

# Book of Revelation

## Week 1 — What's this book about? (Revelation 1)



## Series Introduction

Welcome to this series on the Book of Revelation.

In six weeks, we can only survey the book, so we will focus on the big picture themes rather than the details. That's always the best way to read Scripture anyway. When you're watching a movie, there may be some details you don't get, but you really need the storyline.

Each week, we have two sessions (7:00 – 7:45 and 8:00 – 9:00 pm). Here's what we'll try to do with those sessions each week. To get the most from this course, please read the chapters indicated in the final column in preparation for each week.

Wk	Title	Rev
1	<b>What's this book about?</b> a) How to approach the Book of Revelation b) Meet our ruler (1)	1
2	<b>From the sovereign to his servants:</b> a) What's happening at the outposts (2-3) b) What's happening at the palace (4)	2-4
3	<b>God's edicts are bound-up!</b> a) Heaven has a problem (5) b) Evils broken; God's reign restored (6-7)	5-7
4	<b>The sovereign exposes the rebels:</b> a) Proclaiming God's reign (8-11) b) The rebels fight back (12-13)	8-13
5	<b>God's government replaces beastly government:</b> a) God's government established (14-16) b) Beastly government collapses (17-18)	14-18
6	<b>The restoration of all things:</b> a) Celebrate God's victory; the end of evil (19-20) b) God's government sets everything right (21-22)	19-22

## How to approach the Book of Revelation

Revelation is such a unique book. Some in the early church were unsure whether to include it in the canon. I'm so glad they included it: it brings the whole Bible narrative together to a fitting conclusion.

### Original setting

As with any other Bible book, if you have an interpretation that would have left the original audience going, "Huh?" then you're wrong. What John wrote meant something to the seven churches. We must ask what God was saying *to them* (the people who originally received it) before we ask what God is saying *to us*. Wild interpretations of Revelation arise when people fail to consider these basic questions.

**Who wrote it?**

The author's name was **John** (Rev 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). Which John? We can't be sure. An ancient tradition suggested the apostle John, but:

- a) Nowhere in Revelation does John describe himself as an apostle, or even an eyewitness. He calls himself a servant (1:1), a brother (1:9), and a prophet (22:8).
- b) The writer of the fourth gospel doesn't refer to himself as "John" but as "the disciple Jesus loved."

There are phrases in Revelation that are similar to phrases in the fourth Gospel. But Revelation also reuses phrases from the Synoptic Gospels, OT prophets, Exodus, Psalms, ... most of the Bible!

**To whom was it written?**

Revelation is addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor—western Turkey today (Rev 1:4, 11). The seven churches form a loop, a circuit John may have travelled many times:<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Map from Logos Bible Software.

**Why was it written?**

Christianity was a minority religion among many in the Roman Empire. Everyone was expected to give allegiance to Caesar, declaring him to be Lord, praying to him, making offerings to the gods on his behalf. Can you imagine Christians having problems with those expectations?

Apparently the authorities made life difficult for those who did not fulfil these civil “duties.” This pressure had already led to the death of Antipas at Pergamum (2:13). The Christians were going through what John calls “tribulation” (1:9; 2:9-10; 22). John shared in this suffering:

Revelation 1:9 (ESV)

I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

When Jesus was killed by the Jewish and Roman authorities, he was raised back to life and given all authority in heaven and on earth. The Christians have been announcing this “good news.” But if Caesar is causing them to suffer, who is really running the world now? Jesus or Caesar? Has the kingdom of God been established, or is human rule (in the form of the Roman Empire) still in control? John sees it as a clash of kingdoms. He calls them to endure, to hold on until the final victory of Jesus arrives.

**When was it written?**

Around AD 95, when Domitian was the Roman emperor.

Some have wondered if it could have been in the AD 60s when Nero was persecuting Christians, but there are several problems with that proposal.<sup>2</sup> In the second century, Irenaeus set Revelation in Domitian’s reign,<sup>3</sup> and most scholars agree:

... it was not until the last years of Domitian’s reign (A.D. 81–96) that there was a systematic propagation of the cult of the Caesar that spanned the entire empire. He had conferred upon himself the official title “our Lord and God” (Suet. *Dom.* 13). In the years A.D. 92–96, Asia Minor, a region in which the ruler cult already had a long-standing tradition going back to pre-Roman times, became a center of religious worship of the Caesar. Excavations in

<sup>2</sup> There was no church in Smyrna at that time, and Laodicea had been destroyed by an earthquake in AD 60/61. See Jürgen Roloff, *A Continental Commentary: The Revelation of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 11.

<sup>3</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 20.

Ephesus, the metropolitan city of the province at that time, have unearthed remains of a temple to Domitian and an enormous statue of the emperor ...<sup>4</sup>

### What genre is it?

The Book of Revelation refuses to sit in any single literary category:

- a) It opens like a **letter**: from John to the seven churches (1:4). It closes like a letter with closing greetings (22:21). Seven letters are embedded (chapters 2–3).
- b) It describes itself as **prophecy** (1:3; 10:11; 22:7-19), and John constantly uses the words and phrases of the OT prophets.
- c) The opening word in Greek is *apokalupsis* (meaning a revealing or uncovering), so it is often called **apocalyptic**.

### What is prophecy?

Prophecy is not prediction. It's speaking a message revealed by God. It **can** contain information about the future (since God knows the future) but that's not the point. It's **the word of the LORD**, i.e. it's whatever our heavenly sovereign wants to say to his people.

To mock Jesus as a worthless prophet, those who arrested him blindfolded him and then struck him, demanding, "Prophecy! Who hit you?" (Luke 22:64). They weren't asking him to tell the future; they were asking him to tell by revelation who had struck him. Prophecy isn't clairvoyance: it's hearing what God is saying and delivering his message.

There were two ways that OT prophets received revelation:

- **auditory**: they *heard* what God said (an oracle);
- **visual**: they *saw* a vision or dream (as "seers").

John receives both kinds of revelation simultaneously, an audio-visual prophecy. That's important, because there are times when what he hears and what he sees don't match, bringing a sense of disorientation. For example, in Chapter 5 John *hears* of a powerful Lion, but when he turns to see him what he *sees* is a Lamb.

This book is prophecy. It's full-blown revelation from Heaven: a vividly colourful movie, with a powerful Dolby soundtrack.

### What is apocalyptic?

Apocalyptic doesn't mean scary; it's a style of writing that was popular among Jewish people around 200 BC – 200 AD.

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<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Roloff, *A Continental Commentary: The Revelation of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 9.

When Babylon first invaded Jerusalem (587 BC), some Jews had hoped that one day the rulers of the gentiles would submit to God. You find this hope in early chapters of Daniel, where ruler after ruler comes to recognise Israel's God as earth's true ruler. (See Daniel 2:47; 3:28-29; 4:34-37; 6:25-27). But as time went on and empire after empire oppressed God's people, it became clear that the rulers of the earth had no intention of submitting to Israel's God.

As their oppression dragged on, they realised it would take an act of God to sort it out. Jewish people imagined taking a journey into the heavens, and discovering that God had judgement for the nations all stored up ready to unleash. Or they imagined an angel coming from heaven to affirm that God was in charge and he would finally crush the ungodly and set right everything that was wrong with the world (as in Noah's day). These stories contained lots of symbolic language: signs, horns, plagues, numbers, pillars, winds, angels, demons, and other symbols of the great war between good and evil.

They wrote these stories as if they were ancient texts that had been sealed up for centuries and only just "discovered" (= apocalypse). They pretended the stories were written by ancient figures like Enoch or Noah or Abraham or Moses or Elijah or Isaiah.

**Apocalypse** is therefore a type of literature, written under a false name, as if recently discovered, but actually written in their own time (200 BC – 200 AD). It's full of symbolic language. It's about spiritual conflict. It's often presented as a revelation from an angel, or as a journey into the heavenly realm. Some parts of the Old Testament fit into the genre of apocalypse, e.g. the second half of Daniel.

It makes sense that early Christians would write an apocalypse. It was the literature of Jews who suffered at the hands of gentile rulers, but believed that God would eventually take the reins, crush evil and vindicate his people. Early Christians were also suffering at the hands of the same gentile rulers, and needed to say that they believed Jesus would finally take the reins, crush evil, and vindicate his people. That's what Revelation is saying.

The difference is that Revelation is not written pseudonymously under the name of an ancient sage, as if sealed up long ago for John's time. It is written by one of the suffering people who is told not to seal it up because it's for his own time (22:10). It's not presented as if an ancient figure like Enoch had made a trip into heaven and revealed what he saw. It's presented as "the testimony of Jesus" (1:2, 9; 12:17 19:10; 22:16). Jesus has made the trip back to heaven where he is enthroned, and he issues his prophetic word to his citizens. Jesus is the revelator (the one who gives this Revelation).

## **Interpretations**

There are four major ways people have interpreted the Book of Revelation. The disagreement is the question of *when* it applies.

### **Futurist**

Several places in Revelation you find the language of the future, e.g.:

- 1:1 ... things that must *soon* take place.
- 1:19 ... to take place *after this*.
- 4:1 ... I will show you what must take place *after this*.
- 22:6 ... to show his servants what must *soon* take place.
- 22:7, 20 ... I am coming *soon*.

Futurists tend to read the whole book (or at least from 4:1 onwards) as referring to *our* future—things that are still future for us. It's as if God wanted us to know all about a sequence of events that are to occur during a literal 7-year period at some point that is still future for us. People who take this view often try to connect current events to these “prophecies” to see how close we might be to this future.

The obvious flaws in this view are that it fails to take the original recipients into account:

- a) There's a basic mistake in assuming that things were future for them are still future for us.
- b) The book was irrelevant for suffering Christians in the first century if it was only a map of things to happen thousands of years later. The futurist view misses the pastoral side of this book: John was reaching out to care for the people in the seven churches.

Imagine the early churches having lost touch with their pastor when he was exiled to Patmos. They receive this communication from him, and they sit down to read it through. At the end, one says, “So what was that about?” The other one says, “Absolutely no idea. Perhaps someone will figure it out in a couple of thousand years' time, because it means nothing to us.” If the futurist interpretation is correct, this would have been what John intended them to think.

### **Preterist**

Preterists view the Book of Revelation as entirely to do with the **past**—with the struggles Christians were facing in Asia Minor in the first century. It's all about the conflict between Caesar cult and the Christian faith—the claim that Caesar is Lord versus the claim that Jesus is Lord. It's the kingdom of God versus the Roman Empire. To Preterists, there is nothing in the book that is still future for us: the whole thing related to events of the first century (John's own time).

Preterists do a great job of reading this book of Scripture in its original context. But are they right to limit everything in the book to past events? Or is it possible that some of what John saw in his visions had relevance for further ahead than that?

### *Historicist*

Historicists read the visions of Revelation as the sequence of events throughout church history, i.e. it covers the key moments from the first century AD until the return of Christ. For example, the invasion described in Rev 9:13-19 has been interpreted as the Muslim advance on Europe in the Middle Ages.

Some of the reformers like Martin Luther held this view, through it is no longer popular. The trouble is that the interpretations keep changing as time goes on. Luther thought of his own conflict with the Catholic Church as the big battle with Babylon that marked the end of the era. But 500 years later, we can't interpret it the same way, because the end-point keeps changing.

If you think the letters to the seven churches (Rev 2 – 3) actually represent pictures of the church throughout church history, you'll think that the last one (Laodicea) represents your own time. But it's clear now that those who thought this 500 years ago were wrong.

Very few people take this view today.

### *Idealist*

Idealists don't think Revelation is about a sequence of events in the future (futurists) or in the distant past (preterists), or over the span of church history (historicists). Rather they view it as **timeless truth**, not tied to any particular era. According to this view, it's about God reigning as he always does, and not about events on earth.

The strength of this view is that it does justice to visions such as God's throne which clearly are about his reign in heaven. The weakness of this view is that it disconnects those realities from what we experience here on earth. There is a connectedness in Revelation that won't allow John's visions to be reduced to floating disembodied realities in a distant heavenly sphere. The book is too gritty for that.

### *So, which one's right?*

In my view, the historicist view has little to recommend it, but the others contain some truth. In this course, we're going to use a mix of the other three, for no one view contains the truth without the others:

- Don't focus *only* on what's future for us, as if it was irrelevant for the original hearers.

- DON'T focus *only* on what it meant for the original hearers, as if it's irrelevant to us.
- Don't treat it *only* as disembodied timeless ideals, as if it isn't about God's overall programme to resolve things on earth.

In summary:

<i>View</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Bad</i>
Preterist	Understands what Revelation would have meant for the original recipients in Asia Minor	By reading everything as past, there is no resolution for the problem of evil that persists in the world.
Futurist	Looks forward the ultimate resolution of evil when Christ returns and sets everything right	By reading everything as future, the book is of no practical help to its original audience, or to us. It gives us nothing but charts of the future.
Idealist	Honours the way John reuses images from the OT applying them again as timeless truth	By reading everything as ideals, the book is disconnected from the linear narrative of Scripture: how suffering will ultimately be resolved.
Historicist	Not much	Interpreting everything under the assumption that we are living at the end of times is demonstrably false as time goes on.

## Meet our ruler (Revelation 1)

John *hears* a startling voice like a trumpet, instructing him to write his vision and send it to the churches (1:10-11).

He turns to *see* who spoke, and sees a seven-fold golden lampstand (1:12). This vision is set in the temple. For 1000 years, the temple had been God's dwelling—where God lived among his people. He was Israel's ruler, so the temple was political too: God's palace.

25 years before this vision, Rome destroyed the Jerusalem temple. John is seeing not the Jerusalem temple which they understood as representing God's real eternal palace. John is seeing the real temple/palace.

And there is someone in the palace—someone who looks human (son of man). His long priestly robe and sash gives him authority. He has the seniority of white hair. Nothing escapes his blazing eyes. His stance is as solid as a statue's. His voice has the authority of thundering water. He holds stars in place. His voice cuts through any resistance, words as powerful as a sword. You couldn't look at his face any more than you can look at the sun (1:13-16). Who is this commanding human ruler in God's presence?

His powerful presence overwhelms John who collapses as if he just died. But the ruler reaches out his hand to restore life to John:

Revelation 1:17–18 (NIV)

Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

The person speaking to John is our original ruler: the one who reigned at first, before human rebels grasped at his authority. He's also the final ruler: the one who receives all authority when everything is set right in the end. And the story of how he received the authority again is the most amazing one!

God, the Living One, died at the hands of the rebels who refused to yield to him! The rulers of God's nation colluded with their oppressors (the authority of Rome) to do away with "The King of the Jews," condemning him to death and killing him publicly on a cross. Their coup failed! God resurrected him—raising him up to be earth's Lord, our ruler! Jesus has overcome the evil rulers who use death to keep their power! They've already done their worst, and it failed! He's alive! Forever! Unassailable! Our first ruler has become our final ruler again! He has released humanity from the reign of evil and the power of death. Death and Hades (the grave) no longer reign. Jesus



has broken out of death, and he has the keys to liberate humanity, to resurrect humanity, to restore life to God's creation!

What a ruler! What a restoration! Does this find an echo in your heart? A pulse of the life of Jesus within you? Yes?

We've just been introduced to our sovereign, the one who reigns, the one who dwells in God's palace, the one who is God's presence.

This great ruler commissions John with the task of explaining his authority to his citizens, of communicating what he wants us to do:

Revelation 1:19–2:1 (NIV)

<sup>19</sup> Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. <sup>20</sup> The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

The seven lampstands are the seven churches. When John first turned to see who was speaking to him, he saw the lampstands first. Then he saw Jesus within the lampstands (1:13). The place where the world sees its ruler is within his church. The people of Ephesus and the other six cities can see their sovereign within his people.

John was writing to seven literal churches in Asia Minor, but the same is true in Perth today. Jesus is seen in his church. That means what we do is incredibly important, for we are the place where our heavenly sovereign is revealed.

The seven stars in Jesus' hand are the "angels" of the churches (1:20). Angel means messenger. An angel can be a heavenly messenger (as in 1:1), or it can be an earthly messenger. For example, the prophet Haggai was described the "angel" (messenger) of YHWH (Haggai 1:13), because he delivered YHWH's message to his people. John the Baptist is called God's messenger ("angel") in Mark 1:2, because he delivered the message that YHWH was coming to visit his people. Each of the seven churches, then has a prophet (messenger/angel) who hears and declares what Jesus is saying. John is instructed to pass on Jesus' message to the prophets (messengers/angels) of the churches. They will affirm it as valid prophecy, and insist that citizens of King Jesus follow the instructions of their sovereign and do what he wants in their part of his realm.

## Conclusion

So, what is this book about so far? Who are the main characters of the book? What is the relationship between these characters?

Have you noticed any phrases that reflect previous stories in the narrative of the Bible?

Chapter 1 introduced the most important character of the book: Jesus. His importance is his **kingly authority**:

- 1:1, 3 This is the revelation of *King* Jesus. (*Christ*, like *Messiah*, means anointed ruler).
- 1:4 He has the *throne*.
- 1:5 He is the *ruler of kings*.
- 1:6 We are his *kingdom*.
- 1:6 He has unending *power*.
- 1:7 The clouds of heaven's host stand behind him (compare Daniel 7:13-14), so the rebels who killed him have lost.
- 1:9 John and the suffering churches are his *kingdom*.
- 1:12-16 He is the image of a powerful ruler, with a commanding voice that cuts like a sword.
- 1:17-18 He is the original and final ruler, who already has the keys over the final enemy (death).
- 1:19-20 His authority is seen in the lampstands—the churches who hear and obey what he decrees.

Grant Osborne has the emphasis right:

Jesus is indeed the glorified Christ who is in control not only of the churches (1:12–13, 16a) but also of the secular rulers (1:5) and the evil forces (1:18).<sup>5</sup>

The Book of Revelation is primarily a revelation of Jesus—his character and his authority. Jesus is the core message of the book.

## Memory verse

### Revelation 1:18 (NIV)

I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!  
And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

<sup>5</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 104.

## Outline of the Book of Revelation

Beale suggests this outline, which has enough detail to help you find things in the book:<sup>6</sup>

1:1–3	Introduction
1:4–8	Salutation
1:9–20	John's Commissioning
2:1–3:22	The Letters to the Seven Churches
4:1–5:14	The Throne, the Scroll, and the Lamb
6:1–8	The First Four Seals
6:9–11	The Fifth Seal
6:12–17	The Sixth Seal
7:1–8	The Sealing of the Tribes
7:9–17	The Multitude
8:1, 3–5	The Seventh Seal as the Conclusion of the Seal Series
8:6–9:21	The First Six Trumpets
10:1–11	John's Recommissioning
11:1–13	The Two Witnesses
11:14–19	The Seventh Trumpet
12:1–17	Christ's Victory over the Devil. God protects the messianic community against the devil's wrathful harm
12:18–13:18	Exhortation
14:1–15:4	The End of History
15:5–8	The Introduction to the Seven Bowl Judgments Resumed
16:1–21	Punishment of the Ungodly
17:1–18	The Woman-City
18:1–24	Rejoicing over the Fall of Babylon
19:1–10	Wedding of the Lamb
19:11–21	The Defeat of the Beast and Its Allies
20:1–15	The Millennium
21:1–22:5	The New Jerusalem
22:6–21	Exhortations to Holiness

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<sup>6</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 145 – 150

Others try to organize the book around sets of sevens or eights, e.g. Michael Wilcock:<sup>7</sup>

Prologue (1:1–8)

Scene 1: The Church in the World: **seven Letters** dictated (1:9–3:22)

Scene 2: Suffering for the Church: **seven Seals** opened (4:1–8:1)

Scene 3: Warning for the World: **seven Trumpets** sounded (8:2–11:18)

Scene 4: The Drama of History: **seven Visions** of cosmic conflict (11:19–15:4)

Scene 5: Punishment for the World: **seven Bowls** poured out (15:5–16:21)

Scene 6: Babylon the Whore: **seven Words** of justice (17:1–19:10)

Scene 7: The Drama Behind History: **seven Visions** of ultimate reality (19:11–21:8)

Scene 8: Jerusalem the Bride: **seven final Revelations** (21:9–22:19)

Epilogue (22:20, 21)

## Recommended resources

### Popular commentaries:

Wright, Tom. *Revelation for Everyone*. (London: SPCK, 2011).

Wilcock, Michael. *The Message of Revelation: I Saw Heaven Opened*. The Bible Speaks Today. (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986).

Fee, Gordon D. *Revelation*. New Covenant Commentary Series. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

### Exegetical commentaries:

Beale, G. K. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

Roloff, Jürgen. *A Continental Commentary: The Revelation of John*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

Osborne, Grant R. *Revelation*. BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002).

Aune, David E. *Revelation*. 3 volumes. Word Biblical Commentary. (Dallas: Word, 1998).

### Fiction:

Longenecker, Bruce W. *The Lost Letters of Pergamum*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

### Animation:

Videos from The Bible Project:

- <https://thebibleproject.com/product/read-scripture-revelation-1-11-video/>
- <https://thebibleproject.com/product/read-scripture-revelation-11-22-video/>

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation: I Saw Heaven Opened*, BST (Leicester, England: IVP, 1986), 15–18.

## Take home exercise

**In preparation for next week, please read the first four chapters (Revelation 1 – 4).**

*See if you recognize any of the mistakes highlighted by David deSilva in this article:*

### Three Mistakes Most People Make When Reading Revelation<sup>8</sup>

Some people will never tire of spreading a transparency of the text of Revelation over today's newspaper to look for coincidental correlations, or of gazing into it as though it were some window into an as-yet-future (or in-progress) "seven last years," attempting to "predict" how those events will play out in our world. This post is not for them.

It is for those who are tired of playing games with Revelation; who are ready to approach it in a new way – as Scripture – and to seek out its word to us in line with best practices in listening to the rest of Scripture. Because Scripture ought to be considered first and foremost as a word to those *for whom it was written*, from the Lord to give *them* much-needed guidance. I have found this approach lends itself far better to biblical preaching and to the difficult task of discerning the challenges facing Christians in their settings worldwide.

#### ***Mistake #1: Reading Revelation as if it is all about us.***

Just as Paul wrote all of his letters to address the challenges facing particular congregations, so John wrote Revelation to address the challenges facing seven real churches in late first-century Roman Asia Minor: "John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace." (Rev. 1:4) Comparing this verse to the openings of almost all New Testament letters shows us something important: Revelation is also a letter, and asks to be read as such.

Revelation will speak a word to us as well, of course, but it speaks the clearest and most reliably when we read as we would 1 Corinthians or 1 Peter: when we think about it first as a pastoral word to the actual churches the author cared about, a word that was to be understood by *them*, to shape *their* perceptions of *their* everyday realities, and to motivate faithful responses to *their* circumstances.

#### ***Mistake #2: Reading Revelation as if it is all about our future.***

John speaks of his work as "the words of this prophecy" (Rev. 1:3; also 22:7, 10, 18, 19). The first instinct of many interpreters is to think of "prophecy" as "murky prediction about some future event." Revelation has been read as "prophesying" events in John's own immediate future (the *preterist* reading); events spanning the whole time between John's own and the future, second coming of Jesus (the *historicist* reading); or events chiefly still yet-to-come for the modern interpreters (the *futurist* reading). These three approaches share the assumption that, by "prophecy," John primarily indicates that he is communicating predictions about specific events that will unfold at some point in his first audience's future, and that his predictions are the interpretative key to the book.

However, if we were to canvass the prophetic utterances of the Hebrew Bible and the phenomenon of prophecy within the New Testament and early Christian worship, we might instead arrive at the conclusion that, while prophecy *could* include a predictive element, it was primarily a declaration of

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<sup>8</sup> <https://blog.logos.com/2016/08/3-mistakes-people-make-reading-revelation/> accessed 11 August, 2016

God's action in the present. In these cases, prophecy served as an announcement of God's evaluation of the present actions of God's people, diagnosing problems and calling for realignment with God's values.

Prophecy was essentially a "word of the Lord" breaking into the situation of the Lord's people who need guidance, encouragement, or a call to repentance and recommitment; it was also a regular experience in the worship life *at least* of the Pauline churches (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:10, 28-29; 14:3-4, 23-25, 29-31; Eph. 4:11). Prophecy was the revelation of God's perspective on a situation that invited a radical re-orientation to one's circumstances, practices, or pursuits.

In Revelation, the seven so-called "letters"—I prefer the seven "oracles," as each follows more the pattern of "Thus says the Lord"—to the seven churches are a prime example of early Christian prophecy. The risen and glorified Lord speaks a word to the churches through the prophet John, affirming their strengths, diagnosing their weaknesses, calling them to faithful action, threatening judgment upon the recalcitrant and promising favor for the penitent and faithful. In short, they do precisely what so much of the prophetic corpus of the Old Testament sought to do for the communities of Israel and Judah.

Where a prophet speaks of the future, he or she usually limits the prediction to the immediately forthcoming future, not the distant future: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be destroyed"; "There will not be dew nor rain for the next three years"; and the like. John remains within this range, seen in his emphasis on the "imminence" of the confrontations and events he narrates, his conviction that he speaks about "what must soon come to pass" (Rev. 22:6; cf. 1:3, 19; 4:1; 22:7, 10, 12, 20).

**Mistake #3: Reading Revelation as a mysterious code, one that we're in a better position to unlock than anyone else.**

On the contrary, we are in a far less privileged position than the Christians in Ephesus or Pergamum when it comes to reading Revelation. Indeed, the realities with which Revelation interacts—the features of a landscape very familiar to its first audiences—are for us elements of a quite distant and foreign landscape. As for being written in "code," I am convinced that, if a copy of Revelation fell into the hands of a Roman official of even modest intelligence, the subversive intent of its imagery would not be difficult to grasp in the least (especially with dead giveaways like 17:18).

From the very first word of his book (*Apokalypsis*) John identifies his work as an "unveiling," not a "cryptic encoding." Revelation was not sent to those seven churches as a mysterious text needing to be interpreted: it was sent to interpret the world of those readers. The first readers and hearers did not need a special "key" to unlock Revelation; Revelation was the key by which they could unlock the real meaning of what was going on around them, and so respond to it faithfully. Revelation "lifted the veil" from prominent features and persons in the audience's landscape so that those Christians could see things in their world as they "really were" in light of the bigger picture of God's purposes for the world, and the larger picture of the great revolt against God, which God would ultimately crush.

Like similar "apocalypses" written in the centuries around the turn of the era, Revelation pulls back the curtain on the larger landscape in terms of heavenly and infernal spaces and personnel and in terms of "how we got here" and "where things are heading," so as to put the seven churches' present realities within the interpretive context of a larger, invisible world and a sacred history of God's activity and carefully defined plan. The gift of the genre is to illumine the moment for the

ancient audience: it puts their mundane reality, along with its challenges and options, in its “true” light and proper perspective, so that the faithful responses become evident and advantageous.

***How then should we read Revelation?***

Reading Revelation as pastoral letter, early Christian prophecy, and apocalypse orients us toward Revelation in a very different way from those who read it as a road map for our future or as a countdown to the end. It orients us to a way of reading, moreover, that coheres better with how we read the rest of Scripture; to a way that helps us hear more of Revelation’s challenge to us in our situation apart from the distracting conversation about determining if or when some “countdown” has begun.

This approach to Revelation summons us to immerse ourselves in the situations of the congregations addressed by John so that we can discover the following:

1. What practices around and within the churches he found to be objectionable
2. Whether the churches’ responses to the challenges of living under Christ’s lordship were commendable or objectionable
3. How communities of disciples could live more fully in line with God’s purposes, seeking justice and wholeness for all people

This gives us a basis from which to discern what questions and challenges John would pose to us as communities of disciples living in the midst of the contemporary social, political, economic, and global orders. Understanding how John brought the resources of Scripture, prayer, and worship to bear on the situations of his congregations gives us direction for our own process of discernment and our task of proclamation.

Ultimately, this enables us to move closer to seeing our world from God’s point of view and, therefore, to knowing how to respond to its challenges and entanglements in a way that reflects more closely our primary allegiance to the “kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.”