



the
unveiling

**unravelling
revelation**
part 1

The Unveiling - Introduction

What's in a name?

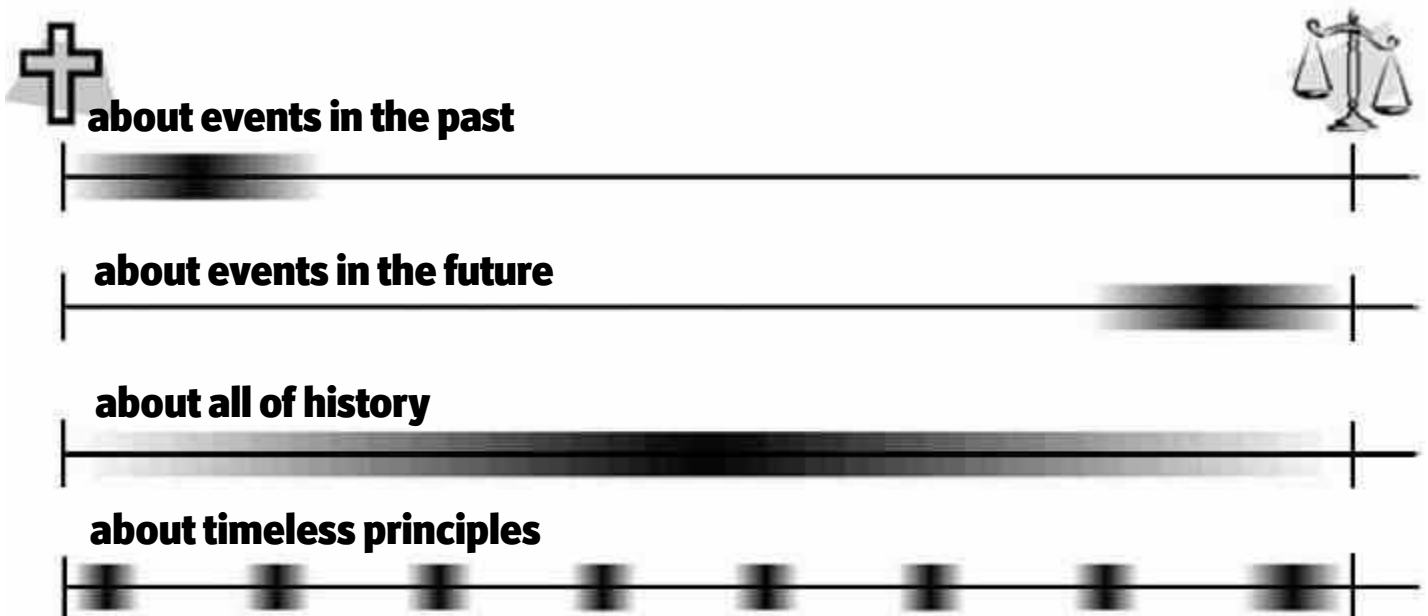
"Revelation" is the English translation of the original Greek title "Apokalypsis." It's an easy guess to link that name to our word "apocalypse," which is usually taken to mean a "disaster" or "catastrophe." (Maybe you've seen the movie "Apocalypse Now"?) One popular thesaurus even suggests "end of the world," "judgement day" and "destruction" as synonyms. Strangely, though, the Greek word doesn't mean any of those things.

"Apocalypse" actually means "unveiling." It means "laying bare the truth" and "revealing what was hidden." Sadly, the book of "Unveiling" has been handled so poorly for so long, that for most Christians it's anything but an "unveiling" and it really is a disaster!

Let's get one thing clear at the start. The truth that Revelation makes clear is that no matter how big the opposition, **God and his people will win in the end.** If you don't get anything more than that from "the unveiling," then the book has done its job.

Approaches to reading Revelation

There are four main "schools of thought" in interpreting the book of Revelation, illustrated in the diagram.



1. It's all in the past...

preterist

The idea is that the events in Revelation happened in the time frame of the Roman empire, and should be read with that historical context in mind. In other words, the letter was written to Christians in the 1st Century Roman empire, and we need to first try to understand how they would have understood it. (John says a number of times that the things in his vision will SOON take place - in the lifespan of his readers. But it also seems clear that the "Revelation" extends all the way to the final judgement. There is at least some future focus!)

2. It's all in the Future

futurist

This view holds that the events in the book of Revelation were going to happen in the far distant future (at least, from the point of view of the original readers.) So, Revelation is talking about events that are still to come, including times like "the tribulation" and "the millennium." (However, this view fails to see that this letter had a real meaning and significance for the people it was originally addressed to.)

3. A Roadmap of all history....

historicist

This approach sees the book of revelation as describing the key events of history from the death of Jesus to his return to judge, and that Revelation is a "timetable" by which we can interpret "signs of the times." In other words, world events TODAY are described in Revelation. (This view is very speculative, and again, fails to give the letter significance for the original readers.)

4. A Matter of Principle...

idealist

This view says Revelation isn't talking about time - it is talking about a pattern of events or trends that will be repeated throughout history, as an encouragement to God's people of all times who face persecution. In that sense, it is a "timeless" message.

While most popular books on Revelation use approach 2 or 3, these studies take a combination of views 1 and 4. John's vision was first and foremost a message for Christians facing persecution in the early Roman empire, **but has application for Christians of all times.**

Handy Hints for Revelation Readers

Understanding the book of Revelation is hard work. But surprisingly, it's written in what was originally a well recognised style. (Maybe future generations will have trouble making sense of "Rap" songs or episodes of "The Simpsons"?) The Old Testament contains some examples of similar "Apocalyptic literature" like parts of Daniel and Ezekiel but it's a style that was used outside the bible as well. This type of literature was always full of symbolism... which is one reason we find it confusing. Here are some more obvious tips for Revelation readers today:

1. Remember the original writer and his situation

John, the disciple, is writing as the church is entering a time of huge persecution under the emperor Nero (though some claim it's the slightly later emperor Domitian.) He is imprisoned on the penal island of Patmos because of his faithful testimony about Jesus.

2. Remember the original readers and their situation - this is a real letter!

Most people are aware that Revelation starts with "seven letters to seven churches." But the fact is, the "seven letters" don't stop at the end of chapter 3. The whole of Revelation is aimed at these Christian communities around present day Turkey, as they face up to the threat of persecution and possible death for their faith.

3. Know your enemy

As the "Unveiling" unfolds, the people of God are facing big opposition. There are fearsome "beasts" with multiple heads and horns and crowns. And behind them, "pulling the strings," is Satan himself. As we'll see, the beasts, horns and crowns represent the Roman Empire, with it's Caesars and regional governors. One specific threat facing Christians as John writes is that Nero has made an order that people would bow down and worship his statue in every town and city in the empire... or face death. The real enemy, though, is Satan himself, who has been defeated already by Christ. **Watch the battles play out in John's visions - and see who wins.** (So how do Christ's people win? See Rev 12:11 - They overcame him (Satan) by the blood of the lamb and the word of their testimony!)

4. Reading Symbols

Symbols are "word pictures which represent something else." Rather than reading every detail literally (as Jehovah's Witnesses and others want us to) we need to be sensitive to the writer's intention. That's not always easy, but John gives us a number of clues. The general rule is, if we really need to know the meaning of a symbol, it will be explained in the text! At other times, there are some simple "rules" we can keep in mind. Here are some examples:

a. Number Rules eg the number 7

The number 7 occurs 52 times in the book. For example, there are seven churches (1:4,11) seven spirits (1:4) and later on seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven signs.

→ Can you think of any modern symbolic numbers? Think of how we use them in every day life.

The number **seven** was used to denote completeness and perfection. We have other numbers that we use in a similar way. (Why, for instance, is it so important to reach 100 in cricket? Why be disappointed with 99?)

→ Apply this principle to 1:4 What does it say about the Spirit?

Are there really "seven Spirits"?

→ Compare this with the famous number 666 in 13:18?

Notice that John includes the meaning of 666-it is "man's number".

How does it relate to the number 7? What does this tell us about God and man?

There are lots of other numbers, like "12" and its multiples, "1000", and 3 ½. All of them should be read with their symbolic meaning in mind. (We'll think about their meaning when we find them.)

b. Symbols Explained in the text

Example 1: Lampstands

Read Revelation 1:12. What on earth are these "lampstands"? Read ahead to verse 20 to find out!

In Rev 11:3-4, two mysterious “witnesses” are described as “lampstands” too. If the imagery is the same, what will they represent?

Example 2: White clothes, fine linen

Look ahead at Revelation 19:8. What does fine linen clothing stand for?

→ What can we say about what people in heaven will be wearing?

→ What can we say people in heaven will be like?

Did you say we will be wearing the newest range of white linen fashions from the Myer “Heaven” collection? The point is, if we read the symbols as symbols, all we can really say is we'll be wearing **righteousness!**

c. Colour codes...

Like the example above, you'll notice other “colour codes” on the way through Revelation. Most of them are familiar. White is “pure”. Gold is usually “royal.” Keep an eye out for them.

5. Get the big picture, and don't sweat on the details...

The most helpful tip for reading Revelation may come as a great relief. The fact is, you can make sense of the book without having to decode anything! Because Revelation is a “vision,” it's literally packed with word pictures... and the best thing to do with any picture is stand back and look at it. Look at the **big picture** rather than trying to decode every brush stroke. Time after time, the big picture is totally clear. **God wins. And evil, whatever its form, is overthrown.** As commentator Vern Poythress says, “Revelation is a picture book, not a puzzle book. Don't become preoccupied with isolated details. Rather become engrossed in the overall story. Praise the Lord. Cheer for the saints. Detest the beast. Long for the final victory.”

Some points in favour of a “Past” View

Most Christians have been exposed to some very speculative views of Revelation - the idea that the book is a “roadmap” for world events in the present day. So what evidence is there that it's really a book addressed to Christians about to face Roman persecution, as the “preterist” or “past” view suggests? Here are some points to consider:-

a) clues from the text

* John is told to write the letter to seven real first century churches facing real problems

* Revelation 17 speaks of a “woman sitting on a scarlet beast” with seven heads, and then explains that “The seven heads are **seven hills** on which the woman sits... the woman you saw is the **great city** that rules over the kings of the earth.” **Rome** was famous as “the city of Seven Hills,” and was the centre of a huge, global empire. The clues in the text back up the interpretation!

b) clues from history

* There are strong parallels between “the Beast” in Revelation, who sets up an image and demands worship, and what we know of first century history, where the Roman Emperor did the same.

* Other early Christian literature picks up and echoes the language of Revelation when talking about the persecution Christians suffer “for their testimony.” There is a good match between what we know of the history of the time, and the images painted by Revelation.

c) Futurist claims are almost always wrong

Futurist (and historicist) interpretations of Revelation generate lots of books and movies. However, their claims and predictions have so far all been wrong. For instance, Saddam Hussein no longer appears to be “the Beast,” or “The Antichrist*” though this claim was made boldly. (eg <http://seder.topcities.com/>) →

A generation earlier, “Russia” was cast in this role. (Interestingly, any “anti-American” world power soon makes an appearance in Futurist interpretations of Revelation!)

d) This is how we read the rest of the bible! Understand the historical situation of the first readers, then apply the principles to our own situation.

e) Having said all this, there are some pretty weird hyper-Preterist views around too! Stay cool. Work hard at making sense of the book. Listen to one another. And avoid extremism!



* Did you know, there's no mention of “the Antichrist” in Revelation!

Study 1 - Revelation 1:1-11

Getting Started

Revelation 1:1-11

Review

a) Review the "Handy Hints for Revelation Readers" together, and discuss your thoughts and reactions.

- look back and compare your answers to the framed sections of the introduction
- if you've ever read Revelation before, which category of interpretation describes your own approach?
- why do you think this part of the bible generates such intense debate and passion?
 - do you have strongly held views on the book? Why?

Read Revelation 1:1-11.

b) How does John summarise his vision, and therefore the book in Rev 1: 2?

c) Compare this with Rev 1:9. Why is John exiled on Patmos? (Patmos was a prison island, where prisoners were put to work in the mines.)

THINK ABOUT IT:

What is the result of testifying about Jesus in John's case? Has it ever been like this in your own experience?

Bearing witness to Jesus has risks attached. You might even end up exiled on Patmos! This age is full of troubles, especially for Christians who are taking on the full might of Satan's opposition to the kingdom of God by testifying boldly about Jesus. But in his vision, John encounters the risen, ruling Jesus... the glorious "Son of Man" ruling with God, as described in Daniel 7. And nothing can be more awe inspiring and fear inspiring than that!

Finish by chatting about your fears and expectations in tackling the book of Revelation. **It's a big challenge!**