

Triumph of the Lamb

A Commentary on Revelation

Dennis E. Johnson



P U B L I S H I N G

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To Jane

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Abbreviations

BAGD	Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i>
BDB	Brown, Driver, and Briggs, <i>A Hebrew-English Lexicon</i>
<i>ExpT</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentary
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LS	Liddell and Scott, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i>
LN	Loew and Nida, <i>Greek-English Lexicon</i>
LXX	Septuagint
NASB	New American Standard Bible (updated edition, 1995)
NCB	New Century Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
P ⁴⁷	Papyrus 47
TBST	The Bible Speaks Today
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>



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Introduction: *A Strategy for Seeing*

Wrestling with Revelation

In 1845 Moses Stuart saw his two-volume, 1,008-page *Commentary on the Apocalypse* brought to publication at last. In the preface he reported that, soon after his appointment to teach at Andover Theological Seminary in 1809, his students “began to importune” him to teach about the Book of Revelation.

I commenced study of it, with a design to comply with their request. I soon found myself, however, in pursuing the way of regular interpretation as applied to other books of Scripture, completely hedged in. . . . I frankly told my Pupils, therefore, that I knew nothing respecting the book which could profit them, and that I could not attempt to lecture upon it. After still further examination, I came to a resolution, not to attempt the exegesis of the Apocalypse, until a period of ten years had elapsed, which should be devoted, so far as my other duties would permit, to the study of the Hebrew prophets. I kept my resolution. After this period had passed, I began, with much caution, to say a few things, in the Lecture-room, respecting the book in question. . . . In the process of time I began to go through the whole book. This I have done several times; and the present work is the result of these often repeated and long continued labors.¹

1. Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 2 vols. (London: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), 1:v.



Perhaps few people today share Stuart's methodical and cautious patience, but no doubt many identify with his initial experience of the Book of Revelation: "hedged in" and understanding "nothing respecting the book which could profit" ourselves or others. His reminiscence well illustrates some of the challenges that this fierce New Testament book poses for its readers.

Revelation seems resistant and unresponsive to "the way of regular interpretation as applied to other books of Scripture." It is neither historical narrative like 1 Samuel, nor an epistle like Romans, nor a collection of laws (Leviticus), songs (Psalms), or wise aphorisms (Proverbs). Yet it speaks of historical events, opens as an epistle addressed to seven churches, is deeply concerned with covenant faithfulness (the central theme of biblical law), is punctuated with songs of praise and victory, and demands a mind of wisdom to unlock its secrets (see Rev. 17:9). The impression that Revelation speaks a foreign language when compared with the rest of the Bible is only partly true. Revelation's mode of communication has affinities not only with significant portions of the Old Testament prophetic literature, as Stuart implies, but also with Jesus' teaching methods in the Gospels (both apocalyptic sections such as Mark 13 and his use of imagery in parables) and some sections of the epistles. Revelation is, as its Greek title implies, apocalyptic—not in the modern sense of "catastrophic" but in the ancient sense of "unveiling, disclosing" in vivid, visual form the invisible realities and forces that drive and therefore explain the course of observable historical events. Most modern readers of the New Testament are not at home with ancient apocalyptic literature, so our sense of Revelation's alienness can make us feel hedged in, frustrated because this book doesn't deliver its message in the form to which we are accustomed, a form accessible to reading strategies that have proved tried and true elsewhere.

One way through the impasse, however, is to pay careful attention to Revelation's biblical precursors, "the Hebrew prophets." As Stuart recognized, the visions of Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and others provided not only a fertile field from which the images of Revelation have been harvested but also a genre—that is, a community or family of literature whose members are related to each other in style and

therefore in the expectations evoked in readers.² We may marvel at Stuart's self-control. A decade seems a long time to postpone studying Revelation directly, to immerse one's heart and mind in its canonical antecedents. Nevertheless, such study of the prophets as well as other Old and New Testament precedents will repay our effort many times over, for, as Richard Bauckham has aptly said, Revelation is "the climax of prophecy"—bringing to consummate fulfillment the prophetic tradition of Israel.³

Stuart's repetitive teaching of the Book of Revelation, cautiously circling and recircling through the book in successive years of seminary instruction, points to one of the book's challenges and the way to meet the challenge. The challenge can be stated simply: You cannot understand any individual passage in Revelation unless you understand the book as a whole, but you cannot understand the book as a whole unless you understand its individual passages.

In one sense, this is a conundrum posed by any lengthy text. Each individual passage must be understood in its context, and one of the most relevant contexts for any sentence or paragraph is the whole document in which it is found. The document provides invaluable signals regarding its setting in life: the stage in the conversation between writer and audience in which a particular passage comes, their previous acquaintance, and their present questions or crises. It also helps us get our bearings with respect to genre, or the type of literature with which we have to do, the way in which this kind of literature uses language. Is it more metaphorical or literal, more direct or indirect, more formal or informal, organized thematically or chronologically? Understanding genre helps us choose a strategy for reading that is appropriate to a text of this type. Of course, close attention to the individual passages that make up a document may expand or revise our impression of its genre as a whole, since each passage makes its own contribution as part of the context of its neighbors in the document.

2. Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, Zondervan, 1987), 76–83.

3. Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993).



We need a general sense of how the book as a whole is delivering its message in order to get the point of its particular components, but our study of the components has to enrich, expand, perhaps correct the big picture with which we began. Although the image of a hermeneutical circle or spiral normally refers to the give-and-take between a modern interpreter's horizon or worldview and that of the biblical text,⁴ one dimension of the circular or spiraling process of interpretation is the way in which a growing grasp of the document as a whole (themes, genre, structure, life setting, etc.) illumines our understanding of its individual passages and vice versa.

This paradoxical, circular principle of interpretation is even more crucial and even more difficult to apply when we come to the Book of Revelation. It is more crucial because the symbolic nature of the apocalyptic-prophetic genre to which Revelation belongs is susceptible to subjective flights of imagination in interpretation. Countless innovative connections have been drawn between Revelation's images and proposed referents in history. How do we sort out which of these are intended by God and which are the fruit of our hyperactive imagination? Many students of biblical prophecy adopt as a working principle a preference for a literal sense where such is possible. They believe that this principle provides an objective way to test the validity of our interpretation, anchoring it to the terra firma of the text rather than letting it float free, drifting in the breeze. Although, as we will see, applying the literal-where-possible maxim to prophetic literature is problematic, its inadequacy does not mean that Revelation is a wax nose, to be manipulated into any shape we choose. The process of sifting our impressions from what the text means is complex and challenging but not impossible. One check on exegetical flights of fancy is to pay attention to the interplay between specific passages and their context.

4. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980). See especially chapter 11 on the thought of Gadamer regarding the distance and fusion of horizons (293–326). Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1991), especially "Context," 19–40.

It is difficult in Revelation to maintain the rhythmic movement from context to text and back again for two reasons. Revelation's apocalyptic-visionary mode of speaking is foreign to many modern readers' way of thinking, so our minds quickly experience fatigue, like the bewildered exhaustion we feel when surrounded by people conversing in a language that we are only starting to learn. With intense effort we manage to pick out a word, a phrase, occasionally a whole sentence or a vague idea of the topic. But we miss more than we grasp, and the effort needed to pierce the veil of foreignness and hear the patterns that make meaning wears us out.

It is unlikely that anyone who has been a Christian for any length of time comes to Revelation as a blank slate, blissfully undecided about all matters pertaining to the form and significance of the book. Through teaching, preaching, or reading you have probably been exposed to one or more of the three perspectives on the thousand years spoken of in Revelation 20 and to one or more of the four views concerning the relationship between Revelation's visions and the events to which they refer. It is an advantage to begin reading with a pattern in mind, but if the paradigm is so deeply embedded in our minds that it cannot be corrected by what we find in particular passages, our framework may obscure rather than illumine the message.

For this reason I have departed from the common practice in books on Revelation, which typically place in their introductions a survey of the premillennial, postmillennial, and amillennial interpretations of Revelation 20 and of the preterist, historicist, idealist, and futurist approaches to the book. Instead of putting this discussion up front, tempting readers to choose sides at the outset, I have moved it to the end as an appendix. Readers who feel that they must know to which camp I belong before we study the text together can turn immediately to that appendix—but I would encourage you not to. Should we not first try to reach an understanding of Revelation's message, as inductively as we can from specific passages and their larger context, and then ask which label best fits what we have seen and heard?

Let us then follow in Moses Stuart's footsteps, circling and recircling through Revelation with patience, expecting that each pass through its lush imagery will unveil new beauties as well as new con-



nections between truths previously discovered. To begin the exploration, however, we do need some general sense of the terrain that lies before us. This chapter proposes seven principles, derived inductively from what Revelation says about itself and shows us about itself. These principles taken together provide a strategy for seeing what God intends to bring before the eyes of our hearts. A brief rationale for each principle is offered in order to show how it is rooted in the text. As we work through Revelation section by section, I invite you to judge whether these principles are keys that fit this New Testament treasury and unlock its riches.

Principles for Reading Revelation

Revelation Is Given to Reveal. Although we have noted Professor Stuart's commendable caution in approaching Revelation, we must not let ourselves be intimidated by the strangeness of its visions or the controversies that swarm, locustlike, around it. Our starting point should be confidence that God has given this book not to confuse, terrify, or divide his people but to give us light, to reveal to us the invisible forces and the secrets of his invincible plan that make sense of visible events and movements experienced by his church in the world. God's purpose for Revelation is disclosed throughout the prologue (1:1–3):

The *Revelation* of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to *show* to His bond-servants, the things which must shortly take place; and He sent and *communicated* 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 all that he saw. 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.⁵

Each of the italicized words emphasizes that God's purpose for Revelation is not to confuse his servants or obscure our perception of his ways in the world but the reverse.

5. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from NASB (updated edition, 1995).

“Revelation” represents the Greek word *Apokalypsis*, and hence some English versions and scholars speak of this book as the Apocalypse; this noun is cognate to a verb (*apokalypstō*) that speaks of the removal of a veil or other covering to disclose what lies behind it (see Matt. 10:26). Paul speaks of Jesus’ second coming in visible splendor as “the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:7; cf. 2 Thess. 1:7).

The purpose of this revelation is “to show His bond-servants what must soon take place.” The verb *show* (*deiknymi*) implies that the message of the book has been communicated to John in visible form, as the phrase “to all that he saw” makes explicit. There may also be a visual connotation to the Greek verb represented by “communicated” (*sēmainō*), which is distantly related to the Greek word for “sign” (*sēmeion*, Rev. 12:1, 3; 15:1).⁶ We could capture the Greek play on words by translating the verb “signified,” showing its kinship with “sign.” This book discloses its message by impressing vivid, sometimes startling, pictures on our imaginations.

The beatitude pronounced on one who reads and “those who hear” and keep these prophetic words provides special encouragement to approach this book with the expectation that God intends to make its message clear to those who seek it. This blessing envisions the common situation in the early church, when copies of New Testament writings were extremely rare and literacy levels low in some regions and classes. The scene is of one reader standing in the congregation, reading Revelation aloud from start to finish, while the rest of the Christians (“those who hear”) experienced its words only by hearing. The promise of blessing that opens Revelation may astonish our text-oriented minds, awash as we are in printed Bibles, concordances, com-

6. A visual element seems present in the other three uses of this Greek word in the Johannine literature: “But He was saying this [i.e., that he must be lifted up from the earth] to *indicate* the kind of death by which He was to die” (John 12:33); “to fulfill the word of Jesus which He spoke, *signifying* by what kind of death He was about to die” (John 18:32, referring to 12:33); “Now this He said [i.e., that Peter would be tied and taken where he did not wish], *signifying* by what kind of death he would glorify God” (John 21:19). G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 50–52, demonstrates that the wording of Rev. 1:1 alludes to Dan. 2:28–30, 45 LXX, in which *sēmainō* highlights the symbolic form of the king’s vision of the great statue and the stone.

mentaries, and Bible-search software. How could anyone understand Revelation well enough to keep its words and receive its promised blessing without flipping pages back and forth, checking cross references, consulting concordances and commentaries? But God promises his blessing to people who experience the Book of Revelation by hearing it and who take its message to heart. This means that the besieged believers scattered throughout the cities of western Asia Minor (now Turkey) in the first century, who had not read it with their own eyes, could nevertheless understand the core of its message with sufficient clarity to respond to it as God desired and to receive from it the comfort, encouragement, and correction that God wanted them to receive—to be blessed (in the rich, biblical sense of blessing) through this word, this means of grace.⁷

Revelation Is a Book to Be Seen. John characterizes the message to which he bears witness as “the word of God and . . . the testimony of Jesus Christ,” adding the important description, “even to all that he saw” (Rev. 1:2). The motif of what the prophet saw is so pervasive in Revelation (the verb appears fifty-two times with John as its subject) that it is easy to overlook. But this opening statement, which equates John’s testimony to God’s word and Jesus Christ with what he saw, shows that we must not ignore it. It indicates the book’s genre and is therefore a guide to the reading strategy we must use if we are to see its message.⁸ The visible, visionary mode of the message

7. They did have advantages in understanding that we do not. They knew, by living in their cities and their churches, more information about the culture and context to which Revelation was addressed than our most rigorous scholarship can discover at this distance of almost two millennia.

8. Readers with visibly challenged imaginations will do well to view the powerful illustrations in Jay E. Adams and Michael W. Carroll, *Visions of the Revelation* (Virginia Beach: Donning, 1991). Carroll, an elder in the Presbyterian Church in America, is a founder of the International Association of Astronomical Artists and has served as artistic consultant to the Reuben H. Fleet Space Theater and Science Center in San Diego, California. His paintings vividly dramatize the visions while showing respect for what John does not tell us and for the pervasive biblical disapproval of human attempts to portray God’s being graphically (The Donning Co./Publishers, 184 Business Park Dr., Ste. 106, Virginia Beach, VA 23462).

is reemphasized in the prophetic commission given to John by the voice of the One like a son of man: “Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches” (1:11). Revelation comes to us, as it came to the seven churches, in writing, but it is literature that paints for us the scenes that John has seen.⁹

Revelation is a book of symbols in motion. What John has seen in prophetic vision is the true character of events, individuals, forces, and trends, the appearance of which is quite different on the physical, sociocultural, observable plane. One of the key themes of the book is that things are not what they seem. The church in Smyrna appears poor but is rich, and it is opposed by those who claim to be Jews but are Satan’s synagogue (Rev. 2:9). Sardis has a reputation for life but is dead (3:1). Laodicea thinks itself rich and self-sufficient, but this church is destitute and naked (3:17). The beast seems invincible, able to conquer the saints by slaying them (11:7; 13:7); their faithfulness even to death, however, proves to be their victory over the dragon that empowered the beast (12:11). What appear to the naked eye, on the plane of human history, to be weak, helpless, hunted, poor, defeated congregations of Jesus’ faithful servants prove to be the true overcomers who participate in the triumph of the Lion who conquered as a slain Lamb. What appear to be the invincible forces controlling history—the military-political-religious-economic complex that is Rome and its less lustrous successors—is a system sown with the seeds of its self-destruction, already feeling the first lashes of the wrath of the Lamb. On the plane of visible history things are not what they appear, so Revelation’s symbols make things appear as they are. Its surprising, paradoxical imagery discloses the true identity of the church, its enemies, and its Champion. Paradox is central to the symbolism. Not only are things not what they appear to be in history, but also typically their true identities as portrayed in the visions are the opposite of their appearance in the world.

The explicit identification of certain symbols makes plain this disparity between surface appearance and visionary presentation. The

9. William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1939), 50: “The entire book consists of changing scenes, moving pictures, active symbols. . . . It is, *as it were*, a ‘sound-film’” (emphasis in the original).



seven stars that John sees in the hand of the Son of Man “are the angels of the seven churches,” and the lampstands among whom the Son of Man walks “are the seven churches” (Rev. 1:20). The harlot dressed luxuriously in purple, scarlet, gold, and gems “is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth” (17:18), and the seven heads of the beast on which she sits “are seven mountains . . . and seven kings” (17:9–10). The fine, clean linen from which the wedding dress of the Lamb’s bride is fashioned “is the righteous acts of the saints” (19:8). The dragon-serpent is “the devil and Satan” (20:2). In the physical world the church in Laodicea looks like a gathering of people, not a lampstand. The great city looks like a collection of buildings, streets, inhabitants, and social and commercial institutions, not a loose woman gaudily dressed. But the symbols show us something about the church, the great city, the bride, and the Enemy, revealing what does not appear to the naked eye. They display the true identity of these individuals and institutions with a vividness that could not be matched by merely conceptual description. The strength of symbolism is vividness, for often a picture is worth a thousand words.

The challenge of symbolism, however, is its ambiguity. All forms of metaphor, analogy, and simile place a demand on the reader to discern the precise point of comparison between two things that are dissimilar in many respects but alike in at least one. This is why Jesus exhorts those who hear his parables: “He who has ears, let him hear” (Matt. 13:9; Luke 14:35), a summons that is echoed in each of his letters to the churches of Asia (Rev. 2:7, 17, 29, etc.; see also 13:9). As the parable of the sower challenges its hearers to recognize in what sense a farmer scattering seed resembles and illustrates the coming of God’s kingdom, so the symbols of Revelation demand eyes that see, ears that hear, and a heart that understands what links the image to its referent (cf. Matt. 13:13–16, alluding to Isa. 6:9–10). In introducing two of its significant symbols, the beast and the harlot, Revelation insists that wisdom is needed to see what the symbols say about the realities they portray (Rev. 13:18; 17:9).

The challenge of drawing the right connection between the symbol and its referent is complicated not only by the paradoxical juxtapositions of Revelation’s symbolism but also by the application of multiple

symbols, themselves apparently incompatible, to the same referent. John hears the promise that the triumphant Lion from Judah's tribe has authority to open the sealed scroll of God's purposes, but what he sees is a Lamb, standing though slain (Rev. 5:5–6). He hears the census of Israel's army, 144,000 sealed from destruction, but he sees an innumerable host from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue (7:4–14; 14:1–5).

The ambiguity intrinsic to symbolism helps to explain the diversity of interpretations that have been offered throughout the church's reflection on the Book of Revelation. Students of Scripture differ regarding the extent of the symbolism in the book, the criteria by which connections between symbols and their referents should be drawn, and the identification of the referents to which particular symbols point. Some have felt that in interpreting all biblical prophecy, whether in the Old Testament or in Revelation, the objectivity of the interpretive process and the historicity of God's acts could be safeguarded by assuming that prophetic speech should be interpreted literally where it can possibly be taken literally and symbolically only in texts that label images as symbolic or in which literalness yields an impossible or contradictory meaning.

In Revelation, however, a literal-where-possible mode of operation raises more problems than it solves. In the first place, the word *literal* is troublesome. It seems typically to be used to signify that the image in a prophet's vision corresponds physically to its historical referent. Hence, when God promises a regathering of Israel in his land, this promise must be fulfilled in a resettlement of physical descendants of the patriarchs in the physical land between the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Or when God promises a rebuilt temple (Ezek. 40–48), this promise cannot find fulfillment in a "spiritual house" constructed of "living stones" who are people (1 Peter 2:5). But this usage of "literal" overlooks the fact that the literal meaning of a piece of language depends on what type of language it is, its genre. The literal meaning of symbolic language is the symbolic correspondence between the imagery of the language and the referent that it describes.¹⁰

10. Vern S. Poythress, "Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1–6," *JETS* 36 (1993): 41–42, points out that there are four levels of meaning to which we need



Second, signals embedded throughout the Book of Revelation make it manifestly clear that visionary symbolism is the dominant feature of the book's genre. Not even the strongest advocate of a literal-where-possible hermeneutic expects that when we see Jesus in his resurrection body, a double-edged sword will proceed from his mouth (Rev. 1:16) or that he will look like a Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes (5:6). Even when symbols are not labeled as such, we sense instinctively that when we step into this book we are walking in a world of symbols. What appears as a beast in John's vision is, as scholars of all schools recognize, a world kingdom or world ruler who will not look like the image in the vision, with ten horns and seven heads and resembling a leopard, bear, and lion all at once. If we are to follow an interpretive rule of thumb in reading Revelation, it should be that we take what John sees as symbolic where possible. What then will anchor our interpretation of this highly symbolic book to the meaning that God intends it to convey? One anchor is found in our third principle.

Revelation Makes Sense Only in Light of the Old Testament. Professor Stuart's example and Professor Bauckham's book title have suggested how important it is to recognize that Revelation presents itself as the climax of prophecy, drawing together images that pervade Old Testament prophetic visions and bringing them to fulfillment. The display of divine splendor that initiates John's prophetic call (Rev. 1; 10) has appeared before as prophets were commissioned to carry God's message from his council chamber (Ezek. 1; Dan. 9–10). The beast that emerges from the sea in Revelation 13 is a composite of the four beasts of Daniel 7, namely, the world kingdoms that oppress the saints until the Son of Man receives royal dominion from the

to pay attention in a book marked by visionary symbolism, such as Revelation. The first level is linguistic, or what the words, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs mean in the linguistic setting of Hellenistic Greek. The second is visionary: the visual experience of John that is portrayed and described in the language. The third is referential: the persons, forces, or events in history to which the images that John saw refer or point. The fourth is symbolical: what the visionary level of meaning, the images John saw in his visions, are revealing about the referential level, the persons, forces, events that the images symbolize.

Ancient of Days. The two witnesses of Revelation 11 are the two olive trees of Zechariah 4, “the two anointed ones who are standing by the Lord of the whole earth” (Zech. 4:14). The woes of judgment that fall on the harlot Babylon (Rev. 18) echo those that fell on Israel’s ancient oppressors, Tyre (Ezek. 27) and Babylon (Jer. 51; Isa. 48).

Revelation’s symbolic vocabulary is drawn not only from the thesaurus of the prophetic literature but also from other parts of the Old Testament. The tree of life in paradise at the dawn of biblical history (Gen. 2:9) reappears at the consummation (Rev. 2:7; 22:2). The ancient serpent whose murderous lie seduced the woman and plunged the world into floods of misery (Gen. 3:1) is seen again, waging war against the woman, her son, and her other children—but this time his doom is sure and his time is short (Rev. 12; 20). Plagues that struck ancient Israel’s Egyptian oppressors (Exod. 7–12) strike the church’s persecutors (Rev. 8:7, 10, 12; 9:3; 11:6; 16:13), so the church’s exodus-deliverance is celebrated with the song of Moses and of the Lamb (Rev. 15:3; Exod. 15).

Although exact Old Testament quotations in Revelation are rare, allusion to Old Testament imagery is everywhere: Elijah and his nemesis Jezebel; Balaam, the prophet who masterminded the seduction of Israel; God’s temple, served by his kingdom of priests, offering incense prayers on the altar, from which the fire of judgment falls, as on Sodom and Gomorrah; Israel the Messiah’s mother; Israel the Lord’s bride; Israel’s twelve tribes, armed for holy war; God’s winepress of wrath; the water of life, offered free of charge; Jerusalem, the city of God. Yet God does not cut and paste Old Testament images, unchanged, into the texture of John’s visions. While remaining recognizable, they are modified and recombined into new configurations—as we would expect, since the sacrifice and resurrection of the Lamb have brought the warfare of the ages to a new phase and theater of operations. We dare not tackle the symbolism of Revelation without immersing our minds in the rich imagery of the Old Testament, but we also will pay attention to the transformation that these ancient pictures undergo as they are used to express the impending, climactic victory of the kingdom of God and of his Christ.



Numbers Count in Revelation. One aspect of the symbolism of Revelation is the use of significant numbers to signal the structure of John's visions to the listening congregation and to represent important concepts. Seven, ten, and twelve and some of their multiples are especially important.¹¹

Seven is the number of churches to which the book is addressed and consequently the number of letters/proclamations addressed by the risen Christ through his Spirit to the churches. Though other New Testament writings show that churches existed in other cities of western Asia Minor when Revelation was given, these seven represent the churches of Jesus Christ generally, since their number, seven, symbolizes completeness. Likewise the Lamb's seven horns symbolize his complete power, and his seven eyes, his complete knowledge through the Spirit's presence in the whole world (Rev. 5:6). The scroll of the purpose of God for "the things which must soon take place" (1:1) is sealed with seven seals (5:1), and the visions associated with the Lamb's breaking of them structure the second major section of the book (6:1–8:2). The angels' sounding of seven trumpets structures the third major section (8:6–11:18), portraying providential disasters that span the time between Christ's comings. These disasters, though limited in scope, provide previews of the total destruction to be poured out in the seven bowls, limitless in scope and "last, because in them the wrath of God is finished" (15:1, 7; 16). We also read of seven heads, seven hills, seven kings, and the seven Spirits of God.

The number ten is significant in itself when it numbers the dragon's heads (Rev. 12:3) and those of the beast (= kings; Rev. 13:1; 17:12; cf. Dan. 7:7) or signifies a brief, ten-day period of affliction to be endured (2:10). More frequently, however, it appears in its multiples. It is cubed to one thousand to symbolize a vast number of years (20:2–7) or cubed and multiplied by twelve to portray the vast dimensions (12,000 stadia [roughly 1,380 miles¹²]) in all directions—length, breadth, and height—of the new Jerusalem (21:16). Or it is cubed and multiplied by twelve squared to symbolize the full registration of armed

11. In several visions the number four also has symbolic import.

12. Clearly symbolic, since the length of ancient Israel, Dan to Beersheba, in literal physical geography is less than 150 miles.

warriors in each of Israel's tribes, the sealed "bond-servants of our God" who are the Lamb's army, purified for holy war (7:4–8; 14:1–5). In even larger multiples (thousands of thousands = millions; myriads [ten thousand] of myriads = hundreds of millions) it symbolizes the countless hosts of heavenly worshipers who praise the Lamb (5:11–12).

Twelve is the number of the people of God, identified with the tribes of Israel (Rev. 7:4–8; 21:12) and with the apostles of the Lamb (21:14). The number twelve is therefore employed in the symbolic presentation of God's people as the heavenly Jerusalem to enumerate its structural features such as gates and foundations and to measure the thickness (144 cubits [12²] = 216 feet) and the length, breadth, and height of its wall (12,000 stadia = 1,380 miles).

The symbolic use of numbers in Revelation is flexible. Readers unaccustomed to this flexibility are perplexed, for example, to read in the opening benediction: "Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne; and from Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:4–5). Does John propose to replace our triune understanding of God with a conception of one God in nine persons (Father, Son, seven Spirits)? Does he repudiate Paul's clearly trinitarian formula, "one Spirit . . . one Lord . . . one God and Father of all" (Eph. 4:4–6)? Some versions render the expression "sevenfold Spirit" (NIV margin), and this is accurate. The context of Revelation makes it clear that when John's description moves away from the apocalyptic imagery he inherited from Zechariah 4:10 to speak directly of the Referent to whom the imagery points, his language changes to singular: "I was in the Spirit in the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10; cf. 4:2; 17:3; 21:10); "Hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 22:17). John clearly knows that the Holy Spirit of God is one.¹³ Why then does he speak of the seven Spirits of God? The number seven symbolizes the Spirit's fullness and completeness. He is pictured as the seven lamps burning before the One seated on the throne—fully, completely present with the Father in heaven (4:5). He is also pictured as the Lamb's seven

13. Zechariah also knows the unity of the Spirit, for in the same text that speaks of seven lamps (Zech. 4:3) and eyes (v. 10) is the promise, "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the LORD of hosts" (v. 6).



eyes, “sent out into all the earth”—fully, completely present with the church, knowing each congregation’s strengths and weaknesses, its outward pressures and its inward reality (5:6). Just as one image of the beast’s seven heads can point to multiple referents, both seven hills and seven kings (17:9–10), so one referent, the Spirit, can be portrayed in multiple images, those of lamps and eyes.¹⁴ When we recognize the symbolic significance of numbers and the flexibility of numerical symbolism in Revelation, we will get the message that the numbers are intended to convey without pressing for a literal connection between the numerical measurements in the visions and the temporal, spatial, or demographic dimensions of their referents.

Revelation Is for a Church under Attack. The violence of Revelation’s visions have given children nightmares and offended the supposedly enlightened sentiments of adults. Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791) contended that the humane reader cannot be blamed for finding the Book of Revelation “unpleasant and repulsive” in its descriptions of God’s wrath on his enemies, for such visions conflict with the self-evident truth of “divine, all-inclusive love and charity for the restoration of men.”¹⁵ Such opinions, however, fail to understand the social and spiritual situation that Revelation addresses. Revelation is addressed to a church that is under attack. Its purpose, to reveal “things which must soon take place,” is not to satisfy idle eschatological curiosity or feed a hunger for revenge but to fortify Jesus’ followers in steadfast hope and holy living.

The seven beatitudes that punctuate the narrative promise God’s blessing on those who keep Christ’s word (Rev. 1:3; 22:7) even upon pain of death (14:13), who maintain purity in alert expectation of

14. Numbers also have a more complex symbolic function through an ancient practice called *gematria*, in which letters of the alphabet are assigned numerical value, making possible a code use of numerical sums to represent personal or national names. It appears that readers are signaled to use *gematria* to crack the code in Rev. 13:18, a possibility to which we will return. See Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, “Nero and the Beast,” 384–452.

15. J. S. Semler, *Treatise on the Free Investigation of the Canon* (1771–1775), quoted in Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 63–64.

Christ's return (16:15), who are invited to the Lamb's wedding feast (19:9), who have been beheaded for their faith and so share in the first resurrection (20:4–6) and share in the tree of life in the city of God (22:14). In these blessings we hear hints of the various forms of attack being launched against the church: persecution leading to martyrdom and seduction leading to defilement.

The church's struggle is also reflected in the promises made to the victor, the overcomer. Each letter to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3 closes with a promise “to him who overcomes,” and generally these promises reach ahead to the final victory portrayed in Revelation 19–22: to eat from the tree of life, to escape the second death, to share Christ's authority over the nations, to be a pillar in God's temple, inscribed with God's name, and so on. The precise form that overcoming must take in each church depends on the particular challenge to faith and faithfulness that confronts each congregation, whether the attack comes in the form of a threat to unity, or in external persecution, or in syncretism with pagan belief and practice, or in complacent compromise with the materialism of the surrounding culture.

The church's ultimate enemy, the dragon, “the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan” (Rev. 20:2), manifests the massive cunning symbolized in his seven heads (12:3) by attacking the church from within and without, through physical threat, spiritual deception, and material seduction. The visions of Revelation 12–19 symbolize these various avenues of assault as the beast from the sea (physical threat), the beast from the land (later called the false prophet; spiritual deception), and the harlot (material seduction). Though representing distinct forces by which the dragon seeks to separate the besieged bride from her triumphant Lord, these three form a devilish coalition in which the false prophet pours out lies to promote worship of the beast and the harlot rides on the beast and toasts the beast's victory with the martyrs' blood.

In response to these attacks, those who hold to “the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus” are called to endure and to stay pure. Because the enemy attacks ruthlessly, employing the intimidating force of Rome's armies and, by implication, the politico-military muscle of Rome's lesser successors, the people of Jesus must steel their hearts to



endure persecution in persistent hope. “Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus” (Rev. 14:12).¹⁶ The call to perseverance is obeyed not through monastic withdrawal from the hostile surrounding culture but through evangelistic confrontation with the culture. Perseverance is therefore related to the call to be a faithful witness on behalf of Jesus. “I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). It was John’s faithful testimony on behalf of Jesus that plunged him into the tribulation of exile on the prison-island Patmos. He is therefore an empathetic and credible witness to be sent by Jesus, the faithful witness (1:5; 3:14), to encourage and summon the churches to persevering hope and witness not in isolation from the world but in interaction with it.¹⁷

Because the serpent slips in subtly, luring Christ’s bride away through plausible lies and pleasant compromises, the church must also overcome by staying pure. The white garments of the victors symbolize their victory over defiling temptation and consequently their fitness to enter God’s temple as the kingdom of priests, to serve gladly in his presence (Rev. 3:4–5, 17–18; 22:14–15). Though their white linen presents a portrait of their righteous deeds (19:7–8), the purity that makes them presentable before the thrice-holy God is not their personal achievement but the result of the costliest of cleansers: “they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14).

Our interpretation of Revelation must be driven by the difference God intends it to make in the life of his people. If we could explain every phrase, identify every allusion to Old Testament Scripture or Greco-Roman society, trace every interconnection, and illumine every mystery in this book and yet were silenced by the intimidation of public opinion, terrorized by the prospect of suffering, enticed by afflu-

16. See also commendations for and calls to endurance in the letters to the churches (Rev. 2:2–3, 10, 13, 19, 25; 3:8, 10).

17. On the theme of witness or testimony in the face of affliction, see also Rev. 1:2; 2:13; 6:9; 11:3, 7; 12:11, 17; 17:6; 19:20; 20:4.

ent Western culture's promise of "security, comfort, and pleasure,"¹⁸ then we would not have begun to understand the Book of Revelation as God wants us to. The dragon's assault on the church comes in different forms and from different quarters in different times and places. In some parts of the world the attack comes head-on, through the persecuting violence of hostile governments or neighbors; in others the danger is insidious, a slow infection to numb the Body's discernment of error and weaken its immune system; in others the weapon is an appealing encouragement to enjoy the advantages of compromised conformity. But always, in every age and place, the church is under attack. Our only safety lies in seeing the ugly hostility of the enemy clearly and clinging fast to our Champion and King, Jesus.

Revelation Concerns "What Must Soon Take Place." Many of the time references in Revelation are puzzling and will require close attention in the chapters ahead: "ten days" (Rev. 2:10), "forty-two months" (11:2; 13:5), "one thousand two hundred and sixty days" (12:6), "a time and times and half a time" (12:14), "one thousand years" (20:2–7). One of the clearest, most literal time references, however, is the repeated description of the contents of John's visions as having to do with "things which must soon take place" (1:1). The prologue's call to hear and keep Revelation's message is reinforced with the motive: "for the time is near" (1:3).

Lest we suppose that some long delay or parenthesis lies unseen behind the scenes, between John's receiving of the visions and the events that the visions symbolize, the conclusion of the book returns to the opening motif of imminence with even greater clarity:

And he said to me, "These words are faithful and true"; and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to His bond-servants the things which must soon take place. "And behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book." (Rev. 22:6–7)

18. P. D. James, *The Children of Men* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 60, describing a culture devoid of hope and therefore devoid of conscience, responsibility, and compassion.



To this reprise of Revelation 1 is added an angelic instruction that plainly alludes to and contrasts with a command given to Daniel: “But as for you, Daniel, conceal these words and seal up the book until the end of time” (Dan. 12:4). Daniel’s sealing of his book symbolizes that a long period of time—a major epochal change—will separate his receiving the prophetic revelation from the fulfillment of its predictions: “for these words are concealed and sealed up for the end time” (Dan. 12:9; cf. 8:26). John, by contrast, is commanded not to seal up the words of his prophecy, “for the time is near” (Rev. 22:10). The Lamb has broken the sealed scroll and unfurled previews of God’s purposes for history not merely to comfort his people with the prospect of a long-distant relief, as Daniel’s prophecy did for his contemporaries, but also to comfort John’s first-century companions with the assurance that the coming months and years are firmly held in the Lamb’s strong hand.

This announcement, which opens and closes Revelation, that the book concerns matters that were to occur “soon” (in contrast to Daniel’s visions), is perplexing. Although scholarly opinion varies as to the date of Revelation, from as early as the 60s to the mid-90s, it is generally agreed that Revelation was written by the end of the first century. More centuries have elapsed between John’s day and ours than between Daniel’s day and the fulfillment of most of his prophecies. How then can John’s book concern things that would occur soon from the perspective of the members of seven first-century churches in western Asia Minor? Or is our time so far beyond the horizon that Revelation for us can focus only as a window on the past, not addressing directly either our present or our future?

To this knotty and important question we will return, but for the present we need to give due weight to the interpretive value of this principle: Revelation gave first-century Christians insight into the purposes of God in their time. We can at least conclude, therefore, that interpretations of the visions that lie completely beyond the original readers’ frame of reference are suspect. If we begin our inquiry with the assumption that God intended first-century believers to get the message of Revelation, we read its visions against the backdrop of Old Testament imagery rather than forcing them into the template of

twenty-first-century technologies or politics. This principle also encourages us to understand Revelation in the context of the cultural and intellectual forces that were affecting the churches of first-century Asia: religious institutions, political structures, military conflicts, natural disasters, and even, perhaps, the symbolic vocabulary of Jewish apocalyptic literature or pagan myth. God is so much the sovereign of history that he can use every dimension of his people's experience to communicate his word.

The Victory Belongs to God and to His Christ. The introduction to Revelation in the pages that follow will fall far short of the detail contained in Professor Stuart's two massive volumes. But abundance of detail can confuse rather than clarify, if we lack a sense of the pattern in which each piece of the puzzle has its place. The next chapter will address questions of the pattern of the book as a whole, the structure of the visions and their interrelationships with each other. The most significant pattern to be grasped, however, is the movement from conflict to victory and the identity of the victors.

Revelation is a book permeated by worship and punctuated throughout with songs of praise and celebration.¹⁹ Its worship not only extols God for his eternal attributes and creative power (Rev. 4:8, 11) but also especially celebrates God's redemptive triumph through the Lamb over the enemies that have threatened his church and challenged his supreme worthiness. Preeminently the scenes of worship and songs of praise celebrate the victory of Jesus the Lamb of God, the defeat and destruction of his and our enemies, the vindication of his martyrs, and the inauguration of the new heavens and earth (5:9–10, 12, 13; 7:10–12; 11:15–18; 15:3–4; 16:5–7; 19:1–7).

Though the enemies' might is portrayed in all its hideousness, Revelation's last word is not about the destructive power of the "prince of darkness grim" but rather about the joyful celebration of those re-

19. Readers' experience of hearing the worship in Revelation will be enriched by listening to great music based on the song texts in Revelation. In the classical tradition, the Revelation portions of Handel's oratorio *Messiah* are powerful despite their familiarity. In a more contemporary vein, I recommend Michael Card, *Unveiled Hope*, sound cassette/CD (Nashville: Covenant Artists/Myrrh, 1997).

deemed by Jesus, the Lord's Messiah. This hope motivates the suffering church to endure tribulation and the tempted church to remain a pure bride for her Groom.

Conclusion

This introductory chapter has identified some of the key interpretative principles that emerge from a careful observation of the literary genre to which Revelation belongs and from the way in which such works use language and imagery to convey their message. In the chapters to come we will put this strategy for seeing to the test as we work our way through the text of Revelation. To summarize our observations so far:

1. Revelation is given to reveal. It makes its central message so clear that even those who hear it can take it to heart and receive the blessing it promises.
2. Revelation is a book to be seen, a book of symbols in motion. Because the appearance of individuals and institutions in everyday experience often masks their true identity, Revelation is given in visions full of symbols that paradoxically picture the true identity of the church, its enemies, and its Champion.
3. Revelation makes sense only in light of the Old Testament. Not only the visions of such prophets as Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah but also historical events such as creation, the fall, and the exodus provide the symbolic vocabulary for John's visions.
4. Numbers count in Revelation. Since numbers are used symbolically in Revelation, we must discern the meaning they convey rather than trying to pull them as numbers directly into our experience, measured by calendars and odometers.
5. Revelation is for a church under attack. Its purpose is to awaken us to the dimensions of the battle and the strategies of the enemy, so that we will respond to the attacks with faithful perseverance and purity, overcoming by the blood of the Lamb.
6. Revelation concerns "what must soon take place." We must seek an understanding that touches the experience of our broth-



ers and sisters in seven first-century congregations scattered in the cities of western Asia Minor. Revelation is not about events and hostile forces remote from their struggle.

7. The victory belongs to God and to his Christ. Revelation is pervaded with worship songs and scenes because its pervasive theme—despite its gruesome portrait of evil’s powers—is the triumph of God through the Lamb. We read this book to hear the King’s call to courage and to fall down in adoring worship before him.

Another important component of our strategy for seeing is to note the ways in which the structure of Revelation reveals the relationship of its various visions and texts, providing the framework in which the pieces fit together. In the next chapter we will examine the features of this framework that provide the big-picture view of the book’s contents. We will also notice additional principles that emerge from the biblical text to guide us in connecting the visions to each other and to the realities that they symbolize.