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A Book about Jesus

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A book about *Jesus*

Revelation

...must, which God
...wants what must
...own by sending
...ho testifies to
...rd of God
...d is

...and who was, and
...the seven
...from Jesus
...the first

Grace and peace be
to all who read
these words

Amen.



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SCAN FOR AUDIO

Since its appearance at the end of the first century even to this day, the book of Revelation has generated great interest and a multitude of interpretations. Why was this book written, how do we interpret it, and what does it say to us today?

A time of persecution

Revelation is written in the style of a letter addressed to a group of seven churches in Asia Minor in the first century AD (Rev. 1:4, 5). These Christians in Asia Minor, today western Turkey, were suffering persecution because they did not participate in Roman cults and other pagan social activities. The rumors and false reports circulated about them made their lives difficult and troubled.

These first-century believers, therefore, needed encouragement, and this encouragement came in the form of a complex letter whose intricate symbols and imagery have challenged readers for two thousand years. Yet, its major themes are easily understood and have provided hope to those facing persecution for their faith.¹

A promise of hope

Part of the purpose of the book of Revelation is to announce that the return of Christ will be very soon. Twice in the first few verses of chapter 1, John referred to the promise of Christ's return. "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of his prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near" (Rev. 1:3).² "Look, he is coming with the clouds; / and every eye will see him, / even those who pierced him; / and all peoples on earth 'will mourn because of him' " (v. 7).

In light of this promise, Revelation is an invitation to remain strong and faithful to Jesus. Even if the future may appear gloomy and hostile, the book tells us that God in Christ will always be with His people.

Apocalyptic symbols

How, though, does one interpret the book's symbols and imagery? Revelation offers clues that can help us understand them.

First, John used a multitude of well-known Old Testament symbols, images, and allusions. For example, John twice referred to 144,000 faithful people of God. The number is highly symbolic, with references to the people of Israel in the wilderness during the Exodus. The number 144,000 is $12 \times 12 \times 1,000$. Twelve is the perfect number of God's covenant people. There were 12 sons of Jacob who formed the 12 tribes of Israel. There were 12 apostles who formed the new covenant people of the Messiah. The New Jerusalem has 12 pearly gates named after the 12 tribes of Israel and 12 foundations named after the 12 apostles. This group of 144,000 also sings the song of Moses, an allusion to Exodus 15, when God's people were rescued miraculously from the clutches of Pharaoh.

The book uses the symbols of locusts and trumpets, also allusions to the Exodus. Revelation refers to geographical places very familiar in the Old Testament: Sodom, Egypt, Mount Zion, Babylon, the river Euphrates, and Armageddon. It refers symbolically to Old Testament people as well, such as Jezebel, King David, the prophet Balaam, and the Moabite king Balak.

Revelation also has links to another apocalyptic book, Daniel. The first beast of Revelation 13 is a composite of the four beasts of Daniel 7; meanwhile, the image to the beast, also in chapter 13, echoes the story of the three Hebrews and the fiery furnace of Daniel 3.

What, then, is the purpose of these symbols? They were intended to build the reader's faith knowing that God's acts of salvation in the future will be very much like God's acts of salvation in the past. The powerful and faithful God who did marvelous acts for His people in the Old Testament is the God who is doing the same for

them now and is the God who gives His people the certainty of His promises concerning their future as well.

A Roman context

We must also keep in mind that the setting of the book is in Asia Minor at the time of the Roman Empire. The language and imagery were intended to make sense to the original readers.

Some references to Jesus are shaped in the form of a challenge to well-known pagan deities. The description of Jesus as holding the keys of death and Hades in Revelation 1:18 is an unmistakable reference to the goddess Hekate, a Greek deity who was thought to possess the keys to the gates of heaven and Hades. Clearly, Jesus is assuming the roles ascribed to pagan gods.

The description of the New Jerusalem at the end of the book is reminiscent of Roman plans for an ideal and safe city.

In Revelation 6, the first four seals depict four riders on horses going out to conquer and cause evil. This was a familiar image for first-century Romans, whose coins depicted the emperor riding on a horse.

Jewish and Christian readers would have understood these symbols, coming from the Old Testament and from the Greek and Roman world of the first century, as teaching them that their faith transcends their immediate context and that they can have hope amid trial and tribulation.

The perfect number

Another key point in a study of the book of Revelation is its literary structure. The number seven plays a very prominent role.

For example, Revelation is a succession of seven symbolic scenes, each introduced by a reference to the ancient Hebrew sanctuary services.

The Hebrew sanctuary was a reflection of God's abiding place in heaven. The sanctuary was built in three sections: an exterior courtyard with an altar for burnt offerings and a tent divided into two parts. The first part of the tent was the Holy Place with three pieces of furniture: a seven-branched candlestick, or menorah; a table for bread; and an altar of incense. The second part was the Most Holy Place, which guarded the ark of the covenant with the Ten Commandments. These pieces of furniture symbolized various aspects of the priest's intercession on behalf of God's people and Jesus' intercession for us. Most of these symbols are present in Revelation and introduce seven different sections of the book:

1. The first section (chapters 1–3) with the letters to the seven churches (chapters 2, 3) is introduced by a vision of Jesus walking among seven candlesticks (chapter 1)—a visual reference to the seven-branched menorah in the Hebrew sanctuary.
2. This is followed by a vision of the heavenly throne room (chapters 4, 5) and the opening of the seven seals (chapters 6, 7).
3. The next section is the vision of the seven trumpets (chapters 8–11), which is introduced by a vision of an angel offering incense at the altar.
4. The fourth section is introduced with a vision of the Most Holy Place and its ark of the covenant (Rev. 11:19) and is followed by the conflict between the woman and the dragon, the beasts from the sea and the earth, and the three angels' messages (chapters 12–14).
5. The fifth section is introduced with a vision of the heavenly temple, out of which come seven angels with the seven last plagues of God's wrath (chapters 15–18).
6. The sixth section begins with a scene of rejoicing and praising in heaven (chapter 19), followed by the coming of Christ on a white horse and the end of the great conflict between good and evil (chapters 19, 20).
7. The seventh and last section begins with a vision of a new heaven and introduces the new earth and the New Jerusalem (chapters 21, 22).

Each of these sections begins with a sanctuary scene or heavenly scene that marks the development of some historical and symbolic representation of God's response to the problem of evil. The scenes also move from the Holy Place to the Most Holy Place to finally encircle the entire celestial host of angels and God's new throne in the New Jerusalem.

These scenes keep our focus on heaven as the center of all divine activities. In fact, the entire book of Revelation is presented from the vantage point of heaven itself. We note that all divine actions on earth are preceded by scenes of divine actions in the heavenly temple.

What, however, does all this amazing imagery mean?

A revelation of Jesus

The first words of the book make it clear: This book is about Jesus. "The revelation from [or of] Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place" (Rev. 1:1).

The expression used here means that the book is from Jesus or about Jesus or both. A special revelation of Christ is the center of the book of Revelation.

It has become customary in many studies of the book of Revelation to attempt to decode all the symbols and find their clear application in biblical history, church history, or current world events. It is not unusual to read about interpretations that focus on the role of Islam in end-time prophecies. Others limit their interpretations to schemes from earlier periods of history and focus on the Roman Empire and how it fulfilled these symbols. Others see the fulfillment of these symbols in conflicts between the medieval church and political powers that it often clashed with.

Yet, these schemes are often missing a major point of what this book is about. This is a revelation from Jesus and about Jesus—about His role in these events and the consummation of history and how the problem of evil will be resolved. Before this book tells us symbolically what future events will be, it tells us what Jesus has done for His people’s salvation in the past and what He will do in the future as well.

In chapter 1, Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of all things and of the plan of redemption. In the letters to the seven churches (chapters 2 and 3), Jesus reminds them that He is with them and promises rewards to the overcomer. Each reward is an aspect of the redemption Jesus is more than willing to give to those who are faithful. Chapter 4 details Jesus’ throne in heaven and in chapter 5, Jesus is the Lamb who was slain and is worthy to “receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise” (Rev. 5:12).

In chapter 6, Jesus opens the seals of the book of the last events of earth’s history and in chapter 7, Jesus assembles before the throne of God a large multitude of all those who will be saved because they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. The outlook in chapters 8 to 11 looks very grim while God’s judgments are poured on the earth, but this devastation ends with a proclamation of the kingdom of the Messiah. In chapter 12, the woman gives birth to a child, Jesus, and His presence defeats the dragon. In chapter 13, while the two beasts attempt to enforce the worship of their image, those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life are safe. In chapter 14, the Lamb stands on Mount Zion with the

144,000 redeemed and declares the threefold message that prepares them to stand there. In chapter 15, the redeemed are singing the song of Moses and of the Lamb.

In chapters 16 to 18, during the seven last plagues and the destruction of Babylon, war is waged against the Lamb and His people, but the Lamb will triumph because He is King of kings and Lord of lords. In chapter 19, a great multitude shouts praises to God as He invites all the redeemed to come to the wedding supper of the Lamb. Jesus is the Faithful and True Witness riding on a white horse, and, with the armies of heaven, He comes to earth to wage one last battle against God’s enemies. In chapter 20, the redeemed reign with Christ for a thousand years. In chapter 21, the Lamb brings the New Jerusalem down from heaven on a restored new earth.

Finally, in chapter 22, a river of life flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb. And Jesus presents Himself: “Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates of the city. . . .

“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star” (Rev. 22:12–16).

This book is about Jesus, the Lamb of God slain for the redemption of His people. It is a book about hope and God’s faithfulness. So the invitation is given to all readers today: “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come!’ Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life” (Rev. 22:17). Heed the invitation—come!



- 1 An excellent volume is Ranko Stefanovic, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press,), 1–49. Another noteworthy commentary is Sigve K. Tonstad, *Revelation*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 3–41.
- 2 Scripture is from the New International Version.

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