

Some thoughts on reading Revelation today...

Revelation is often thought of as one of the most confusing and controversial books in the Bible. It is jam packed with visions, images and symbols that are strange (to say the least) and stretch our imaginations. Chapters on dragons and beasts and battles are enough to possibly scare and discourage the most devoted Bible reader. The writer of Revelation also has a way with numbers: 4 horsemen, 7 seals, 1000 years, 144 000 people. This complexity has spawned many weird, wacky and wonderful interpretations.

But, if you know the gospel of Jesus, and if you have read some of the Old Testament, Revelation need not seem so strange. As with any book of the Bible Revelation presents, often in dramatic, pictorial style: a powerful message about Jesus. Revelation is the epic, mind-blowing, visual blockbuster of the Bible. There is much to learn about God and his purposes for the world.

So, what are we to make of it all?

Historical background

Oppression - At the time of writing, persecution was only sporadic. It seems, however, that Revelation envisions escalating oppression. Caesar worship was rife but Judaism had an exemption. It was permitted outside of a person's country of origin. As might be expected, the Jews were beginning to dissociate from Christianity. This meant Christians were increasingly persecuted for practicing their faith.

Compromise - Some local churches were compromising with local cults and emperor worship. There were also false teachers (e.g. Nicolaitans, 2:6, 15) who were probably redefining apostolic tradition to fit with surrounding society.

Genre

An important step to understanding any book is to grasp the genre - the type of writing. Part of the issue with reading Revelation is that John has incorporated a number of genres.

Apocalyptic (1:1) - The revelation of Jesus Christ' is more literally, 'the apocalypse of Jesus Christ'. This locates the book in a category of literature that was many centuries old. Apocalyptic writing is highly charged, deeply symbolic, and presents a vision which looks beyond present miseries to God's salvation and judgement. Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah are important background reading because Revelation picks up on many of the images in these Old Testament books. The difference between OT and NT apocalyptic literature is key: whereas the material in the OT remained a secret, the material in the NT presents the secret revealed!

Prophecy – (1:3; 22:8:10; 18) – John declares, ‘Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy’ (1:3). Prophecy was widespread in early Christianity and is somewhat similar to apocalyptic writing. It conveys and reveals the word of God, centred on the Lord Jesus. People often think prophecy is just about the future, but this is too simplistic. Prophecy reveals the reality of ‘what is now and what will take place later’ (1:19) and more specifically prophecy is always pointing us to Jesus (Rev 19:10). This is especially the case in NT prophecy.

Letter (1:4:9, 22:8:10) - Revelation is also a letter/epistle. It has an author and a recipient (1:4, 9; 22:8). This means it is grounded in a real place, in a real time of history, with real people. Interpretations of Revelation that ignore this grounding are bound for trouble. If an interpretation cannot make sense to a first-century reader, it is not valid. Revelation is a letter written to encourage and strengthen believers in their particular situation. When we realise this, we are able to see how it applies to our situation.

Author - Probably John the apostle.

Options for reading Revelation

Throughout Christian history, three main theories have emerged:

Preterist - This view limits the interpretation of Revelation to the past i.e. fall of Jerusalem, fall of Roman empire. There is no application for later generations. But this view is overly narrow. Prophecies of final judgment were not finally fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem and have relevance for us and future generations.

Futurist - This view is the other extreme. It limits the interpretation of Revelation to the future, particularly to the end of the age i.e. Armageddon. But this view does not do justice to the needs of the original Christian readers. It also fails to understand the nature of symbolism.

Historicist - This view interprets Revelation as a forecast of the whole of history from John’s time through to the return of Christ. In other words, Revelation predicts the major movements of Christian history. The destruction wrought by Hitler is one example. But, again, there is little relevance to the original readers. There is also little agreement about which events qualify.

None of these views are sufficient. But there are helpful elements. We should consider what the original readers understood (~Preterist). The final overthrow of evil is certainly a part of Revelation (~Futurist). The book does preview history (~Historicist), but in the sense of major recurring themes rather than specific events. As we will see below, it is essential to recognise the centrality of the gospel of Jesus.

NOTE: Beale calls his view, ‘Eclecticism’. Barnett labels his interpretation, ‘prophetic-apocalyptic’. In other words, make up your own name!

Keys to reading Revelation

In his book, *Revelation: Apocalypse Now and Then*, Paul Barnett offers four keys to unlocking Revelation.

1) Centre on the gospel of Jesus

Revelation describes the reality that Jesus has established and will consummate when he returns. It is not so much about some sort of future battle i.e. Armageddon. Instead, the message of Revelation is focused firmly on what Jesus has already achieved in his life, death and resurrection for us. As Jesus himself says, 'I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever And I hold the keys of death and Hades. (1:17:18)' In other words, Jesus is God almighty, the victorious Saviour who died and rose again, the Lord who reigns over all. The whole book of Revelation spells out the implications of Jesus as Saviour and Lord in a world that appears to be falling apart.

In the end, this "key" is the most important. We need to centre on the gospel of Jesus and avoid getting stuck in the details. Vern Poythress puts it well,

'Revelation is a picture book, not a puzzle book. Don't become preoccupied with isolated details. Rather become engrossed in the overall story. Praise the Lord. Cheer for the saints. Detest the beast. Long for the final victory.'

2) Crack the code

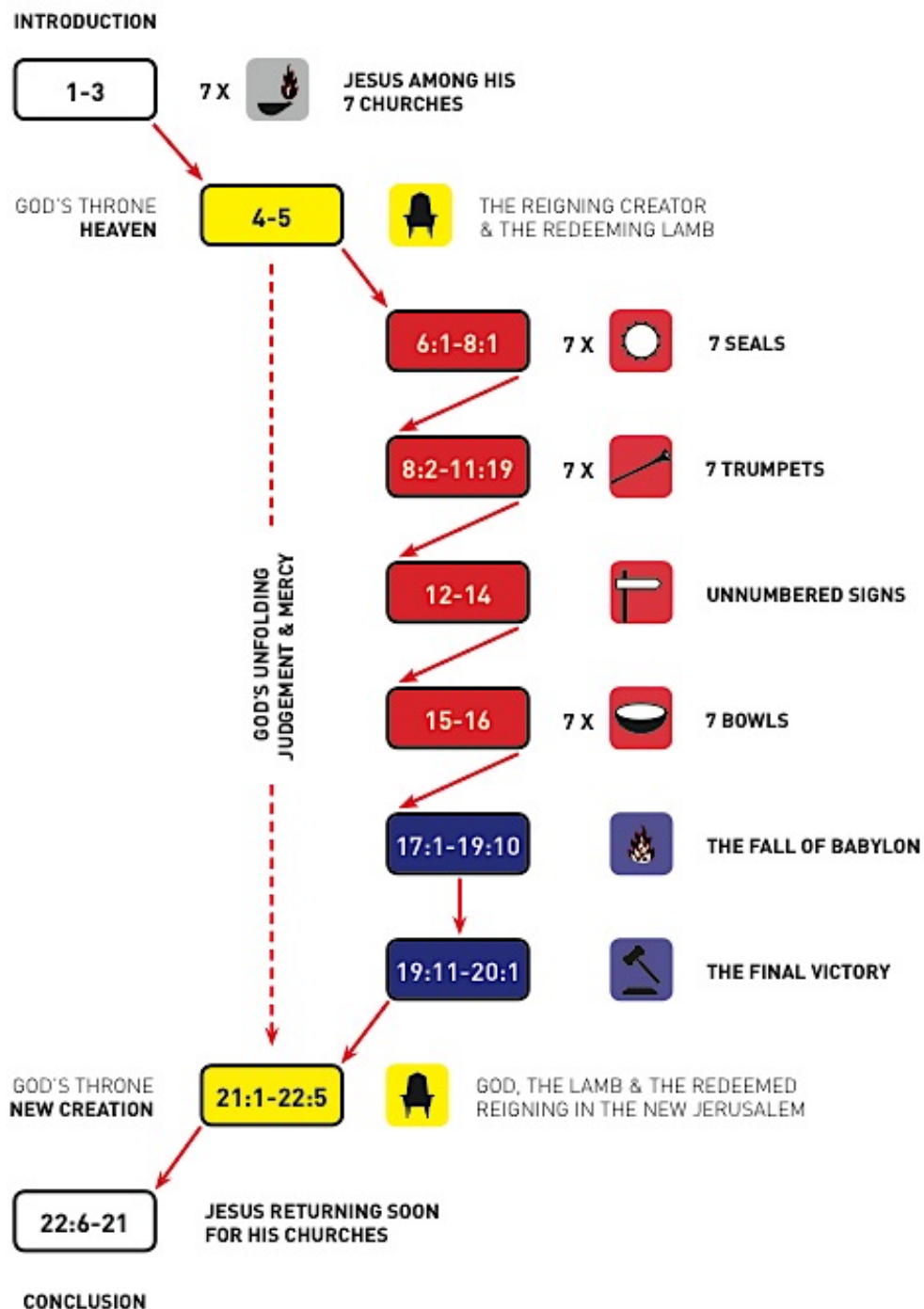
Having said that, it should be obvious to all that Revelation uses 'code'. It is not meant to be taken literally. This is typical of apocalyptic writing. Reading Revelation in the light of OT literature is absolutely essential. For instance, the imagery of the son of man picks up on Daniel 7; the description of the throne room parallels Ezekiel; the plagues mirror the 10 plagues in Exodus; and so on. For those who don't know the whole OT back:to:front (i.e. all of us), here is a cheat sheet with some clues:

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| •7 = completeness, God, eternity | •White = purity, victory |
| •6 = Satan's claim to be God | •Red = blood, war |
| •4 = completeness, especially worldwide | •Black = death, famine, distress |
| •3 1/2 yrs (42 mnths) = half of 7 i.e. period of history which will come to an end (unlike God and eternity) | •Pale = death |
| •12 = God's redeemed people, completeness, unity | •Lion = nobility, royalty |
| •10 = merely a round figure | •Ox = strength |
| •1000 = a great number, a long period of time | •Eagle = speed |
| <i>Perhaps you can now figure out what 144,000 might represent</i> | •Humankind = wisdom |
| | •Horn = power |
| | •Eye = knowledge, seeing |
| | •Right hand = authority |

3) Learn the layout

Revelation is a carefully structured book. It has an introduction (1:1-8) and a conclusion (22:8-21). Broadly speaking, it describes two visions: 1-3 and 4-22. Cycles of 7 occur within this basic structure (more details below).

The important thing to understand is that the cycles of 7 are not an end-on-end, straight-line view of history in advance. The cycles of 7 are different angles on the same reality. On top of this, the different perspectives are not so much about the future, but more about describing the reality of life between the first and second comings of Jesus. They describe the 'overlap of the ages' or the 'now-but-not-yet' stage of history. Once we understand the layout of Revelation as concurrent, not consecutive, many of the apparent difficulties disappear.



4) Perceive the parallelism

This point is similar to cracking the code but with a special emphasis. John deliberately sets up a series of positive and negative parallels.

The godly woman (12) and the great prostitute (17);

The new Jerusalem (21:22) and Babylon (18);

The lamb (5, 13) and the beast from the sea (13);

The community of Christ (7, 14, 21) and the community of the Beast (21:22).

The point of this is simple. John was writing satire - he boldly critiqued the worldly and evil structures of the day. This presents an urgent challenge to John's readers to worship the one, true God, not the counterfeit gods that Satan dangles before us.

Main themes

- ★ Suffering and victory - death of Jesus, defeat of Satan, salvation, judgement
- ★ The throne - God's sovereignty, question of evil
- ★ The new creation - motivation to persevere
- ★ Christians in the world - idolatry, compromise, witnessing
- ★ The theological meaning of symbols : open the eyes of some, blind others

Purpose

Beale summarises it well, *'the focus of the book is exhortation to the church community to witness to Christ in the midst of a compromising, idolatrous church and world.'*

Or maybe this quote floats your boat, *'The sovereignty of God and Christ in redeeming and judging brings them glory, which is intended to motivate saints to worship God and reflect his glorious attributes through obedience to his word.'*

Here at BBC... SEVEN Words to the Church

Here at BBC we will be preaching through the SEVEN letters to churches in Revelation 2-3. These letters deliver a powerful and relevant message for our lives today.

Each letter is addressed to a specific church community highlighting their strengths and weaknesses, urging them to overcome their challenges and remain faithful to Christ. The timeless lessons within these SEVEN letters serve as relevant guides, inspiring us to live faithfully and wholeheartedly as disciples of Christ.

Each week as we preach through these seven letters we will be aiming to focus on one major theme as Jesus' words of correction/encouragement/rebuke to the original church will still speak profoundly to us

THE SEVEN CHURCHES REVELATION 2-3

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1 EPHEBUS (2:1-7)

Positives = toil and patient endurance for Jesus' sake, abhorrence of evil and false teaching
Negatives = abandoned first love
Command = remember, repent and return to previous good works
Disobedience = will have their lampstand removed
Obedience = will eat from the tree of life

2 SMYRNA (2:8-11)

Positives = enduring opposition and slander and being spiritually rich
Negatives = none
Command = be faithful to the point of death
Disobedience = none
Obedience = will be given the crown of life and will not be hurt by the second death

3 PERGAMUM (2:12-17)

Positives = holding fast to Jesus' name and not denying his faith
Negatives = some have accepted false teaching
Command = repent
Disobedience = will face war from the sword of Jesus' mouth
Obedience = will be given hidden manna and a white encribed stone

4 THYATIRA (2:18-29)

Positives = love, faith, service and faithful endurance
Negatives = toleration of false teaching, idolatry and sexual immorality
Command = reject false teaching and hold fast to Jesus
Disobedience = tribulation and death
Obedience = will be given authority over the nations and given the morning star



5 SARDIS (3:1-6)

Positives = none
Negatives = spiritually dead and incomplete in works
Command = wake up, strengthen faith and repent
Disobedience = will be opposed by Jesus who will come like a thief
Obedience = will walk with Jesus, be clothed in white, will have names in the book of life and confessed by him before the Father and angels

6 PHILADELPHIA (3:7-13)

Positives = kept Jesus' word, not denied his name and patiently endured
Negatives = none
Command = hold fast
Disobedience = none
Obedience = will be kept from the hour of trial, made a pillar in the temple of God and have the name of God, New Jerusalem and Jesus written on them

7 LAODICEA (3:14-22)

Positives = none
Negatives = spiritually lukewarm, wretched, pitiable, poor and blind; need to buy spiritual gold and salve to become spiritually rich, clothed and seeing
Disobedience = be zealous, repent and hear Jesus' voice
Obedience = will eat with Jesus and sit with him on his throne

PATMOS (1:9)

An Aegean island south of Samos, where prisoners were exiled by the Roman authorities. John was sent here 'on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus' (1:9) and received his prophetic revelation during this stay.

Further reading

Apocalypse Now & Then (Paul Barnett) - Simple and accessible book. It has a helpful introduction outlining apocalyptic literature and the historical setting. Barnett leans more toward a Preterist view of Revelation.

Revelation for the Rest of Us (Scott Mcnigh) – A very helpful book in outlining how Revelation has been read in many varied and different ways and then presenting wonderful vision that by capturing our imagination, John calls us to be dissident disciples for Jesus in a compromised, broken and sinful world.

Gospel in Revelation (Graeme Goldsworthy) - It deals with the themes and big ideas in the book of Revelation. It is not intended as a details commentary but an attempt to show that the gospel is the key to understanding Revelation.

Revelation (George Beasley-Murray)[New Bible Commentary] : The New Bible Commentary is a must-have for Christians. The section on Revelation includes context and structure as well as a verse:by:verse analysis of the text. It is similar to *Apocalypse Now & Then*.

Revelation for Everyone (Tom Wright) - This belongs to a series of daily devotional books which aim to present scholarly work in an accessible way. It includes a short passage and then a few pages of explanation including illustrations and applications.

The Book of Revelation (Greg Beale)[NIGTC] - A comprehensive but totally dense commentary.