

MURRAY McLELLAN

THE
TRIUMPHANT
CHRIST
UNVEILED

An introduction to

The Revelation

of Jesus Christ



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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Preface | 1 |
| Introduction | 2 |
| 1. Its use of symbols and images | 5 |
| 2. Numbers | 8 |
| 3. Use of the Old Testament and Intra-textual Connections | 11 |
| 4. Historical Context | 13 |
| 5. Finally: Things to Remember as We Study This Book | 17 |
| 6. Conclusion | 22 |
| Some Recommended Books | 23 |
| Contact | 24 |

Preface

Presented by Murray McLellan, an unworthy sinner upon whom the kindest of Kings has poured grace unimaginable. May it please God to use the following manuscript to advance the faith and joy of his people. My foremost desire is to magnify and exalt the Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Unto him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

Introduction

The Revelation has been written to reveal Jesus Christ in all his victorious glory, so that we will hold fast to him and stand firm against all opposition, until that day when God brings about his certain and ultimate victory. In other words, Revelation has been written to give us strength for today and hope for tomorrow.

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.”

Revelation 1:1

Few books in the Bible trigger as much intrigue, confusion, and even fear as the book of Revelation. While a few can't get enough of the book, more tend to shy away from it altogether. If you're part of this second group, don't beat yourself up; you're not alone.

Why is there such apprehension when it comes to Revelation? The most honest answer is because it's so wild and different—and therefore, hard to understand. Revelation is a unique book. It's not like Romans or Mark or Psalms.

It's filled with imagery, symbols, metaphors, and visions that seem otherworldly and mysterious.

Tied into this, Revelation is a book written in a style entirely foreign to us today, falling into the genre of apocalyptic literature. In fact, the word revelation comes from the Greek word *apokalupsis*, which means revelation or unveiling or disclosure. Revelation "unveiled" to the seven churches in Asia (and to us) shows that there is more in the spiritual realm than believers can see.

The difficulty we have today in understanding apocalyptic literature stems from our unfamiliarity with the genre, which often leads us to draw conclusions that the genre doesn't actually permit us to make.

Imagine an alien from another galaxy landing on Earth, and in an attempt to learn something about our planet they read the story "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." But because they have no knowledge of nursery rhymes, they draw conclusions about bears sleeping in beds, loving porridge, and needing to beware of marauding little girls who love to break and enter. Crazy as that sounds, that's the kind of mistake many make with apocalyptic literature, and understandably so, because it is a genre "alien" to most.

When you read a story that begins "Once upon a time," you automatically recognize that you're reading a children's story or nursery rhyme and not a book of history or science. Thus, you know not to conclude that wolves can huff and puff and blow houses down or that old women live in shoes. The same idea is true with apocalyptic literature. As soon a person in the first century AD picked up Revelation and read, in the Greek, "*apokalupsis Ieshua Christos*" (1:1) they would have instantly recognized what they were reading and how to apply it.

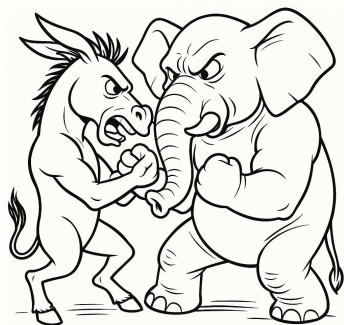
We could also use this analogy in our reading of poetry. Poetry is often used in the Bible to depict characteristics of God that other genres don't afford. In Psalm 91:4, for example, we read that God will cover us "*under his wings.*"

I don't think many would conclude from this text that God has wings; rather, the Psalmist was intending to convey that God is a place of safety and protection like a mother bird is to her babies. Let's apply this to our reading of Revelation: We must not read it from a context that the genre doesn't allow, but in a way that is consistent with its intent and genre.

The use of these symbols and images are designed to inform our minds and ignite our hearts. What are the marks of apocalyptic literature? What are those things we need to know about it in general, and the book of Revelation in particular, and keep in mind as we move ahead?

Its use of symbols and images

Apocalyptic literature in general, and Revelation in particular, is full of symbols and images (including colours and numbers), which are striking (to say the least) and are used to convey broader ideas and truths. After all, a picture is worth a thousand words. Like a picture or painting, if you lean in too close and look only at the detail, it's all a bit perplexing. But step back and look at the big picture, and Revelation not only becomes clearer, but it grabs our imaginations. Though we still use symbols and images to convey ideas today, it was even more common in the first century. Consider the following image (please forgive me that it's not Canadian).



A donkey and an elephant fighting

If you've lived in North America for any length of time you're familiar with images like this, representing the battle between the Republican Party, usually depicted by a red elephant, and the Democratic Party, usually depicted by a blue donkey. You'll also know that one animal represents an ideology that is distinctly different than the other. One is recognized as being conservative and the other liberal. You know this almost intuitively. In fact, if I removed the picture and I simply wrote "The donkey is waging war with the elephant this election year," you would probably deduce that I was speaking of the campaign fight between the Republicans and Democrats, not an actual fight between two literal animals.

Like the donkey and elephant above, the symbols in the book of Revelation communicate real truths, but not in a literal way. For example, when Jesus says, '*I am the gate*' (John 10:7) we do not think that Jesus is literally a wooden gate. Rather, the image communicates that to enter the 'fold' of God, one must go through Jesus. Jesus is the doorway to salvation. The same is true for the symbols in Revelation. They are meant to capture our imagination and help us to think more deeply about the truths being communicated. In Revelation we see images like a son of man, lamp-stands, stars, eyes of fire, thrones, horns, creatures, beasts, dragons, a lion, a lamb (we actually see a lamb who speaks like a dragon!), a woman clothed with the sun, another

woman sitting on a scarlet beast, and the Holy City as a bride. And that's just scratching the surface. The task of the reader in this is to determine what these images represent and convey.

Some people have tried to recreate the fascinating images in the Revelation. However, we must remember that when God gave John this imagery, He didn't give John a sketch pad. This revelation is designed to be read and thought out in your mind. The images are given to denote truth - not a picture. (i.e. We'll see when Jesus is described with symbolic imagery in verses 13-17 of the first chapter, it is not to help us get a mental picture or photograph of what Jesus looks like!)

Numbers

Numbers “count” in Revelation and most often represent something much more significant than their numerical value. The most common numbers used in Revelation are three, four, seven, ten, and twelve, or groupings thereof. What do these numbers convey?

The number three represents God, who’s often described in three-part phrases (“who is and who was, and who is to come”) and ascribed triple attributes (“holy, holy, holy” or “glory and honour and power”). In addition, the one true God exists in three persons: God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The number four is the number of creation. It’s represented by four living creatures in the heavenly throne vision. If you think of the four points of a compass, it helps to connect with all of the earth in visions like this: “four angels standing at the four corners of the earth holding back the four winds.”

The number six symbolizes man and human weakness, the evils of Satan, and the manifestation of sin. Man was created on the sixth day. Men are appointed six days to labour. A Hebrew slave was to serve six years and be released in the seventh year. Six years were appointed for the land to be sown and harvested.

Seven (four plus three, perhaps) represents perfection and completeness. God rested on the seventh day. In Revelation, the Lamb has seven horns and seven

eyes, which symbolize his absolute power and knowledge. The scroll has seven seals because it contains the definitive and full judgments of God. The seven churches at the beginning of the book are symbolized by seven lamp-stands and seven stars. While these are actual churches, they're also representative of the church as a whole. What's written to them is also addressed to the wider community of Jesus's followers. The throne vision depicts the "seven spirits of God." As a translation note in the NIV explains, this is the "seven-fold" Spirit of God—the perfect (divine) Holy Spirit. The angels, in their song, ascribe seven attributes to the Lamb, acknowledging his divine perfections. It is more than telling that Jesus said to Peter he should be willing to forgive "seventy times seven times." Jesus wasn't saying that Peter should be willing to forgive people 490 times, but whatever amount is necessary, perfect, and complete.

In the Old Testament the number ten represents completeness in the human dimension, since people usually have ten fingers and ten toes. That, more than likely, is why God gave an embodiment of the law in the Ten Commandments. The number is also used in this sense when Job says to his friends, "Ten times now you have reproached me." This is not a literal count, because the friends have only spoken five times to that point in the book; the number means "You've reproached me as many times as a human can bear." Ten, meaning what is complete or ultimate in human experience, is also seen in Daniel's vision of the four beasts; the last one, representing a supreme empire, has ten horns. The image and the number with its significance are echoed in John's description of the dragon in Revelation.

Since there were twelve tribes of Israel, the number twelve represents the covenant community in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Jesus himself appealed to this symbol when he chose twelve apostles. Through this number he was declaring that a new kind of covenant community was coming into existence through his life and ministry. In Revelation the number twelve

is used through-out the book to represent the community of God's people. Take time to notice how often it's used in the depiction of the New Jerusalem in chapter 21, for example.

Twelve can also be used in multiples and in combination with other numbers. For example, there are twenty-four elders in the heavenly throne vision, which some argue is used to depict the continuity of the first and the new covenant communities. The number 144,000, for its part, comes from $12 \times 12 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10$, representing the fullness of the community of believers throughout time and space from the first and new covenants. The new Jerusalem is measured out as a perfect cube in chapter 21: 12,000 stadia (a stadia was a unit of measure) in length, width, and height. We are not meant to read this numerical layout and conclude that the city is literally built in a perfect cube but that it is a city that is literally perfect, complete, and the home of God's people.

Use of the Old Testament and Intra-textual Connections

An accurate understanding of Revelation rests heavily on a basic (at least) understanding of the Old Testament. Revelation uses the Scripture more than any other New Testament book. The imagery used in Revelation is not new with the apostle John in the first century. The imagery has its roots in the Old Testament Scriptures. There are close to 1000 references and allusions to the Old Testament in the 22 chapters of this book.

It's vitally important to recognize the strong connection between Revelation and the Old Testament because the sheer mass of symbolism and the foreignness of the symbols can be overwhelming. Most of the symbols referred to in Revelation already occur in the Old Testament, making knowledge of it a crucial ingredient in understanding Revelation.

One example of the Revelation–Old Testament connection is seen in the Exodus event. Consider:

- The evil power that persecutes God's people is symbolically referred to as Egypt (Rev. 11:8).

- The plagues of darkness, hail, locusts, boils, frogs, water turning to blood, and so forth in Revelation all recall similar calamities that befell Egypt prior to the Exodus.
- As Christians are freed by the blood of Christ (Rev. 1:5), so too did the Jewish people's freedom come only after shedding the blood of the Passover lamb.
- The dragon that persecutes the woman (Rev. 12:3ff) recalls Egypt, which is referred to as a dragon in Ezekiel 29:3 and Psalm 74:13.
- After escaping from the dragon, the woman, like Israel, is nourished in the wilderness (Rev. 12:6,14).
- As Israel sang the Song of Moses after safely crossing the sea, so too do the redeemed sing "the song of Moses... and the song of the Lamb" (Rev. 15:3).

Just as it is important to read Revelation in light of the Old Testament, it's equally important to read Revelation in light of Revelation—meaning later parts of Revelation are often intentionally connected to earlier parts and vice versa. To read the first couple of chapters of Revelation, for example, and draw conclusions without having read the entire book would only lead to wild and error-filled landing points.

Historical Context

As mentioned earlier, one of the barriers to our understanding of Revelation is that not only are we reading a genre alien to most, but also a letter that was written at a time and place (first century Asia Minor) where Rome ruled and Christians were being martyred for their faith. Many of the images and symbols used in Revelation are meant to convey powers and places present in that day (Rome, emperors, etc.). This context needs to be considered first when attempting to understand the meaning of the text.

Most of all, we need to approach the book, like any of God's books to us, with humility and Spirit-dependence.

As we enter this study of Revelation, here are some important things to keep in mind:

IT WAS WRITTEN TO A SPECIFIC GROUP OF PEOPLE, LIVING IN A SPECIFIC TIME AND PLACE.

Revelation is a letter, actually the longest letter in the Bible, and thus it was written to specific people at a specific time meeting specific needs. John was writing to a first century group of churches to encourage them as they lived under the tyranny of the Romans. Revelation was written for us but not to

us. Therefore, Revelation does not say something to us that it did not say to its original recipients.

The seven churches described in the book of Revelation were real life churches in the Roman province of Asia (modern Turkey) - Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea.



Contextually, the seven churches faced immense cultural pressure and political persecution.

1. Christians were imprisoned, tortured, and killed under Emperor Nero in AD 65. This continued under Emperor Vespasian in AD 67.
2. Church morale suffered with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the deaths of leaders like Peter, Paul, and Timothy.
3. In AD 92, Emperor Domitian ordered all Roman citizens to worship him and legally required Christians to renounce their faith.

IT WAS WRITTEN AS A BOOK OF ENCOURAGEMENT.

Revelation is not meant to scare the non-believer but to encourage the believer most of all. Therefore, Revelation calls us to see our present in light of the reality of things that are unseen but fully real. Yes, we need to see our present in light of the future, but we also need to see our present in light of the invisible realities of the present.

IT WAS WRITTEN TO UNVEIL THE UNSEEN.

This piggybacks on the previous point. Revelation's goal isn't just to tell us what's going to happen in the future but to peel back the layers on our present.

As Darrell Johnson writes, "*[Revelation]* is to show us that things are not as they seem." Revelation seeks to encourage the believer by showing them what is taking place in the heaven lies in the present.

IT WAS WRITTEN NOT TO REVEAL NEW TRUTH BUT TO TEACH US THE ALREADY REVEALED TRUTH IN A NEW WAY.

What we see in Revelation is nothing that we haven't seen in the rest of the Bible; it's just being said in a new way.

THE VISIONS OF REVELATION ARE NOT LINEAR OR WRITTEN IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

John sees the visions consecutively, but the realities they symbolize do not happen consecutively.

IT WAS WRITTEN NOT ONLY AS AN APOCALYPSE AND A LETTER BUT AS A PROPHECY TOO.

John writes in Revelation 1:3, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy.” In that, we need to remember that the biblical word prophecy does not connote prediction as much as it does declaration. The heart of Biblical prophecy is not, most of all, “Look at what’s coming” but “Thus says the Lord.”

Therefore:

1. We must resist the inclination to read Revelation in a linear or chronological way.
2. Revelation presents a series of visions that progress in the order that John saw them.
3. Thus, the question is not, “What happens next?” but rather, “What did John see next?”

Finally: Things to Remember as We Study This Book

Pray

As we go through this study, ask God to reveal what he wants you to learn. He has something specific for you to take away from this study!

The Source of What We are About to Read and Study

- Revelation 1:1a The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.
- We see the source of the message of this book has come from God the Father himself, and given to Jesus to get to us, his servants, through angels delivering the message to John. John wrote the message conveyed to him to seven churches in Asia. It was written to them, but for us!

Ground Rules

- Questions are encouraged in our Gospel Community Group gatherings.
- If we cannot prove something clearly within the pages of Scripture, we cannot stand on it. It is only a guess. You may think it is an educated guess or the only possible rational solution, but it is a guess nonetheless.
- As we move through the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ (or any other book of the Bible, for that matter) it is an adventure. In one sense it doesn't matter where we end up. We just want to have everyone involved in the process and go where God's word takes us, as we search together for truth.
- We may end up with a number of things in Revelation that we will be unable to nail down clearly. I think that is by design.
- This is God's breathed out word and it communicates truth, but you have to take into account the form in which it is written when you read it. Of course, God purposely did it this way.

A Promised Blessing

- This is the only book of the Bible where we are given a specific blessing for reading and heeding its words.
- A blessing is something for your good and happiness in your relationship with the Lord.
- The blessing that is to be had in reading the book of Revelation

cannot be tied to nailing down specific details about every image. That is good!

- With this in mind, then, the truths for our blessing must be obvious and straightforward, so that every believer who reads it, will receive blessing from the truths revealed.

Some of the Main Themes

The Sovereignty of our Lord

From our vantage point it can appear that history is running amuck. Yet, the book of Revelation tells us very clearly that all of history is in under the wise control of the One who made all things. What a blessing! When you read Revelation you realize all of history is choreographed to bring about a desired and planned end.

Comfort and warning

To the unbeliever this is a book of warning. To the believer, it is a book of comfort, for not only is history under control, but you and I, the believers, are going to be perfectly cared for, no matter what. Thus, this book is for the strengthening and edification of the saints in its intent. The Revelation (Apokalupsis) is an "unveiling" - a revealing - that gives us a look behind the scenes. We are shown the victorious Lamb. To read about the victory of this Christ and His church fill us with comfort. All the Lamb's enemies will be utterly defeated and cast into the lake of fire.

God wins – in fact, Jesus has already won!

The fact that Revelation often stirs anxiety, fear, and frustration in God's people is a sure sign that it's been misunderstood, misapplied, and poorly taught. This book is a hopeful, joyful celebration of God's victory! It is meant to inspire joy, confidence, worship, obedience, and mission! No one who studies Revelation can miss its core message: 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.

Jesus the Lamb has already won the decisive victory through his sacrificial death, but his church continues to be assaulted by the dragon. By revealing the spiritual realities lying behind the church's trials and temptations and by dramatically affirming the certainty of Christ's triumph in the new heaven and earth, the visions granted to John both warn the church and fortify it to endure suffering and to stay pure from the defiling enticements of the present world order. Jesus has already won.

That's the consistent, hopeful message of the book of Revelation. God wants us to know "the rest of the story" so that we can worship Jesus faithfully in the present and rejoice in our glorious future.

How Should We Read The Revelation of Jesus Christ?

- You should read Revelation doxologically. Let it move you to awe and worship and joy and reverence. Engage your emotions and affections. Grow in your love for God and his glory.
- You should read Revelation canonically – that is, as the culmination of the biblical storyline. It's not an isolated book. Don't treat it as such.

- You should read Revelation reflectively. This book is meant to captivate, to impress, to awaken the senses. Enjoy its imagery. Savor its language. Reflect on its metaphors.
- You should read Revelation communally. Read it with other Christians – present and past. Study to see how Christians throughout history have understood it. Ask questions. Have conversations. Argue if you need to. Good theology is always forged in community.
- You should read Revelation Christologically. Jesus is the hero of the story. If you find yourself getting fascinated by peripheral things... repent and return. It's about the Lion (Rev 5), the King (Rev 11), the Lamb (Rev 14), the Warrior (Rev 19), the Bridegroom (Rev 21), the Beginning and the End (Rev 22)... it's about Jesus!

Conclusion

Despite everything that is going wrong with our world, God remains in control. This book is a summons to Christian believers to 'lift up their hearts', and to see their tribulations in relation to a victorious, reigning and returning Christ. And when we see history, our present and our future from heaven's perspective, it will encourage us to trust God and remain faithful to the end. John does this by presenting to us the visions he receives - visions that take us beyond the chaos of history to see God at work behind the scenes; visions that raise our eyes from this present world to the world above, and the world to come. Above all, he shows us a vision of who Jesus is: the ascended reigning Lord, the Lamb who was slain but who now lives for ever, the one who speaks with a voice like the sound of a waterfall, and the one who holds the people of God safe in his hands. More than anything else, we need an unveiling of the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ. For this is what a beleaguered and persecuted church needs more than anything else, not a series of prophecies about the past or the future, or a coded panorama of church history, but a disclosure of the incomparable Christ, once crucified, now resurrected and reigning, and one day returning in power and great glory.

May we see how the message unveiled in this book is just as relevant and applicable to our lives today as it was 2,000 years ago.

Some Recommended Books

- Discipleship on the Edge by Darrell Johnson, published by Canadian Church Leaders Network, 2021. (436 pages)
- More Than Conquerors by William Hendricksen, published by Baker Books, 1940 - paperback edition published in 2015. (240 pages)
- Triumph of the Lamb by Dennis E. Johnson, published by P & R Publishing, 2001. 384 pages
- The Overcomers: God's Vision for You to Thrive in an Age of Anxiety and Outrage by Matt Chandler, published by Thomas Nelson, 2024. (256 pages)
- Of course the number one book is the Scripture itself. Read Revelation over again and again, sometimes in a single sitting.

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