Revelation from 30,000 Feet
Reclaiming the Most Abused and Misused Book of the Bible

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Sample Chapter

The Interpretive Challenges of Revelation

As with any study of a biblical text, the more comprehensive the tools used for interpreting, the more complete a picture of the author's intended message and teachings. This is especially true of Revelation, considering it is one of the more difficult books to fully grasp. In this chapter, we outline a number of important tools, or filters, one needs to consider in order to navigate the book's overall theme and message. These specifically target the interpretive challenges of the book.

A lack, or dismissal of the importance of these tools is one of the reasons that has fueled the many interpretations over the centuries that are more in line with escapism, fearmongering, and spectacle. The downside of all that attention is its propensity to lean heavily on literary tropes and speculation, rather than a solid exegetical and historical understanding of the text.

The following is a listing of key elements that help to unlock the full depth and breadth of the book. As previously mentioned, you can think of them as essential tools, or filters, that greatly assist in interpretation. To ignore these tools is to enter the book ill-prepared to manage its multiple sources, which create the book's overall narrative. In my estimation, the application of these tools is the wisest path forward, through the various points raised here as a kind of litmus test to keep us grounded. Without them, it is easy to turn locusts into helicopters and any unlikeable leader into the antichrist.

A Book with Multiple Genres

Richard Bauckham writes, "Misrepresentations of Revelation often begin by misconceiving the kind of book it is."[1] Widely recognized as primarily apocalyptic, John merges it with other genres such as circular letter, prophecy, liturgy, and political text. Due to its many literary forms, Michael Gorman calls it a hybrid document.[2]

Admittedly, the bulk of the book is apocalyptic, but caution needs to be exercised as John uses various genres to carry his message. As Johnson points out, the book contains the longest letter in the Bible in which John writes to the seven churches (1:4-22).[3] John is a pastor addressing pastoral concerns to specific people in specific cities with specific needs at a specific time in history.[4]

The book also presents itself as a prophecy five times. The phrase, "to show the things which must shortly take place" (as found in 1:1) is repeated at the end of the book in 22:6, basically serving as a prophetic inclusio of the entire book.[5] We will expand on this aspect later in this chapter as it is important to understand the nature of prophecy and its primary purpose within Revelation.

There is a strong worship, or liturgical, as well as a political element to the book. Though not often seen as related, these two play an important role against each other. Gorman writes of Revelation as "resistance literature", writing to churches not to give in to a system already judged by God, but to call them to authentic worship of the one true God.[6] These elements of the book will be highlighted in the appropriate commentary sections, but for now, Revelation stands for appropriate worship while standing against any system that would promote otherwise.

Understanding John's Prolific Use of the Old Testament

John's apocalypse is replete with references to the Old Testament. It is here that John finds much of his foundational imagery, typology, symbols, theology, and allusions. Most contemporary believers have only a cursory understanding of the Old Testament, and consequently, have little awareness of John's extensive allusions to the Old Testament.

For John's contemporary audience, though, few would have missed his prolific borrowing from the Old Testament. As Beale has noted, allusions in the Book of Revelation, depending on how you define an allusion, can be anywhere from 394 to 1,000.[7] Johnson further confirms this by stating that there are more than 500 quotations and/or allusions to the Old Testament in his work.[8] Grant Osborne illustrates this further.

> "The book of Revelation uses the entire Old Testament as its playground. It has nearly as many allusions to the Old Testament as the rest of the New Testament put together. In order of frequency, John uses material from Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, the Psalms, and finally Genesis, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Joel, and Zechariah. Amazingly, there are only two word-for-word quotations (Rev 1:7; 2:28-29) but anywhere from 400 to 700 references, depending on whether one counts them as allusions or echoes. Allusions consist of near equivalence, and echoes are characterized by approximate parallels."[9]

John's usage of terms like Babylon, Armageddon, dragon, beast, New Heaven and New Earth, to name a few, would have resonated with John's audience of the time. These terms have import in their Old Testament context, which he exploits for his purposes in Revelation. As Johnson notes, "John paints his pictures in the language of the Old Testament.",[10] a fact that cannot be ignored when interpreting the primary message of the book. In other words, John's extensive use of the Old Testament demands our attention to this detail. We will especially focus on this aspect whenever we come to the relevant passages in the commentary section later on in this book.

Comprehending Apocalyptic Literature

Though we have noted Revelation as a book with a number of genres, the majority of the book does fall under the apocalyptic category. This is also the section that gives us the most interpretive difficulties. How do we understand its use of numbers, the many images, symbols, objects, and natural occurrences in the book?

The primary interpretive question is whether the book should be taken literally or symbolically. Due to the very nature of apocalyptic literature, with its propensity for symbolism and metaphor, the best approach is to respect the symbolic nature of the literature and interpret it as such. As Beale notes, the various things that are about to unfold refer symbolically to another reality or set of realities.[11] Unless there is evidence to the contrary, the visions of Revelation are to be interpreted in a non-literal way. This does not mean there is no meaning to the symbolism, for there is a literal meaning underlying the symbolic, typically within the context of Old Testament references, often alluding to spiritual, physical, or historical realities.[12]

Apocalyptic literature is virtually an unknown genre in our present day. This is a genre popular in ages past but has long been discarded as a mainstream form of writing. The closest we come to anything like this are the dystopian books and movies that have become popular of late. These are often cast in a post-apocalyptic world with the remnant survivors of a cataclysmic war that has left the Earth in ruins.

Dystopian movies rarely speak to hope or any thoughtful projections of the future. They tend to stand as visual accusations of generations past who warned of what would happen when we ignored the rising tide of environmental, religious, and political strife. Their overall posture is negative in tone, and dire in their estimation of humanity's ultimate fate.

Apocalyptic literature, at least the biblically inspired texts, has as a conclusion to the ruination and judgment, the hope for a new day and a new world. It is a genre that is often mediated by angelic beings who pull back the curtain into the heavenly realm while events on earth are being played out. It portrays a God who is sovereign and keenly aware of the conflict being played out on the earthly scene, yet orchestrating those events to his ultimate conclusion.

That conclusion is often portrayed in images of paradise or heaven, the end result for those who have persevered and remained faithful in the onslaught of earthly struggles. The duality of the scenes between heaven and earth serves as a comforting reminder that, unlike the dystopian versions of our present day, there is always hope for those who trust in things beyond the physical.

Revelation, for the most part, leans into apocalyptic symbolism for much of its messaging. The reasons for this are two-fold. For one, it was a common form of literature used to remind the

faithful of God's ultimate control over the events of history. Secondly, it served as coded language. A book that was critical of the Roman Empire, and any empire for that matter, would have quickly aroused the attention of the Romans. Especially since it was a document that was circulated amongst seven churches in Asia Minor. The way it was written would have garnered incredulity from the authorities, rather than scrutiny, which potentially protected the book from being restricted or destroyed outright. As Johnson has noted, as John wrote Revelation from his prison on Patmos, his writings would have been read by prison censors, and since they would not have comprehended its meaning, they would have dismissed them as the senseless ramblings of a man under stress.[13]

Comprehending John's Cultural Context and Reality

The Greco-Roman world was replete with icons, images, statues, architecture, rituals, and festivals that provided visual impressions of Roman imperial power and the splendor of pagan religions.[14] It was a world formed and fully immersed in empire. Rome was the dominant world power, and everywhere you turned was a reminder of that reality. Even the Roman pantheon of gods was "as expansionist and colonizing as Rome itself."[15] It is also a time that "as Rome conquered territories…it brought in new gods…into the state pantheon."[16]

It is into this cultural milieu that John writes. As believers who are living under the shadow of empire, John is presenting a counter-kingdom, rooted in a gospel that not only challenges the stated political posture of the time, but its entire social fabric as well.

Therefore, due to this cultural framework that exists for John, Revelation has strong socio-political overtones. As Kwok Phi-Lan writes:

> Christianity cannot be understood apart from empire. We cannot understand the Bible without knowing something about the struggles for survival of the Hebrew people under the Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian, Greek, and Roman Empires. Christianity began in the Roman Empire, in which Jesus and his early disciples lived as colonized peoples. Jesus died on the cross, which was a symbol of state terrorism and a form of torture and punishment for political rebels.[17]

Beyond the political implications, John's critique of empire throughout Revelation implies something far deeper and darker at work, something that has implications for the moral, ethical, and religious norms we adhere to. Empire is a by-product of a power ethic with profound social implications. Understanding the world in which John lived helps us to discern what aspects of his warnings have direct relevance for us today.

Misunderstanding the Prophetic Office

The Oracle of Delphi stood for hundreds of years as the altar from which kings and generals would question the oracle about their fates. Whether related to their fortunes in battle or the length of one's reign, the message of the Oracle was treated as a direct message from the gods.

That is the way most understand prophecy, a purely future-oriented prediction, pronounced by one claiming the office of a prophet or, at least, having the prophetic gift. For the majority of history, the role of a prophet has been understood in that way, across many different nations and disciplines. The one place where the definition differs is in the prophetic office of the Old Testament.

The primary role of an Old Testament prophet, among other things, was in calling the nation back to covenant loyalty. The Sinai Covenant became the document that defined the relational stipulations of the people to their God. It came with tangible blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. The New Testament Covenant is essentially the Gospel of Jesus Christ, built on the new commandment of love, something that Jesus himself proclaimed (see Luke 22:19-20; John 13:34).

One of the underlying interpretive problems with the book of Revelation is not seeing the prophecy in its pages primarily speaking to the covenantal responsibilities first and foremost, and any predictive elements as secondary. Calling people to live in faithfulness to God does not have the same gut-appeal that end-time predictions do, but nevertheless, such is the case. As Osborne notes in his commentary, "In the NT, eschatology always leads to ethics."[18] This is an ethic demonstrated and lived out by Jesus himself.

The future-oriented predictions of the Old Testament prophets were secondary to the primary message of calling people back to covenant fidelity. It was from there that predictions of exile or other judgments would be made when the nation did not comply. In other words, they served first and foremost as warnings for disobedience and also as a reminder of God's sovereignty, when the judgment or prediction became reality.

This does not negate the fact that Revelation has prophetic elements. What is being stressed here is that prophecy has a deeper purpose than just forecasting events and timelines. In the tradition of the Old Testament, John places himself in that tradition as someone who is exposing the world for what it is, and allows those with ears to hear and eyes to see to understand and comprehend the world in which we inhabit. What are the true forces at work around us and how can we recognize them and protect ourselves from their influence? Those influences impact significantly upon the people of God, who, without the voice of the prophet, may be slow to comprehend the growing shadow upon the world.

Comprehending Multi-Theological Composites

As already noted, John used the Old Testament extensively, but his usage was not one-dimensional, meaning he often did not reference only one Old Testament passage at a time. There are many instances where he formulates an image that has multiple references. In doing so, John draws numerous theological implications from the composite imagery he presents.

These multi-theological composites can be difficult to discern if one attempts to parse every nuance of the image, considering they encompass a number of references at once. It is most likely that John is using these composites intentionally for their comprehensive theological import, as well as the emotional responses they evoke. Many have recognized the role that imagination plays, as John seems to intentionally provoke our imagination throughout the text.

To our modern sensibilities, the images can seem bizarre at first, but John intends to evoke in the reader a sense of awe and wonder. The book not only becomes a theological canvas, but a canvas for human experiences, confronted with the divine. McKnight and Matchett remind us that "an apocalypse, by design, is an imagination-stimulating genre."[19] In using this terminology, it does not mean we are equating Revelation to something like "a hallucination or childish, silly ideas."[20]

Imagination does to the book of Revelation what music does to words.[21] John works the material in such a fashion that the book touches the reader and stimulates faith in God and his divine plan, not just on the theological level, but upon the emotional level as well. The multi-faceted composites that are presented throughout the book are, according to Bauckham, "capable both of considerable precision of meaning and of compressing a wealth of meaning into a brief space by evoking a range of associations."[22]

When Theological Speculation, Dates, and Timelines Become Dogma

I want to introduce you to what I call the Three Wisemen Problem. If you were to ask someone with limited knowledge about the Bible what they know about the wisemen in the Christmas story, most would likely say there were three and they visited Mary and Joseph at the manger.

How surprised do you think they would be when you tell them they are wrong on both counts? The Bible never says how many wise men there were, only that they brought three gifts. In all likelihood, they came with an entourage as well. They were also not at the manger, but arrived a short time afterwards when Mary and Joseph were in a home (Matthew 2:11). Imagine their surprise to hear the biblical account as opposed to the one that has been proliferated over time.

This is one example of a biblical story that becomes tradition and then becomes dogma. Unfortunately, Revelation, in some circles, has fallen under the distasteful category of dogma. In

some circles, unless you adhere to a particular understanding of certain numbers, symbols, and images, you aren't understanding the book properly.

This is also true of predictive dates and timelines. Many of us have seen the elaborate charts that outline the trajectory of timelines, some even attempting to match them to historical events. Our modern minds think in a linear chronological progression, while the biblical writers rarely thought in those terms. They were primarily focused on theology rather than chronology. Again, it's not about holding a particular view, but when that view treats all others as wrong, heretical, or as a reason to not associate with that person or group, the line into unhealthy dogma has been firmly crossed.

Similar to the dogma surrounding the story of the three wise men, certain interpretations of the book have taken hold, especially in the North American church context. The dangers of these myopic renderings are legion. As stated elsewhere, they often focus on some of the more extravagant passages while ignoring the essence of what John is attempting to convey. And that is if they have even interpreted the various signs and images in any way close to what John intended. If we are not careful, our interpretations, once elevated to dogma, become nothing more than idolatry, and anyone with a contrary view is considered an apostate.

A further danger is self-righteousness, a potent spiritual cancer that confronted Jesus when he walked the earth. Jesus often faced this spiritual problem when confronting the religious leaders of the time. It created in them a spiritual blindness, even though they felt they were seeing just fine (John 8). It is disturbing enough to cite the dangers of dogma as idolatry and self-righteous behavior, but these two are often conjoined to a third problem: testing God.

In Matthew 4:5-7, the Devil quotes Psalm 91 in an attempt to have Jesus prove himself as the Son of God by jumping off the highest point of the Temple. He quotes the Psalm as a way of saying to Jesus, "Don't worry, God will send his angels to protect you." Jesus' response is very telling: "The Scriptures also say, 'You must not test the Lord your God.'" This particular ailment is troublesome in modern evangelicalism. It presumes that just because I am a believer, I can expect to never experience difficulty or trials from God, and even act in ways that are contrary to God's revealed will, but expect him to protect me regardless.

Being rigid, to the point of dogma, in a book like Revelation, leaves one personally susceptible to treating their interpretation as the only viable one, which invariably produces in one's heart idolatry, self-righteousness, and places unwarranted expectations of God. It's nothing more than a form of divination. This is not to say that one cannot have a version they believe to be right, but to treat it as the only right one, to the exclusion of all others, is hubris indeed.

Finally, when God does not respond to our interpretations, expectations, or perceptions the way we thought he should, we often blame God, when in fact, we've been the culprits all along. One example is worth noting. How many have been disappointed each time a rapture has been

predicted and has, each time, inevitably failed to happen—even though Jesus himself warned against such proclamations (Matthew 24:36)?

The Dilemma of Certainty

This particular issue is an extension of the previous point. We have already acknowledged the difficulty in interpreting Revelation, yet many are uncomfortable being content with its mystery. There is a kind of arrogance that prompts us to have it all figured out, and if we can't, speculation abounds.

We have lost the willingness in our culture to accept the mystery — that not everything is easily placed into neat little boxes. Many believers have an inherent struggle with simply "trusting God." We hear this admonition throughout Scripture, yet in a culture that celebrates self-reliance and self-sufficiency, trusting God can almost sound defeatist, naive, or even lazy.

Even the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:12b admitted that "all that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely." This passage is in the context of Paul expressing the tension of what we understand now in this present form, in comparison to the extent of the full knowledge we will enjoy in Heaven.

Even though Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write some of the most profound doctrinal truths about the Christian faith, he accepts the fact that there still exists an element of mystery to what God has revealed (Ephesians 5:32; 1 Timothy 3:16). But mystery, especially when thinking of the future, is fraught with anxiety inducing reactions. Anything that can give us a clear sense of what tomorrow holds is preferred to the uncertainty that consumes the better part of our lives.

All of this is to simply reinforce the notion of the difficulty in parsing the Book of Revelation with absolute certainty. Let me be clear, we can fully comprehend its primary message and the many components within the book that reinforce it. But to not accept the fact that some mystery is intrinsic in the book, especially when it comes to the apparent timetable that some see in its pages, leans into the realm of arrogance.

What this section and the one previous are appealing to is a sense of humility when it comes to Revelation. Humility in our interpretation allows us to be open, not closed, to seeing God work his plan according to his timetable, not ours. It prevents us from becoming discouraged when our perceived timelines do not produce the outcomes our interpretation proposed. And when we are open in this way, we often see God working in ways and places that we otherwise would have missed.

With that said, let me posit a scenario for you.

Imagine for a moment you are a believer living during the period of silence between the Old and New Testament, a span of some four hundred years.[23] No divine revelation, no prophetic utterances, no text added to the final words of the Old Covenant. In fact, it would not have been uncommon to wonder if God had forgotten about the nation of Israel altogether.

What was lingering in the proverbial air of the time was a heightened expectation of the Messiah. No one knew how, when, or where the Messiah would arrive. By all accounts, the general perception was that he would come as a liberator of the people from whatever nation held them in bondage. This warrior-king would usher in the kingdom and re-establish his people as God's prized possession.

Imagine the initial disbelief when, after four hundred years of silence, God speaks to a teenage girl through the angel Gabriel with a promise that she would bear the long-awaited Messiah. Not only that, she would be impregnated by the Holy Spirit and bear a son who is no mere man, but the Son of God himself. He would grow in virtual obscurity and then begin a ministry of scant years that shakes the foundations of everything that has come before. To complicate matters further, this Messiah, in whom the nation has placed its hope for centuries, is crucified on a Roman cross in what would have felt like years of anticipation wasted.

Within the birth narrative of the Gospels, angelic visitations were necessary in order to keep God's plan in place. Joseph wanted to walk away thinking Mary had been unfaithful, and that would likely have transpired had Gabriel not come to set him straight. Angelic visitations were a big part of keeping all the human players in the birth story in line with God's unfolding plan.

Here is the point. No one, based on the Old Testament alone, could have predicted the birth of Jesus in all its unique details as presented in the Gospels. Passages that we easily reflect on from this side of the New Testament, such as Isaiah 7:14; 9:6; 53; Psalm 22:1, 7-8; Micah 5:2, and many more only became clearer after the fact. Even then, they would not have understood these passages in light of Roman crucifixion, let alone resurrection. After the resurrection, Jesus is walking with two men on the road to Emmaus, where he teaches them everything the Law and the Prophets said about him (Luke 24:13-35).

If there was so much uncertainty about the specifics of Jesus' first coming, why would we be confident in our ability to comprehend all the intricacies of the Second Coming, or what theologians call the Parousia? As with the first, the passages related to the Messiah's arrival were signposts to be aware of, not a complete blueprint. Similarly, Revelation serves as a signpost, but as we will see, it stands for much more.

As we delve into the commentary section later on in the book, these interpretive tools, or filters, will be presented in their respective chapters, as we attempt to navigate with integrity the

message of Revelation. As the subtitle of this book suggests, we hope to reclaim the heart of its primary message.

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[1] Bauckham, Richard. *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*. New Testament Theology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1993. Pg. 1.
[2] Gorman, Michael J. *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation*. Oregon: Cascade Books. 2011. Pg. 13.
[3] Johnson, Darrell W., *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey Through the Book of Revelation*. Vancouver, BC. Regent College Publishing. 2004. Page 25.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 25.
[7] Beale defines an allusion as a brief-expression consciously intended by the author to be dependent on an OT passage. G.K. Beale, *Handbook on the Old Testament Use in the New Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation*. Grand Rapids, Baker Academic. 2012. Page 31.
[8] Johnson, 23.
[9] Osborne, *Revelation: Verse by Verse*, 11.
[10] Ibid.
[11] G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation*. Grand Rapids. MI: Baker Academic, 2012. Page 12.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., 39.
[14] Bauckham, 17.
[15] Nadya Williams, *Cultural Christians in the Early Church: A Historical and Practical Introduction to Christians in the Greco-Roman World*. Grand Rapids, Zondervan Academic, 2023. Pg. xviii
[16] Ibid.
[17] Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global World*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox, 2021, pg. 77.
[18] Grant Osborne, *Revelation: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament.* Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI: 2002. Pg. 42.
[19] Scot McKnight and Cody Hatchett, Revelation for the Rest of Us: A Prophetic Call to Follow Jesus as a Dissident Disciple. Grand Rapids, Zondervan Reflective, 2023, page 26.
[20] Ibid., 27.
[21] Ibid., 30.
[22] Bauckham, page 22.
[23] What is meant here is a biblical text that became part of the canon of the Bible. This period was far from silent in that many extra-biblical, apocryphal, pseudepigraphal, and apocalyptic literature arose during this period.