

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

The Message of Revelation

To fully embrace Revelation's primary intention and message, there are two important facts to note concerning the book. Firstly, the people of the first century were not scratching their heads wondering what this book was communicating. It would be odd for John to write a message to the seven churches and then make it difficult for them to comprehend. The receiving churches didn't need a special decoder ring or algorithm. John needed to communicate something important and necessary for the churches and what they were facing in their present circumstances.

The Greek word for “revelation” or “apocalypse”, found in 1:1, means “an uncovering”, “disclosure”, or “unveiling.” The implication in what follows will not only be uncovered, but also understandable. John makes this even clearer in 1:3 where he writes, “God blesses the one who reads the words of this prophecy to the church, and he blesses all who listen to its message and obey what it says, for the time is near.”

Not only would they be able to understand it, but they were expected to obey what they were learning. Not only is there information that is important for them to know, but it also contains practical application for their lives.

Revelation, typically, is not considered a book of practical life application, and yet, this is one of the opening statements of the book's desired intent. Not only would the recipients of the letter to the seven churches gain spiritual insights, but practical day-to-day instruction as well. John's intention in writing the book was never meant to conceal but to reveal.

In 2 Peter 3:10-13, the apostle Peter is writing about the Day of the Lord, an Old Testament designation for the end of days here on earth. Notice what he says in light of knowing how the world will end:

¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and the very elements themselves will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be found to deserve judgment. ¹¹ Since everything around us is going to be destroyed like this, what holy and godly lives you should live, ¹² looking forward to the day of God and hurrying it along. On that day, he will set the heavens on fire, and the elements will melt away in the flames. ¹³ But we

are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world filled with God's righteousness.

The latter part of verse 11 is important to note: "... what holy and godly lives you should live." For Peter, an understanding of God's ultimate plan for the end is not something that drives us to look for signs of its unfolding but should compel us to live as authentically righteous followers. Peter does not lay out any kind of a chronological scheme for the end, but he does stress how we should live in light of it. Here, Peter is reinforcing the message that a knowledge of God's coming judgment is not a recipe for end-time speculations and predictions, but a motivator for living a life that is pleasing to God.

Secondly, any predictions that the book has generated over the years have all been wrong. There are countless stories of people predicting the date of Christ's return, the date of the rapture, and even the identity of the antichrist. We noted earlier the amount of trauma experienced by people who put their entire lives in a holding pattern awaiting a rapture that never came.

Granted, history is replete with seasons that can best be described as periods of tribulation, often mimicking the descriptions found in the book of Revelation, yet not one of these historical periods has resulted in the Second Coming.

I recently heard a well-known ministry leader say that the current rise in antisemitism was evidence that we were entering the end times. I instantly wondered if the person had ever studied the history of the Jewish people and what his intentions were for making such a statement. It is one thing to stand up and warn a culture of what you believe is coming, but it's another thing to do so in a way that is historically inept and inaccurate.

The overwhelming narrative, primarily in North America, that is often presented for Revelation is wholly inadequate and frankly, irresponsible. To treat the book as purely an end-times missive undermines its message for the present. It is this fascination with end-times projections that has fostered a community of believers who avoid it at all costs or pull to the other extreme of treating every disaster, natural or otherwise, as the beginning of the end.

It is here that we are indebted to Richard Bauckham, whose summary captures eloquently the argument of this section:¹

Revelation offers not an esoteric and encoded forecast of historical events but rather a theocentric vision of the coming of God's universal kingdom, contextualised in the late first-century world dominated by Roman power and ideology. It calls on Christians to confront the political idolatries of the time to participate in God's purpose of gathering all the nations into his kingdom. Once Revelation is properly grounded in its original context it is seen to transcend that context and speak to the contemporary church.

Scot McKnight goes even further in helping us understand the nature of Revelation's message once it has been grounded in its original context. He states the following:²

Revelation is not about prediction of the future but perception and interrogation of the present. It provides readers with a new lens to view our contemporary world...it is a projector that casts archetypal images of good and evil onto a cosmic screen.

Interpretive Schemes

In the previous chapter, we highlighted a number of interpretive challenges we face with Revelation, but here we want to summarize the basic interpretive schemes that have often been proposed for understanding the book as a whole. They are as follows:³

1. Preterists – Believe it was written to first-century churches about first-century topics.
2. Historicists – Revelation is a sketch of the history of the church from the first century until the end.
3. Futurists – The book is predominantly about the future and is concerned primarily with “end-times.”
4. Idealists - See Revelation as timeless images and truths about God, the church, the state, and God's plan for the world.

These tend to be the basic views that have been offered. On their own, each one of these interpretive schemes fails to capture the full depth, breadth, context, and genres of the book of Revelation, which is one of the inherent dangers of imposing a singular interpretive scheme over a text.

Others, such as Michael Gorman, in his book, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, have gone beyond these typical interpretive schemes and suggested others, such as political, or theopolitical, the pastoral-prophetic approach, and his most compelling, the Lamb-centred, cruciform interpretation strategy.⁴ In forming an interpretive scheme, one must recognize that the central image of Revelation is the Lamb that was slaughtered. The One who was sacrificed for the sins of the world is now the Resurrected One who is reigning in power and authority.

Therefore, to understand the message of Revelation is to understand the theocentric nature of its theology and its distinctive doctrine of God. This distinction is what Bauckham considers to be the greatest contribution to New Testament theology.⁵ Consequently, there will be a clear invitation in Revelation to a choice: Either follow the Lamb or side with the powers that stand in opposition to him.

Authorship: The John Who Wrote Revelation

The traditional view has been that John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee, who wrote the Gospel of John, also wrote the book of Revelation. The counterview proposes that another elder by the name of John, who ministered in the region of the seven churches, is the author.⁶

The John of Revelation was exiled to the island of Patmos, for no other reason but to remove him from his position of influence in Asia Minor; an influence characterized by his preaching and testimony of Jesus (1:9). His influence had to be significant to warrant the attention of the Roman Empire and his subsequent imprisonment on Patmos.

An early church historian, Eusebius, writes that John was released to Ephesus after the emperor Domitian's death in 96 AD.⁷ For our purposes, we hold to the traditional view of the apostle John as the author, though the matter has not been settled conclusively to be dogmatic. Regardless of who this John was, his stature in the early church had to have been significant.

This reinforces an earlier point as to why John used apocalyptic imagery as a means of masking his true message from the prying eyes of his captors. If John was a threat to the empire and imprisoned for his message about Jesus, how much more a letter meant for public consumption and distribution that warned of the dangers of that very empire?

Despite his imprisonment, John's criticism was not only focused on Rome, as one might expect, but on the church as well. To absolve the church of the book's denunciation would be to lose altogether the message that John has for the communities of faith. Revelation is relatively ignored as a book of practical life application; but it is even more than this. It is a book on discipleship. What does it mean to follow Jesus under an empire that exists by values and principles diametrically opposed to the Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated?

Looking at the various letters addressed to these communities of faith, John relates how Jesus is not altogether impressed and is calling those within the church who are in danger of apostasy to come clean. For if they continue in their present ways, they may be subject to the judgments to come. The apostle Peter wrote that judgment must begin with the household of God (1 Peter 4:17). Though the book of Revelation is often touted as a book of victory for the church, it does so by first challenging believers to persevere in faith, setting aside the sins that are weighing them down, if any hope for victory is to be won.

One of the keys to reading Revelation well is to see the dual critique of the empire and the church.⁸ As this letter was circulated among the seven churches, it was likely read out loud, and maybe even performed as a type of skit. This was common in John's time, as the letter would have been presented as a form of art, with the performer having likely memorized the book and changing voices and inflections during the production. There would be pauses as people asked questions, which would have made the entire presentation quite lengthy.⁹

All that to say, few would have missed the personal challenge being presented to each of the churches. Especially when one considers that each letter describes the unique situation of each church. The call for a return to holy and righteous living, and to do away with anything remotely resembling an idol, would have been easily discerned amidst the warnings of the empire and how it had infiltrated the church.

The Four Major Themes

Revelation revolves around four major themes. They are listed here but will be fully expounded in the concluding chapter following the commentary section. Presenting these now will allow the recognition of these themes when they appear in the commentary. The original idea was first presented by Robyn Whitaker, who listed three themes; however, I have added a fourth which I feel was a necessary addition.¹⁰ The four themes are as follows:

1. *Worship*

In the Book of Revelation, worship is what defines allegiance. Am I on the side of Jesus or the side of Babylon? Further, worship in the context of Revelation defines eternal destiny. For those whose lives are lived in faithful obedience to the Lamb, theirs is the promise of eternity in the New Heavens and New Earth.

2. *Witness*

Jesus is called the faithful witness in Revelation 1:5 and 22:20, serving as a type of inclusion for the faithful believers throughout the book. Jesus, is our example as believers and throughout Revelation, believers stand as witnesses of Jesus.

3. *Waiting*

Perseverance is a key theme in the book and perseverance is an outworking of patience. Not just any kind of patience, but one that rests solely by trusting in God, especially during times when experiencing some of life's harshest ordeals. This theme of perseverance is especially seen in the messages to the seven churches in chapters 2-3, a theme that is carried throughout the remainder of the book.

4. *Warning*

Revelation is full of warnings, especially to believers. The warnings primarily center on the need to recognize the work of the evil one who is mimicking in counterfeit ways the persons of the Trinity. It is the battle between two kingdoms and the danger of compromising faith.

I am not necessarily a fan of alliteration but as it pertains to Revelation, it happens to work. The theological and practical message of the book are well-served in these four categories. Each theme has implications for both believer and non-believer, as we will see in the commentary section that follows and in the concluding chapter.

Lastly, Revelation is a hope-filled book, contrary to the perception of many. As stated by the adage that the first step to solving a problem is to recognize and admit it, it can be argued that Revelation exposes the presence of evil, darkness, power, deception, control, counterfeits, and a host of other realities, both spiritual and physical, that distort our world and God's original intent for it. In exposing these, it simultaneously presents truth, raw and unabashed, through some of the most creative imagery imaginable.

As we prepare to enter the commentary section and begin our journey through the text and context of Revelation, these words from Gorman serve as a fitting reminder of the task before us: "How one reads, teaches, and preaches Revelation can have a powerful impact on one's own – and other people's – emotional, spiritual, and even physical and economic well-being. Therefore, interpreting the book of Revelation is a serious and sacred responsibility, not to be entered into lightly."¹¹

¹ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, back cover.

² McKnight, *Revelation for the Rest of Us*, 12.

³ For an overview of the major interpretive schemes, see Kenneth L. Gentry, Sam Hamstra, C. Marvin Pate, and Robert L. Thomas, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

⁴ Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 63-68.

⁵ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 23.

⁶ Other potential authors have been proposed but these are the two most common options.

⁷ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.20.10-11.

⁸ McKnight, *Revelation for the Rest of Us*, 23.

⁹ See McKnight and Matchett for a fascinating section on Revelation and Imagination in *Revelation for the Rest of Us*, 26-33.

¹⁰ Whitaker, *The Bible for Normal People*, 9. She lists worship, witness, and waiting as the main themes, while I have added the fourth, warning.

¹¹ Michael Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, pgs. xiii-xiv.