev. 4:1—16:21)

¹(MacArthur, The MacArthur Bible Commentary 1991).

- Scene 2 (Rev. 17:1—21:8)
- Scene 3 (Rev. 21:9—22:5)
- Epilog (Rev. 22:6-21)

The “After This” Structure. In a similar manner to the “I will show you” approach, one can use the key phrase, “after this” as a possible partition clue. In this case the book falls into seven major sections:

- Prologue (Rev. 1:19—3:22)
- Scene 1 (Rev. 4:1—6:17)
- Scene 2 (Rev. 7:9—9:11)
- Scene 3 (Rev. 9:12—15:4)
- Scene 4 (Rev. 15:5—17:18)
- Scene 5 (Rev. 18:1-24)
- Scene 6 (Rev. 19:1—20:2)
- Scene 7 (Rev. 20:3—22:21)

The “Contextual Structure:” Carson, Moo, and Morris offer another structure seeing it as the best approach:²

- Prologue (Rev. 1:1-20)
- Messages to the seven churches (Rev. 2:1—3:22)
- A vision of heaven (Rev. 4:1—5:14)
- The seven seals (Rev. 6:1—8:5)
- The seven trumpets (Rev. 8:6—11:19)
- Seven significant signs (Rev. 12:1—14:20)
- The seven bowls (Rev. 15:1—16:21)
- The triumph of Almighty God (Rev. 17:1—20:15)
- A new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1—22:5)
- Epilogue (Rev. 22:6-21)

SIX BASIC INTERPRETIVE APPROACHES

1. **Critical Approach:** Denies either the inspiration or canonicity of the Book of Revelation and sees the writing as a purely human composition based on the historical situation at the end of the first century A.D. This view must be rejected completely by all who hold unreservedly to the inspiration and canonicity of Revelation.

² (Carson, Moo and Morris 406-407)

2. **Allegorical Approach:** The allegorical approach to the book denies the literal reality behind the descriptions of the narrated events, and takes the accounts to be solely allegories, parables, and metaphors which contain messages of spiritual encouragement. This view is contradicted by the very first verse of the Revelation which states its purpose.
3. **Preterist (i.e., “past”) Approach:** Interprets Revelation as a description of first-century events in the Roman Empire. This view conflicts with the book’s own often-repeated claim to be prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19).
4. **Historicist Approach:** This approach views Revelation as a panoramic view of church history from apostolic times to the present—seeing in the symbolism such events as the barbarian invasions of Rome, the rise of the Roman Catholic Church, the emergence of Islam, and the French Revolution. This method robs Revelation of any meaning for those to whom it was written.
5. **Idealist Approach:** This view interprets Revelation as a timeless depiction of the cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil. This view ignores Revelation’s prophetic character and, if carried to its logical conclusion, severs the book from any connection with actual historical events. Revelation then becomes merely a collection of stories designed to teach spiritual truth.
6. **Futurist Approach:** This approach insists that the events of chapters 6-22 are yet future, and that those chapters literally and symbolically depict actual people and events yet to appear on the world scene. It describes the events surrounding the Second Coming of Jesus Christ (Chapters 6-19), the Millennium and final judgment (Chapter 20) and the eternal state (Chapters 21, 22). This view has the most reasons for acceptance and is the approach taken in this study.³

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

I. What You Have Seen (Chapter 1)

- The Prologue (1:1-8)
- The Vision of the Glorified Christ (1:9-18)
- The Apostle’s Commission to Write (1:19-20)

II. What is Now (Chapters 2-3)

- The Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1--3:22)

III. What Will Take Place Later (Chapters 4-22)

- Worship in Heaven (4:1-5:14)
- The Great Tribulation (6:1-18:24)

³ (MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* 1991). See also (G. G. Cohen 13-43; esp. p. 41)

- The Return of the King (19:1-21)
- The Millennium (20:1-10)
- The Great White Throne Judgment (20:11-15)
- The Eternal State (21:1-22:21)

BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING REVELATION

Principle No. 1: Whenever John saw things in the heavenly realm that were beyond human comprehension, he used metaphors to describe what he saw. Metaphors are usually identified as similes, words such as “like,” or “as” (Rev. 1:13-16; 8:8; 9:7; 10:1; 13:2, 11).

Principle No. 2: Be careful about forcing a meaning into a metaphor that isn’t there. Remember, for now we see these things dimly (1 Cor. 13:12).

Principle No. 3: Always approach a prophecy as literal (in its usual, ordinary meaning) unless one of the following occurs:

- The grammatical context shows that it is figurative language by the use of similes, metaphors, parables, allegories, symbols, or types.
- A literal interpretation violates common sense (i.e., it is contrary to what John is saying, or is contrary to what the rest of Scripture teaches).

Principle No. 4: When interpreting figurative or symbolic language in Revelation look for meanings:

- Within the surrounding context of the book in which the passage appears
- In any other writings of John
- In any other prophetic writings to which the John had access

Principle No. 5: When John refers to future events, he does not always use the future tense.

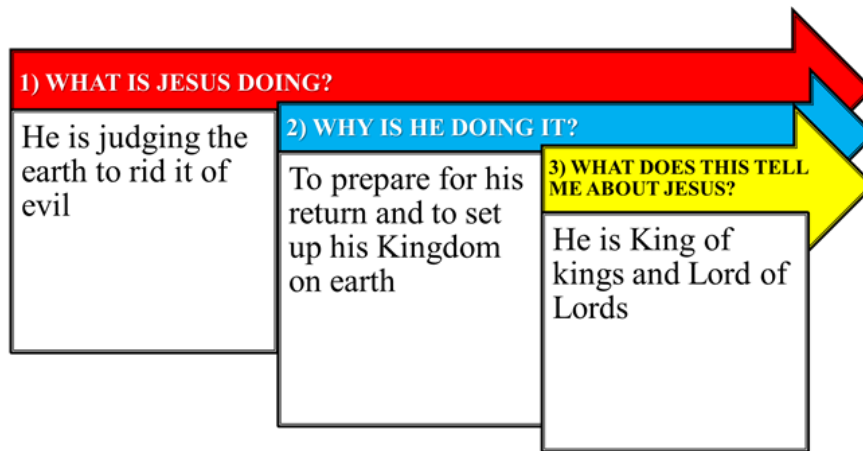
Principle No. 6: Consider the historical context of Revelation, remembering that God was delivering his prophecy to a particular people at a particular time.

Principle No. 7: Events in Revelation are not always disclosed in chronological order, and not all Bible scholars agree to the exact order of events.

Principle No. 8: The book of Revelation is about Jesus, so keep your eye on the ball (Jesus, and what he does), not just on the symbols and metaphors. The three important questions to ask when reading the book of Revelation are:

- What is Jesus doing?
- Why is he doing it
- What does this tell me about Jesus?

For example, in Chapters 6-18 as the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments take place these three questions can be answered as follows:



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As a Christian, what aspects of the future delight you the most?
2. How does an understanding of God's future plans encourage you when you go through difficult times today?
3. Why do you suppose God didn't give us much more information about the future?

NOTES
