

# Revelation 1:1-3 | How Should We Interpret the Book of Revelation?

## Say hello to the Reality Ventura Campus!!!

To step into the book of Revelation is to step into a strange, unfamiliar world<sup>1</sup>

- One full of angels and demons, of lambs, lions horses and dragons
- Seals are broken, trumpets blown and the contents of seven bowls poured out on earth
- Two malicious monsters appear, one emerging out of the sea with 10 horns and 7 heads, the other rising from the earth with a lamb's horns and a dragon's voice
- There is thunder and lightning, hail, fire, blood and smoke
- "The whole book appears at first sight to contain a chaotic profusion of weird and mysterious visions"<sup>2</sup>

And so, many shy away from it

- But we cannot leave it there
- The book is a divine revelation from God for His servants (1:1)
- It promises a special blessing for those who read and obey it (1:3)
- We are followers and lovers of Jesus
  - And as we learned last week, Revelation is the full and final unveiling of Jesus in all His glory and of His work in all its splendor
- We must seek to understand and apply it's truth

## How do we start to unravel it?

### Four Interpretive clues in Revelation 1:1-2

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him (1) to **show** to His bond-servants, (2) the things which must **soon** take place; and He sent and (3) **communicated** [signified] it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to (4) all that he **saw**.

### The Four Interpretive S's in Revelation 1:1-2

#### (1) Show

- To make visible
- Visions

#### (2) Soon

- Prophecy
- Future

#### (3) Signify

- Communication
- Symbolism

#### (4) Saw

- With his eyes (≈ 50 times John says, "I saw...")
- In the Spirit (vv. 10-11<sup>a</sup>)

= Revelation contains **pictures** (visions) that John **saw** that revealed the **future** (prophecy) though the use of **symbols** (signification)

These visions from Jesus were to be communicated to His **servants**, the **church** (us)

- v. 1 = **to show to His bond-servants** (followers)
- v. 11 = **send it to the seven churches** (represents whole)

<sup>1</sup> John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church* (London: Angus Hudson Ltd, 1990), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

These visions were meant to be a **blessing** and to be **obeyed**

## Revelation 1:3

**Blessed** is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, **and heed** the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

If we are going to be blessed by Revelation and obey it's content, we must first understand it

## How do we interpret, so as to be **blessed** by and to **obey**, the Book of Revelation?

- Not an easy task (not meant to be hard)
- Not everyone agrees (not something to divide over)
- Not always clear (not an issue of dogma)

## The four ways the church has interpreted Revelation

1. As fulfilled (The Preterist View)
2. As unfolding (The Historicist View)
3. As future (The Futurist View)
4. As fundamentals (The Idealist View)

### 1. The Preterist view (fulfilled; past)

- Preterism says: The events of Revelation were fulfilled in the early centuries A.D., beginning with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and concluding with the overthrow of Roman Empire

### 2. The Historicist view (unfolding; present)

- Historicism says: Revelation is an overview of church history that describes various times of persecution and tribulation from the time of writing to the Second Coming of Christ

### 3. The Futurist view (coming; future)

- Futurism says: Revelation is mostly about actual events that will take place just before the Second Coming of Jesus

### 4. The Idealist view (principles; timeless)

- Idealism says: Revelation is about timeless principles of the victory of God over evil that apply to all the church at all times

All of these views have strength and weaknesses (**Book Recommendation—Revelation: Four Views, Revised & Updated by Steve Gregg**)

- All have them have modified and hard-line nuances
- All see Christ as returning literally and physically to earth at the end
- All have had there moments
- All of them warn us to observe God's ways and live accordingly
- All of them have proponents who are Jesus loving, rational, faithful Christians

"None of these schools of interpretation can claim any monopoly on scholarship or faith. Each group numbers many fine scholars and devout Christian believers. Therefore, complete certainty in regard to the interpretation of the Apocalypse is not to be had. It is our duty to do the best we can, to study the various systems and accept the view that seems to us right, but always with a certain amount of reservation and of respect for the opinions of others." —Albertus Pieters<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Albertus Pieters as quoted in Steve Gregg, *Revelation—Four Views* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 17.

Because it is not always clear, many people adopt another approach, which may be called "eclecticism" or "parallelism" is a mixture or combination of two or more of the other 4

- Some elements of the book are clearly future
- Some are probably past
- Some probably had near fulfillments and far fulfillments
- Some are definitely timeless principles
- Some, seem to be all three at the same time<sup>4</sup>
- Revelation has some of all of it (Cf. **verse 19**)

These various approaches really only apply to a portion of the book

- Chapter 6-18 are debatable (4 views)
- Chapters 1-3 are for the church as a whole at all times
- Chapters 4-5 are mostly straightforward visions of heaven
- Chapters 19-22 are clearly future

In this interpretive maze we need to remember what **the first world of the book** taught us

- The word '**revelation**' is '**apokalupsis**' in Greek = an unveiling (not an obscuring); and uncovering (not a concealing)

**What makes Revelation sometimes seem obscure is the use of symbols**

Four Interpretive clues in Revelation 1:1-2

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We must take seriously what the author says happened<sup>5</sup>

- John tells us that he had a series of visions
- He "**heard**" certain sounds and "**saw**" certain things

These sights and sounds were communication from God of a certain kind

- In verse 1 the word "**communicated**" is actually "**signified**" = the use of **symbols**
- **A symbol is a picture or image that conveys meaning**
  - The meaning is not the picture—the picture has a meaning
    - E.g. Jesus seen in chapter 5 as "**a Lamb, standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes...**"
      - The meaning is not the picture: I.e. Jesus is actually a dead lamb
      - The meaning is symbolized by the picture: I.e. Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins who is sovereign and powerful

Revelation is not the only book in the Bible that uses imagery and symbolism in this way

- **Ezekiel 37** and the Valley of Dry Bones
  - We are not to understand that bones were actually scattered around in the valley
  - The account is symbolism that conveys meaning
- **Acts 10** and the sheet full of meat
  - We are not to think that there was an actual sheet full of animals
  - It was a vision that symbolized meaning

<sup>4</sup> See example from Mounce in Gregg, p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code—Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 12.

What is key to understand is that symbols such as these and especially the ones in Revelation are **meant to be understood more than merely pictured**

- Again, the meaning is not the picture—the meaning is symbolized (signified or communicated) by the picture
- E.g. In chapter 7 Christians are pictured in heaven before the Throne of God who have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”
- **This is meant to be understood, not necessarily pictured (bad picture!)**
- The descriptions are descriptions of symbols, not the reality conveyed by the symbols<sup>6</sup>

We get this!

- Republicans are not elephants and democrats are not donkeys (**Keynote: Can you please find images of the Republican elephant and Democratic donkey and put them up together here?**)
- Cf. Symbols on a map or road sign

Biblical symbols, however, often communicate in more complex way<sup>7</sup>

- They do not only convey information (like symbols on a map or road sign)
- They invoke feeling, emotion and ongoing reflection
  - E.g. **The Lamb that was slain** (Rev. 5:6) (a principle image in Revelation)
    - Is easy to **decode** and **recognize** as Jesus who was crucified
    - The symbol is meant to **unveil not obscure**; to **uncover not conceal**
    - The image works by **evoking a range of associations**<sup>8</sup>
      - Sacrifice and atonement
      - Passover and liberation
      - Purity and innocence
    - Our understanding of Jesus and His work is enhanced by a pictorial symbol

“Symbols also help to move readers by affecting the emotions and will. Portrayal of the Lamb as a slain victim can help to awaken the reader's sympathy toward the one whom the Lamb represents, even before they consciously analyze the sacrificial implications of the imagery. Conversely, the ugly portrayal of a violent beast with seven heads, ten horns, and blasphemies pouring from its mouth can awaken an intuitive sense of aversion that precedes any attempt to interpret the beast's significance. People may not understand exactly what the beast is, but they quickly recognize that they want nothing to do with it. The images through which Revelation 'signifies' its meaning are an element of persuasion. The book is not... [only] meant to dispense information... it is designed to strengthen the reader's commitments. When the images move readers to renounce evil and to affirm their loyalty to God and Christ, they are effective in their communication even if the readers cannot explain the meaning of each detail.” –Craig Koester<sup>9</sup>

Symbols are an important part of Scripture (**meant to reveal, not conceal**)

**Now, what this does not mean is that we take Scripture as being allegorical**

- And we are not talking about **allegorizing** or **spiritualizing** the text -- **It is literal**
- It sometimes **uses symbolism** to convey literal truth
  - E.g. In **Matthew 16** Jesus said to Peter: “**I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven...**”
  - Did not hand Peter literal keys
  - Peter used the “**keys**” Jesus gave him to **literally** open the way to the gospel to Jews (**Acts 2**) and gentiles (**Acts 10**)
- That is a literal interpretive method
  - Not that Peter pulled out actual keys in Acts 2 and 10
  - But that Peter actually unlocked the way to salvation through the preaching of the gospel

<sup>6</sup> Metzger, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 43.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Koester, 44.

Take for example **Revelation 16:13**

**And I saw coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs...**

- A vivid picture
  - Is the **literal interpretation** that in the future (past?) a dragon and beast and false prophet will have frogs come out of their mouth?
  - Or is that an image/symbol that God showed John pictorially **to mean literally** that Satan and the Anti-Christ will unleash demonic activity on earth?

To interpret Scripture literally (as we do) does not mean to ignore the use of symbols

- I.e. To interpret symbols as if they were not symbols
- But we also do not take as symbolic what is not meant to be symbolic
  - E.g. The return of Jesus and the renewal of all things

That can be hard at times; to determine what is symbolic and what is not—but that is the task of interpretation

- Sometimes Revelation will help us: **1:19-20**
- Sometimes we will have to work hard to determine the **literal truth** that is meant to be conveyed by the symbol(s)

**As a whole we will have to decide:** Does the Book of Revelation (and its symbols) tells us about:

- A time long past (Preterism)?
- The whole of history (Historicism)?
- The Future (Futurism)?
- Timeless truths (Idealism)?
  - A little bit of all of it (cf. **verse 19**)

But I think we will find that it is **mostly a book about the future**

- At least it was at the time of writing (**1:1, 19; 22:7, 18, 19**)
- Does not seem to have been sufficiently fulfilled in the first couple of centuries or the time since (not **preterism** or **historicism**)
- Speaks mostly of events yet to come and that precede the Second Coming of Jesus (**futurism**)
  - **Revelation is about eschatology not history**
- It certainly does contain truths and principles that are timeless (idealism)—but not to the exclusion of actual times, events, people and places (not **idealism**)
- At times I will **offer options** and present the strengths and weaknesses of each one and let it rest at that
- Sometimes, I am going to say, **"I do not know what that means"**

**Here is what I believe:**

- That the book made sense, in context, to the original audience (preterism)
- That it contains timeless truths and principles about God and the world (idealism)
- That much of it is yet future (futurism)
- That it does picture a time of great tribulation before the return of Jesus (literalism)
- That before the tribulation the church will be Raptured (pre-tribism)
- That after the tribulation Jesus is coming back to establish His kingdom on earth (pre-millennialism)
- That the book of Revelation is a book of great hope and joy and faith (gospel oriented)
- The goal of Revelation is to show Jesus to be the great and glorious King of all Kings who loves us and is sovereign over every world event (Christ-centered)

It is the **futurist approach** that comes closest to doing justice to the nature and purposes of Revelation<sup>10</sup>

- I am not going to engage in sensationalism—That is not my goal
- The future belongs to no one but Jesus

<sup>10</sup> D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 483.

I will tell you what I am going to do—**what my goal is**

- My goal, our goal, the goal of the book... is the exaltation of Jesus Christ
- And bringing to bear on every part of the text, every situation and circumstance, any world event... the comfort, hope, joy and strength that come from knowing that Jesus is the **first and the last**, the **beginning and the end**, the **lion and the lamb**, the one who **holds the keys of death and Hades**, the one who is **high and exalted**, **great and victorious**, **ruling and reigning**, **present in the churches** and **coming again to make everything new!**

But what of verse 1 saying that **the subject matter of Revelation is: "the things which must soon take place"?**

- Its been about 1900 years since that was written
- Preterism? Idealism?

We have to understand **how the NT uses the idea of "soon" in eschatological matters**

- **Soon** is an important word in our lives
- Depending upon whether or not something is **soon** determines the way that we live
  - If we knew that we were going to die **soon**—that our death was immanent—we would live very differently!
  - Suddenly, everything is precious
  - If we assume that life will go on forever then one day blurs into another<sup>11</sup> and nothing means too much
  - But when we are made aware of an end—every moment and every perception comes to life

This is the New Testament's intention with **soon** (eschatological perspective)

- We are to live our lives for Jesus as if every day were our last

- **The Doctrine of Imminence**

#### **Matthew 24:36, 42, 44-46 (NASB)**

36 But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.

42 Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.

44 For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.

45 Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time?

46 Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes.

#### **Romans 13:11-12 (NASB)**

Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed.

The night is almost gone, and the day is near. **Therefore** let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

#### **1 Peter 4:7 (NASB)**

The end of all things is near; **therefore**, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.

This is the perspective of the whole NT—but nowhere is it more pervasive than in the Book of Revelation

- This is part of the appeal of the book—it seems to tell us about the end and holds the possibility that it is **near**
- That is interesting (just look at the world)
- **But what does this accomplish? (Moral instruction [v. 3] + joy in the Lord)**

"Far from covering life with a shroud of gloom, the intense awareness of the end of all things infuses the book's imagery with sharpness and rich color. The announcement that 'the time is near' provokes not resignation or a feeling that nothing matters, but on the contrary a kind of jubilation at the preciousness of life and at the world God created and will recreate anew in the events that 'must soon take place'. For the writer of this book and for his readers, the time of the end will be a time of new beginning." –J. Ramsey Michaels<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> J. Ramsay Michaels, *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series—Revelation* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 1997), 48.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.