



## Session 1 ■ Special Interest Topic 3

### How to Study the Book of Revelation

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*In understanding how to study Revelation, these points are explored:*

1. Revelation is a Christian book.
2. It is a divine revelation.
3. The Book of Revelation is set in Asia Minor.
5. The author uses apocalyptic language.
6. The importance of the Old Testament.
7. Structure in Revelation.
8. Numbers in Revelation.
9. Revelation is a drama in two acts.
10. Revelation is a book that centres on worship.

Followers of God are persistent in well-doing and faithful in trial. Not content to live on the surface, they go deep into God's Word, willing to follow wherever it leads.

In 1938, the king of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, authorised a team of American engineers to explore the trackless desert bordering the Persian Gulf, an arid landscape marked only by the occasional palm-fringed oasis. He hoped they would find water. A tribal leader with precarious finances, Ibn Saud believed the Americans might discover places where he could refresh his warriors' horses and camels.

But the team from Standard Oil of California had something else in mind. Geologists had discovered oil in other countries in the region and the engineers thought they would find more in Saudi Arabia. During a period of several years, they drilled more than half a dozen holes without result. They could easily have given up in frustration. Instead, they decided to see if going deeper than normal might make a difference. So they set up their equipment again at well number 7 and dug deeper than they ever had before. They burrowed all the way to a depth of 4,727 feet and finally hit the first sign of what would turn out to be the largest supply of crude oil in the world. A willingness to go a little deeper was all that stood between failure and unimaginable success.

Oddly enough, the king did not appear to appreciate the discovery at first. He ignored the news about the oil for an entire year. Finally, he and his retinue arrived in a caravan of 400 automobiles at the pumping station of Ras Tanura in time to witness the first tanker hauling away its cargo of Saudi crude oil. The discovery would change everything.

Up until then, the primary source of income in the Saudi kingdom came from servicing pilgrims in Mecca, Islam's holiest city. But even the first shipment of oil produced wealth beyond all expectation.<sup>1</sup> The lives and lifestyles of Arabian Bedouin would never be the same. This isolated country with no other exportable

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Zagorin, "Finding the King's Fortune," *Time*, Mar. 31, 2003.

product suddenly became a major factor in global politics. The Saudi royal family became powerful players on the world scene. Their wealth is a crucial factor in Middle East politics and bargaining over global energy supplies. Today, their nation is at the centre of world attention because a handful of American engineers were not willing to be content with a surface approach to their task.

Even so, for us to obtain the wealth waiting to be found in Revelation, we must be prepared to go deep into the meaning of the book. If we do, we will be rewarded far beyond the value of any oilfields.

## 1. Revelation is a Christian book.

In the opening lines of most books, the author tries to bring the reader up to speed on his or her purpose for that book. The Book of Revelation is no exception. The first eight verses of the book form a prologue that presents the major themes and intentions for the book. The style of the prologue (see Revelation 1:1–8), however, is different from the rest of the book. It is fairly normal and straightforward, written in the typical language of the New Testament. As a result, it is quite unlike the apocalyptic language of the rest of the book, which is filled with complex symbolic images that have vexed interpreters for nearly 2,000 years.

Revelation is like Jurassic Park: What do you do with a book that describes an animal with seven heads and 10 horns, and has the body of a leopard and feet of a bear (see Revelation 13:1,2)? What do you do with a book in which eagles speak (see Revelation 8:13) but gigantic cities are silent (see Revelation 18:22,23)? And what do you do with a book in which blood flows as high as a horse's bridle (see Revelation 14:20)? With images like that, it is no wonder that 12 people trying to interpret Revelation will often come up with 13 different opinions about what the book means!

The good news is that before you get into the bizarre stuff, John takes a moment to let you know why he wrote the book. And he does this in plain language—straightforward prose. Yes, the book of Revelation *does* have a strong focus on end-time events (see Revelation 1:1, 7). But above all else, the theme of the book is Jesus. It comes from Him (see verse 1), it is His testimony (see verse 2) and it is grounded in His death, His resurrection, and His work for us (see verses 5 and 6).

Readers of Revelation must not forget this beginning, no matter how confusing the journey gets. We must not fall into the trap of some, who use current events to interpret the book. While this can look fascinating for a short time, such applications have left many Christians feeling embarrassed as current events change and soon become history in a few years.

It is important to remember that Revelation is a book written from the perspective of Jesus Christ and is the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

You will not find in Revelation erratic details that totally contradict what you find elsewhere in the Bible. Revelation is in harmony with New Testament theology, even when the language is radically different.

For example: in Revelation 9:2–6, an incredibly strange description is given of locusts coming out of smoke from the Abyss, acting like scorpions to selectively torment people for five months. But when we compare Revelation 9 with Luke 10, we discover the message is the same—a message of God taking care of His people in the face of a demonic plague.

Quite simply, the message is a revelation of Jesus Christ and not a revelation of freakish details to be interpreted by events in history. Unfortunately, for some who read this book, discovering the Beast power with its seven heads and ten horns is more popular than the discovering the Lamb. To do this is to fail to come to grips with the real message contained in the book.

Revelation begins and ends with a vision of Jesus Christ. As we read this book, it is important to keep foremost in our thinking the discovery of knowing more about Jesus Christ.

## 2. It is a divine revelation.

As much as we may study the intention of a human writer, the Book of Revelation is also about the intention of a divine writer. It is God who gives the visions and sets the symbols for this book. Revelation is more than just a human author's intent because the words are from God.

## 3. The Book of Revelation is set in Asia Minor.

The book was clearly intended to be understood by its original audience. Revelation 1:3 says:

"Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near."

God met John where he was. In the process, He used live symbols of John's day: it is set in Asia Minor and it makes sense in Asia Minor in the first century. For example, in chapter 1:17 and 18, we find a description of Jesus as the one who holds the keys of hell and of death, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. He sends His angels to guide John.

At the same time, there was an ancient world goddess, Hekate, with some interesting characteristics. She was very popular in western Asia Minor when the book was written. She was known as the mistress of the cosmos, who had the keys of heaven and hell. The universe was thought of as a three-storey building: heaven at the top, hell below, and the earth where people live in between. By having the keys of heaven and hell, Hekate could travel between the three layers reporting to the occupants of each what was going on. She was known as the beginning and the end, and she used angels to mediate her messages.

The parallels that exist between Hekate and the description of Jesus are not coincidental. John, under inspiration from God as he wrote out the Book of Revelation, wrote in terms that would be understood in that day and age.

It is also true that there was much familiarity with prophecy in the ancient world. It wasn't only Jews and Christians who had prophets but there were many types of prophets. You may recall from history how people would consult the Delphi Oracle about the future and happenings in their lives.

In Revelation 1:17, 18 when Jesus commissions John, He lays His hand on John's shoulder and says, "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last." This is known in the ancient world as an oracle of assurance. It was very common in the commissioning of prophets in the pagan world, as well as in the Christian world. There was a pattern—the commissioning god would say, "Fear not" and then give a reason why the prophet should not be afraid. In the Book of Revelation, Jesus says, "[Fear not, John,]... I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."

Revelation is a book well connected with its world because it uses the language of its time and place. You may ask the question: "Why would an inspired writer use pagan concepts?"

There are two reasons. First of all, pagan concepts can be used to communicate. The author uses them to communicate to people who are living in a pagan culture. To use terms that make sense to the people is an effective means of communication.

Second, such phrasing does battle with pagan theology. If you are going to oppose certain ideas that are floating around, you have to use the language in which those ideas are given. John is dialoguing with the ancient world in Revelation, giving a critique of their religion; at the same time, he is bringing to them the faith that God has brought him. He is writing to the churches of Asia Minor in their time and place so they may understand.

## 4. Revelation is written in Greek.

John wrote Revelation while on Patmos. He wrote in Greek. But he did not write in classical Greek or even the Greek of the highly-educated classes. He wrote in *Koine* Greek—the Greek of everyday usage. He obviously wanted as many as possible to be able to read what was written. Greek was the most common language spoken by John's readership at that time.

Of course, Greek was probably not John's first language or mother tongue. We know this from some of the grammatical constructions that John used. For example, in Chapter 1:4, the greetings are translated as coming from One Who "was, is and is to come. Interestingly, the literal translation of the original Greek would read something like this: "Greetings from the One being, and the One who was, and the One coming." We would all agree that the way John expresses this is not as smooth as it could be. This is so in English and it is certainly so in Greek.

All sorts of explanations have been offered to explain this less-than-perfect grammar. Some have dismissed John as uneducated. Some have said he must be translating his words into Greek from some other language. Some have even said this is some kind of protest against the Greek language and culture. Of course, the simple explanation is that John was not from a Greek background. On Patmos, he certainly did not have expert editorial help to tidy up his elementary Greek. Many times, therefore, the original Greek comes across a little like that of a person learning Greek, rather than a person who has spoken it fluently all their lives. Despite that, God used John, a man who is not an expert in the most commonly-used language of his day, in a special way to bring this powerful and necessary message to His people.

## 5. The author uses apocalyptic language.

Apocalyptic language is the language of symbolism, which is often very bizarre. There are descriptions of animals that don't look anything like the ones in the zoo, as well as symbols and concepts that are foreign to normal life. For example, in Chapter 13 of Revelation, you have a beast with seven heads, ten horns, feet like a bear, a body like leopard and a mouth like a lion. Such an animal doesn't exist in the real world.

But in the world of Revelation, there is plenty of imagery like this.

Fortunately, if you study the ancient world, you will find that this kind of language is not unique to Revelation. In fact, it is rather common in the ancient world. The ancient Jewish religious book entitled *1 Enoch* also has some apocalyptic images similar to Revelation. For instance, you have the 12 gates of heaven and the heavenly city has 12 gates, three on each of four sides. In another book, a Jewish book of the first century called *The Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, there is the following description, similar to the Book of Revelation:

*"Then I arose and stood and I saw a great angel standing before me with his face shining like the rays of the sun in his glory, since his face is like that which is perfected in his glory. And he was girded as if a golden girdle were upon his breast. His feet were like bronze which is melted in a fire. And when I saw him I rejoiced for I thought the Lord Almighty had come to visit me. I fell upon my face and I worshiped him. He said to me, Take heed. Don't worship me. I am not the Lord Almighty but I am the great angel Arimiël who is over the abyss and Hades, the one in which all the souls imprisoned from the end of the flood are which came upon the earth until this day."*

Does this sound familiar? The language being used here is similar to Revelation 19:10. Apocalyptic language was a style of writing in the ancient world. So, while the language of Revelation often seems bizarre to us, a first-century reader knew the context in which to interpret it.

The word "apocalypse" means revealing the will of God so it does not remain hidden or unknown. For people to understand such mystical things, apocalyptic symbols are used to stimulate the senses of the reader:

- A young lamb freshly slain for sacrifice.
- A violent beast with seven heads and ten horns, and blasphemies pouring out of its mouth.
- A pregnant woman standing on the moon, clothed with the sun.
- A prostitute dressed in purple and scarlet, riding a beast with seven heads and ten horns.

While readers may not be able to see significance in every detail, the images are sufficient enough to create a reaction. Even today, there is much to gain by reading the book through in one sitting, allowing the imagery of the book to make its impact.

## 6. The importance of the Old Testament.

Readers of Revelation today would be hard-pressed to find a single concept that does not have its roots in the Old Testament. Because of this, the Old Testament becomes a key element in understanding Revelation.

The Old Testament is never quoted directly in the Book of Revelation. It is only alluded to with a word here and a phrase there. One of the chief tasks for interpreting any passage in Revelation is weighing the probability that John had a certain Old Testament passage in mind. If it is certain he had in mind a passage from the Old Testament, then that passage should be used to help interpret meaning in Revelation.

Obviously, those original readers in the first century were more knowledgeable about the Old Testament than most who read the book today. Revelation is not a coded collection of secrets that only become intelligible at the end of time; it has always been an open book (see Revelation 22:10). The challenge is for us to wrestle with information that has always been available to help us.

It has been estimated that 85 per cent of the hundreds of symbols used in Revelation have their root of origin in the Old Testament. Most of these are simply a word or a phrase. At times, it can just be a hint by way of connection with an Old Testament event.

When New Testament writers refer to the Old Testament, we find that there are four ways this connection can be expressed:

- a. *Citation*. This takes place when a writer quotes another piece of literature and tells you where to find its source. Revelation never cites or quotes the Old Testament directly, so we have to rely upon the other three methods for detecting connection.
- b. *Quotation*. This takes place in a similar manner to a citation. However, the writer gives you a significant amount of quoted material and does not give the reference from the Old Testament. As with citations, we find that Revelation does not directly quote from the Old Testament.
- c. *Allusion*. An allusion is a serious attempt to point the reader to a commonly recognised source from the Old Testament. When John uses an Old Testament allusion, he intends the reader to see the connection. It may be a word, a phrase or a symbol. When it is detected and understood in its Old Testament setting, it opens up a window to detecting the point John wishes us to get from the statement. As we proceed through Revelation, we will see how important these Old Testament allusions are for correctly understanding the book.

An example of a contemporary allusion to something that is happening in our world today is an allusion to the *War on Terrorism*.

When these words are voiced, everyone living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century understands the wider context. Straight away, our minds race to the events of 9/11, the London bombings and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. People who lived and died in the 20<sup>th</sup> century would never have understood the allusion by connecting ideas in the same way.

- d. *Echo*. Echoes are similar to allusions in that they involve merely a word, a phrase or an idea from the Old Testament. But there is one major difference. As stated, a direct allusion is a serious attempt to point the readers to a commonly recognised source. With an echo, the author has no intention of directing readers to a specific source, literary or otherwise. A writer from previous times may “echo” the language of literature in their day without being aware of it. The language comes to the writer “in the air” from the world he or she lives in. The reader is expected to understand the meaning of the term but not tie it to any particular literary predecessor.

If we had grown up in a world where the stories of the Old Testament were spoken of in everyday conversation, it would be natural for us to use expressions coming from the Old Testament without giving much thought to their origin.

In our modern world, we have words and phrases we use in everyday life that are like echoes of our environment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: such a word could be “podcasting.” We can use this word when speaking to anyone and they know what we are talking about. But for those who lived only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this word would certainly not have been understood as an everyday term. They would be more familiar with “broadcasting,” a word invented for transmission by radio that preceded podcasting. But someone who lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century would not have understood broadcasting or podcasting at all as we do. In those times, broadcasting could be “scattering grain widely by hand.”

So when a word is used within the context of its time, it can be used without any conscious intent to link up with future or past events.

## 7. Structure in Revelation.

### A. Revelation has a very repetitive structure.

There are seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls. As you compare the trumpets and bowls, you see there are tremendous parallels between them. Item by item, the trumpets and bowls fall on similar parts of the earth. If you look at the beginning and the end of the Book of Revelation, you will see that there are parallels between the beginning and the end. You will see even more parallels as we examine its structure.

The structure is not linear: it does not simply tell the story in a straight line from start to end. There are times when the visions circle back and tell us the same things again but in a different way.

Sometimes, the sequence of events overlap: the seventh seal opens to reveal seven trumpets; after the seventh trumpet sounds, there come seven plagues. John is doing what movies do today: there are flashbacks, replays in slow motion, changes in lighting and camera effects; musical effects; and computer enhanced images.

Revelation appeals not only to our intellect—it also causes us to get emotionally involved in what we are seeing in our minds.

### B. Guide Post Passages

In most modern books, a writer introduces a chapter, adds the main content, then places a conclusion at the end of it. In Revelation, we often find embedded in the conclusion the clues to understanding what is coming up next. It provides the author’s own commentary or interpretation of what follows.

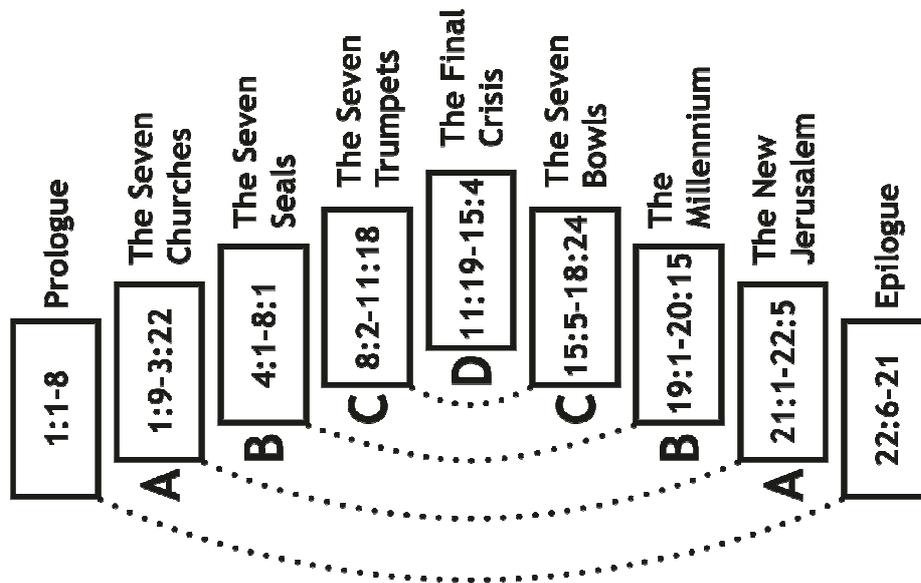
As we proceed in this study of Revelation, we will take careful note of the transition passages found in these passages: 1:19; 3:21; 6:9,10; 11:1; 12:17; 15:1–4; 17:1–6 and 21:1–8.

### C. Chiastic Structure

A chiasm describes a way of thinking and writing found among the people to whom the Bible, or Torah, was first written. The Greek letter “chi” or the word “chiasm” is related to the Greek *Chiasma* (“crossing”) or *Chlazein*, which is “to mark with an X.”

This literary structure was commonly used to show a special symmetric order or pattern. When we write books today, we move from point A to B to C and so on. However, in a chiasm the writer moves from A to B and then back to A. The second A can be an enhancement of the original idea, similar to a musical scale ascending with the same keys but at a higher pitch.

This outline shows the principle of chiasm found in Revelation:



Notice how the ideas at the beginning [A] and the end [A] parallel each other, as does the second [B] and the third [C] until you reach the centre [D].

Today, we normally take an ABC approach to writing, where the climax comes at the end. However, in the Hebrew logic, which is the ABA approach, we find the main point comes at the centre [D].

This pattern was widely used in the literature of the ancient world. Some have likened the similarities of the structure of Revelation to an ancient Greek drama, where the climax comes near the centre of the action and the unravelling of the plot comes toward the end.

The same type of structure was used in Rome during the time of the Republic for narrative poetry. Those who have studied the literature of Israel and Judaism found the same type of constructions being used. It was a form of writing very familiar to John.

This type of construction is also helpful to tell the reader the central ideas of the author. We will see as we work our way through this book that a central issue coming out of Revelation is an issue of war in relationship to worship, as expressed in section D. The “Who,” “how” and “when” with regard to worship is at the hub of issues being dealt with in this book.

## 8. Numbers in Revelation.

Commentators usually agree there are at least four numbers—3, 4, 7 and 12 and their multiples—with symbolic meaning in Revelation. They are also in agreement that these numbers receive their figurative significance from the Old Testament.

The number seven and its multiples are often used. There are seven lampstands, seven stars, seven spirits of God, seven seals on the scroll, and so on. In ancient literature, the number seven symbolises perfection or completeness. It finds its biblical roots in the Creation account of Genesis Chapter 1, where we have a full week comprising of seven days.

Six is one number short of completeness and perfection. Revelation pictures 666 as the number of a man. This number has Old Testament roots as well. For instance, Daniel 3:1 has the image to be worshipped as being 60 cubits high and six cubits wide. When the musical instruments are played to enforce worship, six are mentioned (see verse 15).

Four is also a number of completeness, especially something of universal or worldwide scope. For example, there are four angels on the four corners of the earth (see 7:1). In Daniel 7:2, there are four beasts coming up out of a sea, which is whipped up by four winds from heaven.

The number 10 also represents a type of completeness in Revelation 2:10, 13:1, 17:3 & 12. In Daniel, we have the fourth beast with 10 horns (see 7:7). There are also 10 commandments (see Exodus 20:1–17).

The number 12 has the idea of completeness with unity in diversity. The one nation of the people of God consists of 12 different tribes. The people of God are described as 144,000, which is a multiple of 12 times 12 times 1000. Later, they are described as coming from every nation, tribe, people and language (see 7:9). So there are 12 gates into the New Jerusalem and many nations will have the right to enter (see 21:24–26).

We also see this number used to describe the size of the New Jerusalem as 12,000 stadia.

## 9. Revelation is a drama in two acts.

The first half:

Chapters 1–11 of Revelation takes us to the experiences of seven churches in Asia Minor in the days of John. We then move to the throne room of God to witness the courts ring with praise at the coronation of Christ. We see Him begin to loosen the seals that bind a scroll. As he does this, we see horsemen emerge, leading to upheavals in nature. We see seven bowl plagues poured out on the earth in answer to the prayers of God's people. Now we see an angel proclaiming that the scroll is open to reveal two witnesses who are slain by a beast from the abyss, yet we see them raised again.

Before the curtain falls on act one, we are given a preview of act two: an awesome scene from the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary, where we see the Ark of the Covenant on display amidst a display of thunder, lightening and hail. Evidently, this scene gives us important insight into what is coming up in act two.

The second half:

Chapters 12–22 concentrates on the events revealed by the opening of the scroll and the meaning of the death of the two witnesses. There is to be a final testing time for the church before Jesus returns. In many respects, the church will be following in the footsteps of her Lord as she faces her Gethsemane and Calvary. Babylon, riding a beast empowered by spirits of devils, will make war against the followers of Christ. There will be a final battle on earth called Armageddon. God will fight for His people and overcome the enemy. In the end, He will give them a place to live in the New Jerusalem.

## 10. Revelation is a book that centres on worship.

The Book of Revelation is full of hymns, images of the sanctuary rituals and scenes of worship. The worship scenes provide a commentary on the significance of what is happening. The end-time issues are fought in the area of who is worthy of worship (see Chapter 13). In the end, it will be seen that only God the Creator is worthy of worship. Those who triumph at the end of time are pictured as giving praise to God, the One who alone is worthy of worship (see 15:3,4).

Many see Revelation as a book that calls us to true worship. For example, Ben Witherington III quotes Craig R. Koester and credits him with the following observation:

*"...part of the essential message of Revelation is that the one true God must and will someday be universally recognized properly, which is to say that God will one day be properly worshiped."*<sup>2</sup>

Some scholars see Revelation 14:7 as the very structural centre of the book. By giving a call to worship the Creator, it answers Chapter 13, which declares the majority of earth's inhabitants have given their worship allegiance to a counterfeit trinity of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet.