

Ten Keys for Interpreting the Book of Revelation

Edwin Reynolds
Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies
Silang, Cavite, Philippines

The book of Revelation is at once one of the most important books of the Bible for many Christians, yet one of the most difficult books to understand. It holds a unique place in biblical interpretation. We need some keys to unlock its special apocalyptic message. This paper focuses on ten keys which should aid the interpreter of Revelation in coming to terms with its unique nature. The ten keys we will discuss are (1) the genre of the book; (2) the purpose of the book; (3) the structure of the book; (4) the roots of Revelation in Old Testament (OT) theology and prophecy; (5) the essential unity of the book; (6) the ethical dualism of the book, especially in the Great Controversy theme; (7) the important theological themes; (8) the book's sanctuary emphasis; (9) the distinctions between the symbolic and the literal, with particular attention to numerology; and (10) the message of Christ, as opposed to a schematization of history.

The Genre of Revelation

Revelation claims to be a prophecy. In the prologue of the book, a blessing is pronounced upon the one who reads, hears, and takes to heart the words of "this prophecy" (1:3). Again, in the epilogue, we find a similar saying, pronounced by Jesus Himself: "Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book" (22:7).¹ An angel tells John in 22:10, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book." This same angel apparently regards John as among the prophets, because he speaks in v. 9 of "your brothers the prophets." Revelation is called a prophecy twice more in 22:18-19.

¹All Scripture quotations in this paper are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

To say Revelation is a prophecy, however, is to tell only part of the story. Revelation is a very special kind of prophecy. Not only is it the only book of the New Testament (NT) that deals almost exclusively with the future, but it is also the most thoroughgoing example of biblical apocalyptic prophecy. It is the book from which the genre apocalypse takes its name. Though it was not the first apocalyptic work, it is the most characteristic and well known of all apocalyptic works. The very first word of the book is *apokalypsis*, meaning an unveiling, uncovering, or revealing of something previously hidden. From this word we get the name Revelation. Many things that were previously hidden regarding the future are now revealed in this book.

Revelation also has elements of an epistle. Following the preamble in 1:1-3, there is a typical epistolary introduction in vs. 4-5, following a style similar to that of the Pauline epistles. First, the name of the writer is given, followed by the identification of the addressees. Finally, there is a salutation, wishing grace and peace to the recipients from the triune Deity. In the subsequent vision of 1:9-3:22, seven letters are dictated by the glorified Christ to John, to be sent to the seven churches named in 1:11. Each of these letters, in turn, follows a slightly modified epistolary form in which the recipients are named before the author identifies Himself. Instead of a salutation at the beginning, Jesus moves directly to the point: "I know your deeds," but ends with an individual appeal and promise to each church. The book itself also ends with an epistolary close composed of appeals and promises and a final benediction: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen."

The genre of Revelation, complex as it may be, nevertheless offers us some keys for its interpretation in harmony with the function of each aspect of the genre. As a prophecy, we can expect it to speak to us prophetically, bringing a message direct from God, not from man. This is the substance of the first three verses of the book, assuring us that the message is from God, sent via His own appointed channels of revelation, and that there is a blessing in properly receiving it. John designates it as "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ" (v. 2), signifying that it carries the twofold witness that ensures its authority and veracity. We cannot afford to neglect it. Many today prefer not to consider its claims to prophetic authenticity as valid. Yet it has stood the test of time, and we ignore its claims to our own detriment. We will never be able to correctly interpret the book if we begin by denying the claims it makes to speak prophetically.

Secondly, the nature of its prophetic character is explicitly oriented toward the future. Since we will consider this aspect later, when considering the purpose of the book, I will not elaborate here, but the book claims to reveal the future. It represents that aspect of prophecy that looks into the future and reveals things to come. If Revelation is not accepted as actually foretelling the future, one will see only a feeble attempt at *post eventum* prophecy, which makes it a

REYNOLDS: TEN KEYS FOR INTERPRETING REVELATION

book of history that has little relevance for later generations. This is the approach of the preterist school of interpretation.²

Thirdly, as apocalyptic prophecy, we need to recognize that Revelation differs in a number of significant ways from classical prophecy. Its primary purpose is not to deal with local, contemporary issues, but with the sovereignty of God in history and His broad, salvation-historical plan for the redemption of His covenant people and final judgment on their enemies. Apocalyptic is known for its cosmic sweep and eschatological emphasis, among other things.³ This means we should not look for a narrow, local fulfillment of its visions, but should see the broad outlines of history from the time of John until the return of Christ to render judgment on sin and sinners, gather His covenant people, and establish His eternal kingdom. All history is moving toward this end and should be seen from this perspective. The great controversy between Christ and Satan is a major theme of Revelation, and there is a striking ethical dualism apparent that we will discuss later in greater detail. The symbolism is extensive and composite, challenging us to understand it at a figurative level, but one consistent with established biblical criteria and practice.

The epistolary aspects of the genre remind us that, as with the other NT epistles, there is both a theological and a parenetic purpose to the book. The theological elements serve as a foundation for the parenetic elements. The appeal is very personal.

The Purpose of Revelation

The book of Revelation has both an explicit and an implicit purpose. The explicit purpose is clearly stated in the very first verse of the book: “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.” According to this verse, God gave to Jesus a revelation to pass along to His servants, for the purpose of showing them what must soon take place. This explicit purpose makes plain the future orientation of the contents of the prophecy of this book. At the same time, it conveys a sense of the immi-

²An example of this way of thinking is found in J. Christian Wilson, “The Problem of the Domitianic Date of Revelation,” *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993): 602: “How do you tell a genuine prophecy from a *vaticinium ex eventu*? Answer: *Vaticinia ex eventu* always come true.” Again, he writes, “*Vaticinia ex eventu* always come true. Genuine prophecies usually do not” (ibid., 603). In a strange twist of logic, he argues that John was a true prophet who was wrong about his predictions regarding Nero in 11:1-2 (as he assumes), so his prophecies must have been written before the actual events or they would not have been proven wrong (ibid., 603-4).

³For a fuller description of the characteristics of apocalyptic, see, for example, Kenneth A. Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation: Hermeneutical Guidelines, with Brief Introductions to Literary Analysis*, 2d ed. (Naples, FL: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1979), 18-20; idem, “Foundational Principles of Interpretation,” in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 1: Introductory and Exegetical Studies (Sympos. 1)*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 6:12-27.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

nence of the coming events, for it states that these events “must soon take place.” Verse three adds that those who read or hear and take to heart the words of this prophecy are blessed, “because the time is near.” This clause, “the time is near,” is expressed again in 22:10.

In 4:1, at the beginning of the section of the book often considered historical in focus, John is invited by Christ, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” Again we see the future as a key aspect of the prophecies of the book. The sense of imminence is also conveyed explicitly at different points in the book (3:11, 20; 6:17; 10:6; 11:15, 17-18; 12:10, 12; 14:7, 14-16; 16:15; 19:1-9), keeping expectation alive in the minds of the readers and hearers. At the end of the book, the recipients are told three times by Jesus Himself, “I am coming soon!” (22:7, 12, 20).

Besides this explicit purpose of revealing the future as imminent expectation, there seems to be an implicit purpose that coincides. This is found in the repeated calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the readers and hearers. Apocalyptic prophecy is given to meet the needs of those who are facing adversity. The precise nature of the adversity faced by the readers of Revelation has been debated by scholars, but there is little question that the book seems to have been written especially for those facing difficult times, including persecution. Jesus appeals to believers to hold fast till He comes, even unto death, so they will not lose their crown of life (2:10, 25; 3:11). There are further calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints who face the persecuting Beast in 13:10 and 14:12. Many promises are made to the ones who overcome, despite the obstacles, by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony (2:7, 11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 21:7). This suggests the parenetic purpose of the book, to encourage those facing trials and persecutions to be faithful until the end, in light of God’s sovereignty, the victory of the Lamb, and the promises of coming vindication and reward for the saints and judgment on their enemies.

The Structure of Revelation

There is very little scholarly consensus on the overall structure of Revelation.⁴ Nevertheless, there are a few key structural elements that most will agree upon, and these are important for any careful study of the book.

Probably the most important structural element is the division of the book into two main parts, one emphasizing primarily salvation-historical events and the other emphasizing primarily eschatological events. Most scholars divide the book between chapters 11 and 12, the point which H. B. Swete calls a “great

⁴Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Harvard Dissertations in Religion, no. 9 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1976), 8; Donald Guthrie, *The Relevance of John’s Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987; Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster, 1987), 20.

REYNOLDS: TEN KEYS FOR INTERPRETING REVELATION

cleavage” in the book of Revelation.⁵ However, a number of Seventh-day Adventist scholars follow Kenneth Strand’s chiastic structure, which places the division between chapters 14 and 15.⁶ Roy Naden’s recent commentary proposes a chiasm which divides the book between 12:10 and 12:11.⁷ In reality, chaps. 12-14 constitute a unit which contains a mix of both historical and eschatological events, making it difficult to assign it exclusively to either section. Chapters 12-14 could be called the Great Controversy vision, a vision that points all the way backward to the beginning of rebellion in heaven and points forward to the glorified redeemed standing victorious with the Lamb on Mt. Zion. In any case, chaps. 1-11 fall in the historical section of the book and chaps. 15-22 fall in the eschatological section of the book. The contents of these sections must be interpreted accordingly. The visions of chaps. 1-11 deal primarily with events that would occur between John’s day and the parousia, while the visions of chaps. 15-22 deal primarily with events that take place at the eschaton and beyond. Since the historical visions generally cover events up to the eschaton, obviously there will be eschatological events found at the end of those visions, in particular, 6:14-8:1 and 11:15-19. It is hazardous for the interpreter to stray from this structural guideline.

A second important structural element is the explicit use of septenaries throughout the book. There are four: seven letters, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls.⁸ Some authors have attempted to structure the whole book according to septenaries,⁹ but this may be going beyond what is self-evident,

⁵Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John: The Greek Text with Introduction Notes and Indices*, [3d ed.] ([New York]: Macmillan, [1909]; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1951]), xxxix; see also David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis,” *Interpretation* 38 (1984): 44-45; Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 111-12; Martin Hopkins, “The Historical Perspective of Apocalypse 1-11,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27 (1965): 43; J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 62.

⁶Kenneth A Strand, “The Eight Basic Visions in the Book of Revelation,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies (AUSS)* 25 (1987): 107-21; C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares*, Vol. 2, *The Message of Revelation for You and Your Family* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1985), 55-62; “Issues in Revelation: DARCOM Report,” in *Sympos. 1*, 177.

⁷Roy C. Naden, *The Lamb among the Beasts* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1996), 20-21. Cf. Hans K. LaRondelle, *How to Understand the End-Time Prophecies of the Bible* (Sarasota, FL: First Impressions, 1997), 105.

⁸Since the seven thunders are not elaborated, they do not constitute a structural septenary.

⁹Austin Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St John’s Apocalypse* (London: Dacre [A. & C. Black], 1949; repr., Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1970), 36; John Wick Bowman, “The Revelation to John: Its Dramatic Structure and Message,” *Interpretation* 9 (1955): 440-47; R. J. Loenertz, *The Apocalypse of Saint John*, trans. Hilary J. Carpenter (London: Sheed & Ward, 1947), xiii-xviii; Ernst Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament, vol. 16 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1926), 1-2, 181-82.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

although evidence for some other septenaries has been frequently adduced.¹⁰ The explicit septenaries form literary units which should be held together. Each of these literary units has an introduction which, except the first, reveals events taking place in the heavenly sanctuary while the events of the respective septenaries are taking place on earth.¹¹ These introductions cover the whole period represented by the respective septenary, not just its beginning.¹² Taken together with their introductions, these explicit septenaries cover most of the book of Revelation, leaving only the prologue, chaps. 12-14, chaps. 17-22, and the epilogue unaccounted for. If chaps. 12-14 constitute a unit, as noted above, then only chaps. 17-22 remain to be structured. Various proposals have been made, none of which is decisive. We cannot solve the problem within the limits of this brief discussion, but we can know that they are eschatological and deal with the judgment on God's enemies and the final reward of the saints.

Other important structural features include the prologue and epilogue, which include an epistolary introduction and conclusion and manifest remarkable similarities; recurring parallel themes and symbols which tie the book together as a unit (to be discussed later); possible chiasms;¹³ and recapitulation of the historical visions, each covering the period from John's day to the parousia, in different ways, for different purposes.

The Relation of Revelation to the Old Testament

No other book of the NT draws on the Old Testament (OT) as heavily as does the book of Revelation. It is steeped in OT theology and prophecy. Unless one understands and appreciates this fact, one cannot fully grasp the meaning of the book. John is heavily indebted to the OT for much of the theology, vocabu-

¹⁰Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, while seeing septenaries as a compositional technique that is decisive for the structuring of the book, and at the same time outlining the book in a seven-part "concentric" pattern, criticizes those who reconstruct the book into seven series of sevens for "their failure to explain why the author clearly marked four series of seven but did not mark the others, even though the existing septets prove that he was quite capable of doing so." Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 167, 174-75. See also Martin Kiddle, assisted by M. K. Ross, *The Revelation of St. John*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1940), xxxii.

¹¹Kenneth Strand identifies introductions to each of the eight basic visions he finds in the book. Strand, 112-18; idem, "The 'Victorious-Introduction' Scenes in the Visions in the Book of Revelation," *AUSS* 25 (1987): 267-88.

¹²Jon Paulien, "Seals and Trumpets: Some Current Discussions," in *Sympos.* 1, 194-95.

¹³This is a controversial area, since chiasms are often forced on the text rather than found to be natural and self-evident in the structure. Literary parallels are sometimes turned into chiasms. For chiasmic studies in Revelation, see Strand, "Eight Basic Visions," 107-21; idem, "Chiastic Structure and Some Motifs in the Book of Revelation," *AUSS* 16 (1978): 401-8; idem, "Two Aspects of Babylon's Judgment Portrayed in Revelation 18," *AUSS* 20 (1982): 53-58; William H. Shea, "Chiasm in Theme and by Form in Revelation 18," *AUSS* 20 (1982): 249-56; idem, "Revelation 5 and 9 As Literary Reciprocals," *AUSS* 22 (1984): 249-57; idem, "The Parallel Literary Structure of Revelation 12 and 20," *AUSS* 23 (1985): 37-54.

REYNOLDS: TEN KEYS FOR INTERPRETING REVELATION

lary, and symbolism of Revelation, although it is always Christologically informed. This is not to suggest that John did not receive his messages in visions, as he claims, but rather to accept the reality that John saw things remarkably similar to those shown to the OT prophets and found it convenient to describe what he had seen by utilizing the language and thought forms of the OT, which were familiar to him and were brought forcibly back to his mind by his own visions. The extent of this indebtedness has been shown well in the recent work by Hans K. LaRondelle, *How to Understand the End-Time Prophecies of the Bible*.¹⁴

John's prophecies are rooted in the OT prophecies, particularly those of the major and apocalyptic prophets. John's theology and salvation-historical perspective are a Christological and ecclesiological extension of that of the OT prophets. To attempt to understand Revelation without a thorough recognition of the OT roots to which John's prophecies continually allude is to program oneself for failure. Revelation cannot be understood apart from its constant allusive reference to the OT. Yet even here one must exercise caution, for John does not merely *transfer* OT concepts to Revelation; he *transforms* them for his own purposes.

Interestingly, there are no direct quotations, or even citations, of the OT in Revelation, only backgrounds to which John seems to point by indirect reference, or allusion. These allusive OT backgrounds can be evaluated fairly objectively following a methodology established by Jon Paulien. He has suggested ways of evaluating the level of certainty with which texts may be deemed to function as allusive backgrounds for understanding the contents of the book of Revelation, based on verbal, thematic, and structural parallels between them.¹⁵ By using such objective tools and methods, we are able to make safer interpretations than with more subjective reference to OT texts as backgrounds to the book.

The Unity of Revelation

In the early twentieth century there were a few proposals for source-critical theories regarding the origin of the book of Revelation that disputed its unity.¹⁶ This is no longer the case. Most scholars today agree on the unity of the

¹⁴Hans K. LaRondelle, *How to Understand the End-Time Prophecies of the Bible* (Sarasota, FL: First Impressions, 1997).

¹⁵Jon Paulien, *Decoding Revelation's Trumpets: Literary Allusions and Interpretations of Revelation 8:7-12*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 11 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1988), 165-94; idem, "Interpreting Revelation's Symbolism," *Sympos. 1*, 83-92.

¹⁶Perhaps the best known of these was that of R. H. Charles, put forward in his commentary, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), 1:lxv. Such theories were reviewed and rebutted by Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary* ([New York]: Macmillan, 1919; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 216-39.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

book.¹⁷ The complexity of the structure, interconnected as it is, is one of the compelling arguments for its unity. David Aune writes:

The Apocalypse of John is structurally more complex than any other Jewish or Christian apocalypse, and has yet to be satisfactorily analyzed. Like other apocalypses, it is constructed of a sequence of episodes marked by various literary markers such as the repetition of formulaic phrases (“I saw,” “I heard,” etc.), and by such literary devices as ring composition, intercalations (though never interrupting narrative sequence), the technique of interlocking (the use of transitional texts that conclude one section and introduce another), and various structuring techniques (the use of septets and digressions).¹⁸

One portion of the book of Revelation is frequently interpretable by recourse to another, simply by cross-referencing the imagery or language. For example, the mention of the Beast that comes up from the abyss in 11:7 and the mention of the great city which is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt in v. 8 may seem somewhat obscure in that context until one compares the language with chap. 17, where the great city and the Beast that comes up from the abyss are more fully described and explained. Many similar examples exist throughout the book.¹⁹ Thus, the unity of Revelation permits the book to interpret itself in many areas, supplemented, of course, by OT allusive backgrounds, guided by verbal, thematic, and structural parallels to various OT texts and contexts.

The Ethical Dualism of Revelation

One of the prominent characteristics of Johannine literature is its ethical dualism. This is no less characteristic of Revelation than it is of John’s Gospel or his Epistles. Ethical dualism refers to the clear and essential contrast between good and evil, no matter in what ways it is manifest or characterized. This dualism is especially manifest in Revelation in the Great Controversy motif, which

¹⁷Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Revelation,” in *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Eldon J. Epp and George W. McRae, The Bible and Its Modern Interpreters (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 411; Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 37-52.

¹⁸David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, Library of Early Christianity, vol. 8 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 241.

¹⁹For other examples of internal parallels that aid interpretation, cf. 1:1 and 22:6, 10; 1:3 and 22:7, 12, 20; 1:8 and 4:8, with 21:5-6 and 22:13; 1:14-15 and 2:18; 1:16, with 2:16 and 19:15, 21; 1:17-18 and 22:13; 2:7 and 22:2; 2:11 with 20:14 and 21:8; 2:28 and 22:16; 3:3 and 16:15; 3:4-5 and 7:9, 13-14, with 19:8; 3:12 and 21:2, 10; 4:1 and 1:10; 5:5 and 22:16; 5:10 and 20:4, 6; 6:10 and 19:2; 6:17 and 7:9; 7:3-4 with 14:1 and 22:4; 7:17 with 21:4, 6 and 22:1, 17; 8:1 with 17:12 and 18:8, 10, 17, 19; 9:1, 11 with 12:4, 9 and 20:1-3; 9:14 with 16:12 and 17:1, 15; 10:1 and 1:13-16; 11:1-2 and 21:15-17; 11:2-3, with 12:6, 14 and 13:5; 11:16-17 and 19:6; 11:19 and 15:5; 12:3 with 13:1 and 17:3, 9-10, 12; 12:9 and 20:2-3; 12:15 and 17:15; 12:17 with 19:10 and 22:9; 14:8 and 18:2-3; 14:9 with 13:15-17 and 20:4; 14:12 and 12:17; 14:19-20 and 19:15; 16:6 with 17:6 and 18:24; 16:13 with 19:20 and 13:14; 17:1-5 and 21:9-11; 17:14 and 19:16; 19:9 and 21:9.

REYNOLDS: TEN KEYS FOR INTERPRETING REVELATION

is centered in chap. 12. It begins with the war in heaven between Michael and the Dragon, and continues in the struggle on earth between the Dragon-Beast, including his heads and horns (earthly civil powers which accomplish his purposes), and the pure Woman and her offspring, first the Male Child (the messianic Lamb Himself), then the rest of her offspring. The pure Woman is also shown in contrast to a great Harlot, a religio-political power which reigns over the kings of the earth and is held responsible for the blood of all the saints and prophets. The symbol of the pure Woman, in the eschatological age, is transformed into the Bride of the Lamb by whose blood her children have overcome the Dragon. The two women are also depicted as two cities in Revelation: the Harlot is the great city variously characterized as Sodom, Egypt, and Babylon, while the Bride is the Holy City, the new Jerusalem.²⁰ The Dragon, the Beast (from the sea), and the False Prophet (the Beast from the earth) seem to form a triumvirate on earth (16:13) that constitutes a counterpart of the heavenly Trinity (1:4-5).

This ethical dualism is far-reaching in Revelation. There is little room for any middle ground in the book. Most things belong to either one camp or the other. Any rational being, at least, cannot be neutral. One may be temporarily identified with the wrong camp (e.g., 2:2, 9, 13, 20; 3:9; 18:4), but one belongs innately to one or the other. The reader or hearer of the book is enabled to quickly identify which side is the right one to be on and what decisions need to be made to place oneself on that side. Once the two sides are clearly identified, it remains for the reader or hearer to choose which side he or she will be identified with and to be faithful to that decision until the end.

Important Theological Themes in Revelation

The book of Revelation is primarily concerned with a few theological issues. One important issue is the sovereignty of God. Another is the question of the justice of God. A third important issue is the process of salvation. A fourth is the role of Christ in salvation history. A fifth issue is the role of the church in God's salvific plan. A sixth is the role of revelation and prophecy in communicating what is essential for salvation. A seventh issue is the role of personal decision in preparation for the judgment. These issues are closely intertwined in the book.

One cannot truly understand the issue of God's justice independently of His sovereignty. He is sovereign because He is Creator of all things (4:11). He is before all else, greater and more powerful than all else, wiser than all else, and holier than all else (1:8; 4:8; 6:10; 15:3-4). No one can question the infinite wisdom of His judgments, because He sees the end from the beginning and judges righteously. When He has completed His judgments, He is declared just

²⁰For an in-depth study of these contrasting symbols, see Edwin Earl Reynolds, "The Sodom/Egypt/Babylon Motif in the Book of Revelation," Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 1994; Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1995).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

and true in light of the equity with which He judges (16:5-7; 19:1-4). Then He sets up His eternal kingdom, free from all unrighteousness.

Another reason for the proclamation of His justice, or righteousness, is that He has provided salvation as a free gift to the believer through the blood of Christ, the Lamb (5:8-14; 7:10; 12:10-11). The process of salvation is described at several points in the book, beginning in 1:5-6. It is clear that it centers around the figure of the Lamb, making it Christologically oriented. The Christology of Revelation is extensive, particularly in the variety of titles and functions given to Christ in the book. Besides His function as sacrificial Lamb, Christ also functions variously as the promised Seed of the Woman (12:4-5), as Lord of the Church (1:10-3:22), as Intercessor in the heavenly sanctuary and the One who effects the covenant (5:6-11:19), as Judge of the nations (6:16-17; 14:10; 19:11-15), eventually as returning Son of Man (14:14-16; 22:7, 12, 20) and conquering King of kings and Lord of lords (17:14; 19:16), and finally, as Shepherd of His redeemed people (7:17) and the One who shares with God the worship of the redeemed hosts on the throne of the universe (22:3), among other things.

The people of God, or the Church, also plays a significant role in salvation history. This becomes evident from the very beginning, where the glorified Son of Man is revealed to John as walking in the midst of seven golden candlesticks, which represent the churches, and as holding in His right hand seven stars, which represent the angels, or spiritual leaders, of the churches. The messages which Christ delivers to the churches make their role abundantly clear. The churches, and the spiritual leaders of the churches, are the designated recipients of the message of Christ to His people. It is within the churches that Christ and His Spirit work for the salvation of His elect. That the whole book is addressed to God's people in the context of the church becomes self-evident in 1:4 and 22:16. The pure Woman at the heart of the book represents the corporate people of God in both the old and new dispensations. She is Christ's beloved, who is transformed into the Bride of Christ, represented by the holy city, New Jerusalem, in Rev 19-22.²¹ The Church militant becomes finally the Church triumphant.

The whole book is designated a revelation and a book of prophecy, as well as the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (1:1-3). This is not merely a designation of genre, but a theological assertion regarding the essential connection between communication of objective truth from God and the process of salvation. The expression, "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus," which reappears throughout the book, is rooted in the legal concept of the two-fold witness as essential for establishing truth.²² This is made more graphic in the case of God's Two Witnesses in chap. 11, who prophesy for 1260 prophetic

²¹See LaRondelle, 275, 499.

²²See 1:9; 6:9; 20:4; cf. Deut 17:6; 19:15; Matt 18:16; John 8:16-18; 2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19; Heb 10:28.

REYNOLDS: TEN KEYS FOR INTERPRETING REVELATION

days and are martyred for their witness in the Great City. The Two Witnesses represent the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, or the witness of the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles in the Old and New Testaments.²³ All revelation is in harmony. Jesus Himself initiates the prophetic witness to the churches in Revelation. And He is called the Faithful and True Witness (3:14; cf. 1:5; 3:7; 19:11), as well as the Word of God (19:13). The revelation itself is in fact the revelation of Jesus Christ (1:1).²⁴ At the same time, Christ speaks to His churches by His Spirit (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22), and 5:6 shows the intimate relation that exists between Christ and the Spirit, so that it would be a mistake to overlook the important role of the Holy Spirit in the prophetic revelation of God to His people.²⁵ The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (19:10).

As the readers and hearers of the book respond to the prophetic witness calling them to salvation and to steadfast faithfulness, they become prepared for the coming judgment. Everything in Revelation is to be understood in light of this impending judgment. The sense of imminence and urgency is everywhere communicated, from the very first verses (1:2-3) to the very last verses (22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20). Appeals to respond are also found repeatedly in the book, from 1:3 to 22:17.²⁶ Blessings and promises are offered as incentives to accept the messages of the book and prepare for an eternal dwelling with God in a recreated heaven and earth, where sin, pain, sorrow, and death are no more. The path may be strewn with hardships, suffering, even death, but the one who overcomes and endures to the end will receive the crown of life. This inheritance is worth every sacrifice. The redeemed will dwell with God and He with them.

The Sanctuary in Revelation

Another of the important keys to understanding the book of Revelation is a realization of the extent to which the sanctuary functions as a framework for the work of Christ in our salvation.²⁷ It does this on several levels. On one level, John repeatedly mentions the temple²⁸ (3:12; 7:15; 11:1,19; 14:15,17; 15:5, 6,

²³See Kenneth A. Strand, "The Two Witnesses of Rev 11:3-12," *AUSS* 19 (1981):131-35.

²⁴The genitive here could be either subjective or objective, making Christ either the Revealer or the Revealed, though the context more clearly suggests the former.

²⁵See 1:4, 10; 4:2, 5; 17:3; 19:10; 21:10; 22:17. See also Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 109-25.

²⁶For example, 2:5, 10, 16, 22, 25; 3:3, 11, 18-20; 13:9-10, 18; 14:6-12; 16:15; 18:4; 22:7.

²⁷For recent discussions of this, see Richard M. Davidson, "Sanctuary Typology," in *Sympos. I*, 99-130; Clifford Goldstein, *Between the Lamb and the Lion: A New View of Jesus in the Book of Revelation, from the Cross to His Coming* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1995); Paulien, "Seals and Trumpets," 187-92; Jan Paulsen, "Sanctuary and Judgment," in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 2: Exegetical and General Studies*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 7:275-94; Strand, "'Victorious Introduction' Scenes," 269-88.

²⁸That he identifies the heavenly temple with the archetypal sanctuary becomes obvious in 15:5, where he calls it "the tabernacle of the Testimony," the same name used in Exod 38:21 and

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

8; 16:1, 17; 21:22), as well as various articles of sanctuary furnishings, like seven lamps burning before the throne (4:5), golden bowls full of incense (5:8) and golden censers full of incense (8:3-5), unidentified altars²⁹ (6:9; 11:1; 16:7), the golden altar before the throne (8:3, 5; 9:13), and the ark of the covenant (11:19). There are also individuals who are designated as priests (1:6; 5:10; 20:6), and some who seem to be dressed and function like priests (4:4; 5:8; 7:13-15; 8:2-6; 14:18; 15:6-7). On a second level, John refers to the performance of some of the sanctuary rituals (5:6, 9; 8:3-6).³⁰ The repeated reference to the Lamb and the blood of the Lamb is itself explicit sanctuary imagery. On a third level, careful research has shown that the book of Revelation seems to follow the cycle of annual feasts associated with the Hebrew cultus.³¹

The extent of these references and the interconnections between them make it unreasonable to consider interpreting the book apart from the centrality of the sanctuary theme, particularly the work of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary from the Cross to the Second Coming. Much more attention needs to be given to this aspect of the theology of the book than has generally been done.

Symbolism and Numerology in Revelation

The book of Revelation is replete with symbolism and numerology. Extensive symbolism is one of the characteristics of apocalyptic. Numerology is also frequently used in apocalyptic, because numbers may have symbolic value. The symbolic value of a number does not necessarily mean it has no literal value. Some numbers are purely symbolic, while others seem to have a literal value, though perhaps also carrying some symbolic value. The key is to know when something is to be taken literally and when it is to be taken symbolically. This is no easy task.

Richard M. Davidson has suggested what may be a valuable insight into solving this problem in the book of Revelation, at least with reference to sanctuary imagery, which comprises a significant part of the book. It has to do with the eschatological substructure of New Testament topology. He notes that

in the time of the church the *earthly* antitypes in the spiritual kingdom of grace find a *spiritual* (nonliteral), partial (nonfinal),

Num 1:50, 53, for example, for the wilderness sanctuary which was modeled after the heavenly archetype (Exod 25:8-9; Heb 8:5; 9:11-12). That it contains the ark of the covenant is a further evidence (11:19).

²⁹Paulien argues that the altar in 6:9 is the altar of burnt offerings (*Decoding*, 315-18). The altars in 11:1 and 16:7 probably both refer to the golden altar of incense before the throne.

³⁰I have included here only the most explicit references. For an excellent discussion of many other more inferential references to sanctuary rituals, see Davidson, 112-19, and Paulien, "Seals and Trumpets," 187-90.

³¹See Davidson, 119-26; M. D. Goulder, "The Apocalypse as an Annual Cycle of Prophecies," *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981): 342-67; Paulien, "Seals and Trumpets," 190-92; William H. Shea, "The Cultic Calendar for the Introductory Sanctuary Scenes of Revelation" (in this issue of *JATS*).

REYNOLDS: TEN KEYS FOR INTERPRETING REVELATION

and universal (nongeographical/ethnic) fulfillment, since they are spiritually (but not literally) related to Christ in the heavenlies. Thus, we should expect that when sanctuary/temple imagery in Revelation is applied to an *earthly* setting in the time of the church, there will be a *spiritual* and not literal interpretation, since the temple is a spiritual one here on earth.³²

Conversely, he observes that

during the time of the church, the earthly spiritual kingdom is overarched by the literal rule of Christ in the heavenlies. Consistent with this NT perspective, the sanctuary topology of Revelation, when focused upon the *heavenly sanctuary*, partakes of the same modality as the presence of Christ, that is, a literal antitypical fulfillment.³³

If this hermeneutic is consistently followed, many problems seem to be resolved in trying to decide what should be taken literally and what symbolically. Nonetheless, numbers still may have symbolic value, even in heavenly scenes that would be otherwise literally interpreted according to the above hermeneutic.³⁴ To determine what various numbers stand for requires careful cross-referencing of Scripture. The recent commentary by Roy Naden proposes to unlock the meaning of the numbers of Revelation. He begins by assigning meaning to the numbers 3, 4, 7, 10, and 12,³⁵ then proceeds to assign symbolic value to virtually every number in the book. He carries it too far, without a consistent method or a biblical precedent for much of it. This is very risky. Traditionally, three has often been considered the number of God, or unity, while four has been considered the number of earth, or creation, but this is largely without biblical precedent. The numbers three and four have no clear symbolic meaning in Scripture, though some would suggest that symbolic meanings may be inferred from the emphasis given in various texts.³⁶ John Davis argues that

³²Davidson, 109.

³³Ibid., 110.

³⁴The 144,000 in 7:4 and 14:1, 3, for example, are found in heaven in a temple setting, which should suggest a literal fulfillment, but the number is still to be taken symbolically. In chap. 7, John first hears a symbolic number, describing people on earth from twelve symbolic tribes of Israel, sealed with a symbolic seal in their foreheads. But when he looks, he sees a numberless multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the throne and the Lamb. The group in chap. 14 is the same group. It represents the countless hosts of the redeemed. For the 144,000 and the Great Multitude as the same group, see Beatrice S. Neall, "Sealed Saints and the Tribulation," in *Sympos. 1*, 267-72.

³⁵Naden, 39-44. To these five numbers he assigns the following meanings: "3, unity; 4, universality; 7, rest; 10, completeness; and 12, the kingdom." Ibid., 44. I would not agree on all of these, especially on seven as rest. Seven everywhere stands for completeness or perfection in Scripture. See, e.g., Gen 4:24; 33:3; Lev 23:15; 25:8; Num 23:1; Deut 7:1; 28:7; Josh 6:4; Judg 16:7; Ruth 4:15; 1 Kgs 18:43; 2 Kgs 5:10; 2 Chr 29:21; Job 5:19; Ps 12:6; 79:12; 119:64; Prov 26:25; Isa 4:1; 30:26; Ezek 39:14; Dan 3:19; Matt 18:21-22; Mark 16:9; Luke 17:4; Acts 6:3.

³⁶John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 122.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

seven is the only number that can be clearly shown to have a symbolic use in Scripture.³⁷ Seven, the sum of three plus four,³⁸ represents completeness or perfection throughout Scripture,³⁹ and is the most important number in Revelation. Ten is a number used primarily as a factor in multiplication, to create large round numbers. It appears as a unit in Revelation only in the ten horns, with respect to which the number may have more literal than symbolic value. If it has any symbolic value, it is probably as a whole or round number, representing a basic mathematical unit of general nature. Twelve, incidentally the product of three and four, is widely understood to be the kingdom number, though this is inferential only, used as it is for the people of God who make up the kingdom, represented by the twelve tribes in the time of Israel and the twelve apostles in the time of the church.⁴⁰ The numbers one thousand, ten thousand, and multiples thereof are generally used in Revelation to signify very large numbers, not exact figures.

The primary basis for interpreting either symbolism or numerology in Revelation is from within Scripture. Doing a concordance study is very useful, but one should focus particularly on those passages in which the image or number seems to have a symbolic value in the context. One may also learn what certain symbols or numbers represented in extrabiblical literature,⁴¹ but should exercise caution in not permitting such information to outweigh or contravene the biblical evidence. Kenneth Strand has made some very practical suggestions for interpreting the symbolism within Revelation, to which the student of Revelation is referred.⁴²

The Message of Christ in Revelation

I have reserved for last what is probably the most important key to interpreting Revelation. One needs to begin from the right assumptions. What is it that the book is trying to communicate? Some readers of Revelation believe John was writing about events taking place in his own day, as well as events he

³⁷Ibid., 116, 124.

³⁸Some of the septenaries in Revelation seem to be made up of four plus three. The last three seals, trumpets, and bowl plagues are different in some distinctive way from the first four.

³⁹Davis, 119.

⁴⁰It is not surprising, therefore, to find the number twelve appearing in the 144,000 (12,000 from each of twelve tribes of Israel) as well as in the various dimensions of the New Jerusalem, along with its twelve gates (with the names of the twelve tribes) and twelve foundations (with the names of the twelve apostles). Cf. Neall, 262.

⁴¹This is the case, for example, with the number 666 in 13:18, since this number featured in ancient Egyptian and Babylonian religion, giving it some significance in relation to known pagan religions of the day. See R. Allan Anderson, *Unfolding the Revelation*, rev. ed. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1974), 125-28; Maxwell, 414. It should be noted, however, that 666 is used as a literal number, though it serves as an aid in decoding a mysterious name by means of the ancient practice of gematria, in which the numeric value of a name became a code for the name: it is "the number of his name," "a man's number," or the number of a man's name.

⁴²Strand, "Foundational Principles," 26-27.

REYNOLDS: TEN KEYS FOR INTERPRETING REVELATION

expected to take place in the very near future. These preterist interpreters ignore John's own claims about what he is recording and why. They fail to accept John's claim that he received visionary revelations from God that pertain exclusively to the future, especially to the time pertaining to the eschatological judgment and the setting up of Christ's eternal kingdom. They see only the beginning of Christian history, but not the middle or the end. Nor do they see the message of Christ to His people in every age.

Other readers believe John is writing only about eschatology, the final events of history and the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. They fail to see that John includes much historical activity before he gets to the eschaton: seven churches, six seals, six trumpets, during which events continue on earth. It is only in the days when the seventh trumpet sounds that the mystery of God is finished (10:7). These futurist interpreters see the end of Christian salvation history, but not its beginning or its struggle through the long ages that intervene before the end. Nor do they see the message of Christ for His people in every period.

Still other readers believe John is writing primarily about history, setting forth a detailed schematization of history by which we can reconstruct the past and predict yet future events if we will but decode the symbols correctly. The results are a vast diversity of opinions about the meaning of the many symbols and the resulting reconstructions of history past, present, and future. These historicist interpreters may be correct in seeing a rough outline of history afforded by the prophecies of Revelation, but they are often over-zealous in attempting to define every detail of the symbolism in their schematization of history, resulting in speculative confusion and a tendency to keep changing the interpretation as extended time makes old interpretations invalid. Such a focus on history draws away the reader's attention from the main message of the text, which would have been of spiritual benefit and blessing if applied as intended.

Even those idealist readers who, wrongly, believe Revelation is not about history, either past, present, or future, risk missing the true message of Christ to the reader by losing the perspective of the message, which is rooted in and tied to the progress of Christian salvation history.

Only a balanced approach to the interpretation of the book, keeping in mind the true object of the revelation, will yield satisfactory results. The revelation was given not only for John or for the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, but for God's servants (1:1) who would live in the interim before the final judgment, to prepare them for the coming events. It was not preserved in the canon of Scripture as a history textbook, but as a message from Christ to His people, with the object of preparing them spiritually for what would lie ahead. Unless one reads the book with the intention of discerning this message from Christ, he or she has missed the most important content of the book. What happened in the past serves only as a witness to the trustworthiness of the revelations concerning the future. What will happen in the future is only a promise,

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

dimly understood, of what we may expect, depending on the choices we make in the present. It is to our present choices that the book constantly appeals.

The most meaningful part of the book for our experience is the letters of Christ to the seven churches. Here Christ speaks personally to every individual in every age. The seven churches represent the complete cross-section of the church in every age, as well as the various experiences which any individual Christian may have at any given time. That this is true may be seen from the injunction, repeated seven times, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22 NRSV). The appeal is individual, and the message to each church is applied to all churches.⁴³

If one takes a similar approach to each of the visions of Revelation, seeking for the personal message from Christ to the reader, understood within the historical context to which the vision pertains and in light of the development of events described in the vision, with a view to personal application and present decision making, the blessing of 1:3 and 22:7 will accrue to the reader. That should be the goal of the study of the book of Revelation. That alone will prepare the reader for what yet lies ahead.

Edwin Reynolds is Chair of the Biblical Studies Department and Professor of New Testament and Biblical Languages at the Theological Seminary, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines. He is also the editor of Asia Adventist Seminary Studies. He has served overseas for sixteen years, including six years at Solusi College (now University) in Zimbabwe and eight years at AIAS. reynolds@aiaas.edu

⁴³Further evidence that the appeal is individual is found in the imperatives, which are all in the second person singular, and in the promises made to each church, which are each addressed to the one who overcomes. Further evidence that the message to each church was intended to be read and applied by all the churches is found in the fact that the letters were bound together in one book and sent to all of the churches, which were located in sequence on a main postal route. That this was not an unusual practice for letters of spiritual counsel to the churches may be shown by Paul's request in Col 4:16 that the letters he had written to Colossae and Laodicea should be exchanged and read in the neighboring church. Manuscript evidence reveals that it was common practice to bind all of Paul's letters together and circulate them to all the churches as a corpus.