

Reading *Revelation*...

If you are following the current SAPC Reading Challenge, you will begin reading Revelation tomorrow. The book of Revelation is the subject of much debate and speculation. This can be very intimidating. Over the next four weeks, I want to highlight some important considerations for reading and understanding this fascinating book.

First, *consider its practical relevance.*

It was written by John to seven churches in the late first century AD. These were seven actual churches with real life issues. They represent the church as a whole from the first century down to today. We face the same underlying issues as they did and also need to hear the same message.

One could summarize the purpose of the book as follows: *to comfort and exhort the church in the midst of suffering and spiritual battle against the forces of evil.* Sounds practical, doesn't it? Consider how the book describes itself:

“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near” (1:3 ESV).

This verse tells us some important things about the content of the book. First, there is blessing to be found in it (not something to avoid). Second, it assumes that you can understand it on some level. Lastly, there are things to ‘keep’ in the book—practical things to follow and obey. Contrary to popular opinion, it is an inherently *practical* book.

In light of the above considerations, we can say that the book of Revelation is relevant to the first century and it is relevant to subsequent centuries down to today, until Christ returns. Therefore, Revelation is not all about the future, nor is it all about the past. It has practical relevance for all of God's people living in the ‘last days,’ which, biblically defined, refers to the time between the comings of Christ (the inter-advent period).

As you begin reading this wonderful book, remember that it is not merely a speculative riddle. It is practical and relevant to what we face today in our context. There is blessing to be found in it. Ask the Lord to open your eyes to see wonderful things in His word.

Jason Hunt

Reading *Revelation*, Part II

Last week, we looked at the importance of considering the *practical relevance* of Revelation. The whole book (not just chapters 2-3) was written and sent to the seven actual churches mentioned in the book (cf. 1:4, 11; 22:16).

Another important thing to consider is *genre*. What is genre? Simply put, it refers to a type or kind of writing. Why is it important to consider this? Knowing the genre of a book provides a *reading strategy*—a set of expectations and assumptions (appropriate to the type of writing) that will help you to understand the meaning of a text. We do this all the time in everyday life. For example, when we encounter a news article, we expect it to claim to relate historical facts, usually with the ‘news’ appearing early in the article, and as you read further, you get the backstory, and so on. If we encounter a poem, we expect imagery and symbolism, not a chronological, historical narrative. So, we are always engaging in genre consideration, though we often do so intuitively, not self-consciously.

So, what is the genre of Revelation? We should let the text itself dictate our answer. The text suggests a *threefold genre*—prophecy (1:3), apocalyptic (‘revelation’) (1:1), and epistle (letter) (1:4; 22:21). Because there are epistle elements, we should expect pastoral exhortation and encouragement. Because there are prophetic and apocalyptic elements, we should expect the use of poetry, symbols, symbolic numbers, dreams, visions, and angelic beings (i.e. the same types of things found in prophetic and apocalyptic portions of the OT [e.g., Ezekiel, Daniel, etc.]).

Vern Poythress, in his wonderful introductory commentary on Revelation, *The Returning King*, makes the profound observation that “*Revelation is a picture book, not a puzzle book*” (p.13). Indeed, John is told to “*write what you see*” (1:11). We shouldn’t become preoccupied with isolated details in a way that runs contrary to the genre of the book. We should expect snapshots, using symbolic images (largely drawn from the OT), not a running video giving us historical narrative in advance.

As we will see, Revelation gives us snapshot pictures of the ‘last days’ (i.e. from Christ’s first coming to His second coming). May the Lord bless your reading of His word.

Jason Hunt

Reading Revelation, Part III

We have already highlighted the need to consider the practical relevance and genre of the book of Revelation. Next, it is important to consider the *structure* of the book.

There have been many proposals for identifying the structure of Revelation. Some of them are extremely complicated. This is often the result of trying to plot out an historical narrative of the future. This not only runs contrary to the genre of the book (as we have seen), but also creates problematic scenarios. For example, a literalistic narrative approach has to make sense of multiple snapshots of the return of Christ (e.g., the same event of final judgment at Christ's return is described in: 6:12-17; 11:13, 19; 14:14-20; 16:17-21; 19:11-21; 20:7-15). This would contradict what is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture—that there is only one second coming of Christ to consummate both, judgment and salvation.

So, how *should* we make sense of the structure of the book?

Based on the subject matter and the images used, it seems to be structured in parallel visions, describing the same period of time—namely, the time from Christ's first coming to his return ('last days'). There is a precedent for apocalyptic literature functioning this way in the OT (e.g., Daniel 2 and 7). In short, we get seven snapshots of the 'last days.' The structure of Revelation has also been described as *progressive parallelism*, meaning that with each picture of the 'last days,' it becomes progressively more detailed and vivid. This is not unlike watching a play in a football game which is reviewed from a number of different camera angles—each one more 'zoomed-in' than the previous. You are watching the same thing, but from different angles, you see more details.

The seven sections of the book can be generally summarized in the following way (chapters are in parentheses):

1. Seven Churches (1-3)
2. Seven Seals (4-7)
3. Seven Trumpets (8-11)
4. Persecuting Dragon (12-14)
5. Seven Bowls (15-16)
6. Fall of Babylon (17-19)
7. Great Consummation (20-22)

Some scholars have observed that in chapters 1-11, the focus is more on the war between the world and the church, whereas in chapters 12-22, the focus is more on the deeper war between Satan and Christ. It is important to note that the above sections are *not* chronological, but *parallel*. Each vision covers the *same* time period. We know this to be the case, because of the subject matter and images spoken of in each, understood in the context of the whole Bible.

Keep reading and be encouraged by our victorious Christ!

Reading Revelation, Part IV

As we have seen, a right understanding of the book of Revelation will have to take into account the following: *the practical relevance of the book, its genre, and its structure.*

Our last consideration for reading and understanding Revelation is to *consider its use of the OT and its place in the larger story of Scripture.*

Scholars have suggested that in the 404 verses (ESV) of the book, there are anywhere between 400 and 1000 references or allusions to the OT (note: the numbers vary depending on how one defines an ‘allusion’)! In short, Revelation is steeped in the OT. Often, like in other NT books, the OT is used more extensively than mere direct citation would indicate. The OT books used most often in Revelation are: Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Zechariah, and the Psalms (though, certainly others are also used—e.g., Genesis 1-2 in Revelation 21-22).

What are some practical implications of such use of the OT? There are many, but I will only mention two. First, we need to look primarily to the OT in order to understand the images and visions found in the book, not current headlines. Second, one reason many people have a hard time making sense of the book is because they are not familiar with the OT. This is yet another reason why we need to be reading through the whole Bible.

Not only do we need to understand Revelation in light of the OT, we also need to understand its place in the larger story of Scripture. How does it fit with all that has gone before? We should interpret Revelation in light of the larger context of redemptive history, not the other way around. This is merely restating the sound interpretive principle (just on a larger scale): we should interpret unclear passages using clear ones.

So, what is clearly taught elsewhere – that might be relevant to understanding the message of Revelation? First, we know that there is only one return of Christ (his second coming). Second, there is no gap between his second coming and the final judgment and resurrection. In other words, there is no gap between his second coming and the consummation of all things. Third, the kingdom of God (over which Christ reigns) was inaugurated at Christ’s first coming and will be consummated at his return. In sum, whatever issues arise in the book about Christ’s coming and His kingdom or reign, they must be understood in light of these clear teachings found elsewhere in Scripture.

I hope these four considerations are helpful to you as you have been reading through Revelation. I pray you are blessed and encouraged by the Lord as you read His word.

Jason Hunt