

Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas
Fredericksburg Bible Church
107 East Austin
Fredericksburg, Texas 78624
830-997-8834 jthomas@fbgbible.org

A0509 -- Feb. 28, 2005 – Revelation – Interpreting Revelation

Introduction

Let me say by way of introduction that you'll want to write down any questions you might have each week as we study the Book of Revelation and stick them in the little church in the back of the church. You can ask these anonymously if you like and I'll be answering these questions during the review on the next Sunday. This is your opportunity to pry into things that I may not cover.

This is the final book of the Bible. As Genesis records the beginning of history, and the fall of 1/3 of the angelic realm, the fall of man, and the fall of nature so Revelation reverses this order. Revelation records the end of history and the re-creation of the heavens and earth. I'm going to take several weeks to introduce the Book of Revelation. There are at least five factors leading me to make this decision. 1) Revelation is **highly visionary**, 2) Revelation is **highly symbolic**, 3) Revelation contains **a lot of prophecy** (history written in advance), 4) Revelation has **a uniquely miraculous origin** (all Scripture is miraculously given but Revelation has some unique aspects to its divine composition) and because of these four factors 5) Revelation has been **misunderstood** and/or **assumed that it cannot be understood**.

But why is Revelation misunderstood or assumed that it cannot be understood when the first word of Revelation contradicts that very idea? The first word of Revelation, which serves as the title of the book, is the Greek word *apokalupsis*. The word means "to reveal" not "to conceal". If it meant "to conceal or hide" then I could understand why the book would be misunderstood. But Revelation was not meant to be misunderstood. God's intention here is to reveal not conceal! In the New Testament the antithesis of "revelation" is "mystery" (Gk. *musterion*). Eph 3:3 shows this contrast well. "that by revelation [*apokalupsis*] there was made known to me the mystery [*musterion*]". Something that is a "mystery" is something hidden, something that cannot be figured out by human

investigation. But the very first word in the Book of Revelation signifies that this book is a revelation, not a mystery. Its contents can be known by studying them because God has revealed them. Revelation is therefore the “unveiling of mysteries”, not the “concealing” of them.

Even so, we must admit that Revelation remains a “mystery” for many Christians. For example, Martin Luther said, “Even if it were a blessed thing to believe what is contained in it, no man knows what that is.”¹ But if the book's own title means “to reveal” why is it that Luther speaks as if the contents were “concealed”? John Calvin wrote commentaries on 65 of the 66 books of the Bible. Can you guess which one he did not comment on? Why such confusion? What is so secret about the Book of Revelation? The answer is “nothing, nothing at all is mysterious about the Book of Revelation”. In fact the message is quite clear: the book pits a Holy and Faithful God against a sinful humanity. I will Purge My Covenant People Israel and I will Punish the Nations who have so long cursed Her. She is My People and I am Her God. Touch the Apple of My Eye and I will destroy you. For I am bound to My word with Israel and My word is bound to My nature and My nature is immutable. I have sworn to it, I will return to fulfill my covenants with My people and establish My Kingdom for 1,000 years. Then I will abolish death, the last enemy. Then I will hand over My Kingdom to God the Father and We will create a New Heavens and New Earth where righteousness will dwell forever and there will be no more death, mourning, shouting, or pain. And Our glory will shine forth forever and ever. Now that is what the Book of Revelation is all about. It has a powerful message. But if the message is so clear why have so many missed the point? Because they refuse to interpret prophecy the way they interpret the rest of Scripture. “Oh yes, we believe in the virgin birth and we believe in the death and resurrection but when it comes to prophecy we play fast and loose with the text. 1,000 years on earth, that can't be, Jesus said the Kingdom of God is within you. It can't be on the earth they tell you.” Who says so? Origen? Augustine? Why? Because they were influenced by Greek Philosophy, that's why. And Greek philosophy brought in the idea of allegorical interpretation.

Let's talk this morning about interpreting Scripture. The science of interpreting literature/Scripture is known as **hermeneutics**. The word hermeneutics came from the Greek god, Hermes. Hermes job was to bring messages from the gods down to the mortals. As Hermes was the bridge between the gods and mortals so the principles of hermeneutics are the bridge between God's words and proper human understanding.

To get to the proper understanding we need to follow three basic steps of Bible study: 1) observation, 2) interpretation, and 3) application (a e i o u).

Observation asks the question, “What does it say?” You want to have a detective like attitude and you want to ask questions like “Who, What, When, Where, Why, How?” The best interpretation rests on the best observation. Step two is **Interpretation**, which asks the question “What does it mean?” Not “what does it mean to me?” but “what did it mean to the original author?” What is the original author communicating? Scripture can have only one meaning, never two or three. The old adage says, “Interpretation is one, application is many?” (Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation) Why can Scripture have only one meaning? Because if it had more than one meaning then we could never know which meaning the author truly intended. We could never be sure that what we had was the truth. This would destroy objectivity. Lastly, step three is application. **Application** asks the question, “How does this apply to my life?” If we are good observers of the text, and we are good interpreters of the text then this yields fruitful application in our lives. Observation and interpretation are the only sure foundation for right application. If our interpretation is wrong then our application will not be what God intended.

The position I will take is that the Book of Revelation should be interpreted normally, like any other writing, and especially like the rest of the Scriptures, recognizing the peculiar nature of prophecy and figures of speech. I would like to note that I am parting company here with a popular interpretive movement that’s been revitalized in the last 30 years.ⁱⁱ This recent movement argues that we should interpret the Book of Revelation in a different way than we interpret the rest of Scripture because Revelation is Apocalyptic in genre. Genre simply means “literary style”. Genre studies analyze NT books and divide them into different groups based on comparisons with extrabiblical literature from the periods immediately before, during, and after the NT. Since Revelation does have some similarities with the extrabiblical Apocalyptic books of those periods then Revelation is classified as Apocalyptic literature. Once Revelation has been classified as Apocalyptic genre this gives them license to interpret the book differently than the rest of Scripture. Many authors have pointed out similarities in literary style between Revelation and extrabiblical Apocalyptic writings. These Apocalyptic writings are highly visionary, highly symbolic, dualistic, and talk about the end of the age. But, Revelation differs significantly from everything else in this class. *First*, Apocalypses are generally pseudonymous (unnamed author) whereas Revelation mentions John the Apostle as the author four times (Rev 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). *Second*, Revelation classifies itself as “Prophecy” not “Apocalyptic” literature in Rev 1:3. So, the book fits in the Prophetic genre not in the Apocalyptic genre. So, we can’t follow the Apocalyptic genre argument in order to justify applying an allegorical or spiritual interpretation of the text which allows us to make it mean all sorts of things God never intended. What do I mean by an **allegorical** or **spiritual interpretation**? I mean taking the literal words in the text and assigning secondary meanings to them that are not expressly taught in the words. For

example, when I read the word “Church” in the Bible if I read into that word “Israel” then I have allegorized the text. The text doesn’t say that. Allegorical or spiritual interpretations are not obvious, they are hidden meanings that the interpreter reads into the actual words.

Instead of allegorizing, “the preferred approach to Revelation is to interpret according to normal principles of grammar and facts of history, remembering the peculiar nature of predictive prophecy throughout the Bible. This is usually referred to as literal interpretation.”ⁱⁱⁱ (or grammatical-historical hermeneutics). Literal or normal interpretation allows ample room for figures of speech.^{iv} There is a difference between “wooden literalism” and “literal or normal interpretation”. “Wooden literalism” doesn’t allow any room for figures of speech. For example, when Jesus said, “I am the door” a “wooden literalist” would be forced to say Jesus meant he was a piece of wood about 7 feet tall, 3 feet wide, and 1 ½ inches thick (John 10:9)! A “literalist” would simply say Jesus is using a figure of speech. Just as a door is the way of entry into a room, Jesus was saying that he was the way of entry into salvation. All languages have figures of speech but all figures of speech do have an assigned meaning. Who assigns that meaning? The author. In the case of the Bible that author is God.

Let me give you some examples from the Book of Revelation to show you how to interpret. *First* turn with me to **Revelation 7:4-8**. John sees this vision of 144,000 Jews, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. There is no hint in the context that these 144,000 should be understood in some hidden sense. Therefore, these must be 144,000 Jews from the 12 tribes of Israel. Whereas allegorizers say the 144,000 refer to the Church. They do this because they believe in only One People of God and that the Church is therefore Israel. So, they just read the word Church into Israel. The Bible never identifies the Church as Israel.^v The problem is that they are stuck on the unbiblical idea of only one people of God.

Second, turn with me to **Revelation 11:8**. Here we have two tribulation witnesses lying dead in the streets in **the great city which is mystically called Sodom and Gomorrah**. The word “mystically”, “spiritually”, or “figuratively” (*pneumatikos*) indicates this is a figure of speech.^{vi} Sodom and Gomorrah stand figuratively for some city known by a different name. Notice how the text itself tells us that we should not understand Sodom and Gomorrah here to mean the Sodom and Gomorrah that was destroyed in Genesis 19? God Himself gives us the meaning in the next phrase, “where also their Lord was crucified.” What city was Jesus crucified in? Jerusalem. See, this is not that hard. I don’t have to guess or make up what “mystical Sodom and Gomorrah” refers to. Scripture is its own best interpreter. Scripture interprets Scripture. And according to Scripture “mystical Sodom and Gomorrah” is Jerusalem.

Third, literal interpretation avoids making assumptions that are not justified in the text. For example, there have been many theories that “Babylon” in Revelation 14 and 16-18 is a code-word for “Rome” regardless of the fact that **Revelation 16:12** locates “Babylon” on the Euphrates River. Does Rome sit on the Euphrates River? Yet people have not deterred from continuing to identify “Babylon” with “Rome”! Deterrence from this view has not ceased even in the face of the fact that Rome is in no position geographically to become the world’s commercial leader as indicated in Revelation 18. Eventually, Rome did become a code-word for Babylon, but not until well after John’s day. And we have to interpret in the original historical context. We cannot make assumptions that are not justified in the text. The fact is, the Bible never identifies “Babylon” with “Rome” and 1 Peter 5:13 is no exception.

Fourth, turn over to **Revelation 6:12-14**, the sixth seal judgment. Some commentators say these cosmic cataclysms are descriptive of “human arrogance being overthrown”. But the problem with this is that vv 15-17 describe human arrogance being overthrown in “literal” terms! vv 12-14 are real cosmic cataclysms that result in human arrogance being overthrown. But the important point is that these are real cosmic cataclysms. There is no reason to take them otherwise!

I hope you are getting the idea here. We interpret Revelation according to the normal principles of grammar and facts of history, remembering the peculiar nature of predictive prophecy throughout the Bible. This is what is known as “literal interpretation”.

I briefly touched on an important principle of literal interpretation known as “**scripture interprets scripture**”. This means that you study a passage in light of related passages. Since the word of God is the word of God then it always agrees with itself. He cannot contradict Himself. All scripture harmonizes perfectly within itself. When we run into what seems to be a contradiction we must realize that the problem is not with the Bible but with ourselves. Augustine said, “If, here or there, I stumble upon something which seems not to agree with the truth, I make no doubt that either the copy is faulty, or the translator did not express exactly the thought of the original, or that I do not understand the matter.”^{vii}

Next I have to touch on **context**. A key to literal interpretation is context, context, context. When we ignore the context we are left with no controls (dispensation→book→ author→passage→verses before and after→the verse). If we ignore the context any number of interpretations may be valid. But ignoring context is the #1 reason the Bible is the most abused book in the world. People say you can make the Bible say anything you want. Some have even

said that the Bible proves God does not exist from the words of Ps 14:1, “There is no God”. However, what these fallacious interpreters refuse to recognize is that Ps 14:1 also says it is “the fool who says there is no God”! So, yes, you can make the Bible say just about anything you want when you tear it out of context and out from the constraints of its grammatical and historical context. But when you leave it in context you are forced to recognize the single meaning of the text. The Bible does not have hundreds of valid interpretations. It has only one. The very fact that 100’s of interpretations have been given to certain figures of speech and symbols in Revelation shows the invalidity of non-literal interpretation. If it’s left up to us to give the meaning then it becomes pure speculation. The result is that it makes the Book of Revelation unknowable. And if God can’t clearly “reveal” what He set out to “reveal” in this book then we’re saying that God is a poor communicator.

Why do we insist on normalcy in our interpretation of all of Scripture? Couch identifies a number of reasons:

First, the...purpose of language is to enable effective communication between intelligent beings. Words have meaning and in their normal usage are intended to be understood...God is the originator of language. When He spoke audibly to man, He expected man to understand Him and respond accordingly. Likewise, when God speaks to man through the inspired writings of His apostles and prophets, He expects man to understand and respond accordingly...A *second* reason for a normal reading of Scripture concerns the historical fulfillment of prophecy. All the prophecies of the Old and New Testament that have been fulfilled to date have been fulfilled literally...Thus...all prophecies which are yet to be fulfilled will be fulfilled literally. A *third* reason concerns logic. If an interpreter does not use the normal, customary, literal method of interpreting Scripture, interpretation is given over to the unconstrained imagination and presuppositions of the interpreter.^{viii}

So, there you have three reasons we should interpret all of God’s word literally. 1) the purpose of language, 2) the evidence from past fulfilled prophecy and 3) logic forces us toward literalism. See, if you cut yourself off from literal interpretation you will go farther and farther away from God’s intended meaning.

Another key advantage of literal interpretation is it is **minimal**. You’re doing as little interpretation as possible. You’re just accepting what God says. “The *best* interpretation of a historical record is *no* interpretation but simply letting the divine Author of the record say what He says and assuming He says what He means.”^{ix} The more we play with the text of Revelation the more we are in danger of adding or subtracting from the meaning God intended (contra Rev.

22:18-19). Minimal interpretation is the way a reader would most likely understand the text when absent from the guidance of a non-literal interpreter.

For example, if you were on a desert island and read Revelation for the first time, how would you interpret the book? The answer would be “actual and literal,” unless there was an allegorist around to say, “No, no, these events aren’t real! They have some hidden meaning that no one is sure of, but don’t let that bother you!”

The fact is all interpreters interpret most of Scripture normally. It is only when they come to prophecy that they start playing fast and loose with the text. These interpreters have what is called a “dual hermeneutic”; two sets of rules that govern their interpretation of Scripture. And they shift from normal interpretation to spiritual/allegorical interpretation like one shifts from 1st to 2nd gear in a vehicle. They apply different rules to prophecy than they do to the rest of Scripture. This is inconsistent, particularly when we remember that all prophecy that has been fulfilled already was fulfilled literally. Jesus was born of a virgin (Gen 3:15; Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23). Jesus was born of the seed of Abraham (Gen 22:18; Matt 1:1). Jesus was born of the seed of Judah (Gen 49:10; Matt 1:2). Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2; Matt 2:1). Jesus was a prophet like unto Moses (Dt 18:15-19; Acts 3:22; 7:37). Jesus was Messiah the King (Jer 23:5-6; Mark 11:10). Jesus rode in on a donkey (Zech 9:9-10; Mark 11:7). Jesus suffered and died on a cross (Ps 22; Mark 15:32). We know hundreds of prophecies that were fulfilled literally. Why then are people unwilling to interpret future prophecy literally? Because it doesn’t fit their school of thought, it doesn’t fit their experience, or they just can’t believe it. I don’t know about you, but if you believe in creation out of nothing, the virgin birth, and the resurrection from the dead then why can’t you believe in the great cosmic cataclysmic judgments of the Tribulation? There simply is no valid reason. Forget your theological persuasions and follow the word of God!

It is not that hard to realize that when the word of God says “Church” it means “Church” and not “Israel”; when it says “Judea and Jerusalem” it does not mean “England and London”; when it says “Babylon” it does not mean “Rome” or “Apostate Christendom”. Those who refuse to take the word of God at face value “spiritualize” or “allegorize” the text. Those two terms are interchangeable. By “spiritualize” I don’t mean they take the Bible as a spiritual book. I mean they read new meanings into literal words that are not justified by the context.

So, there are basically only two main approaches to interpreting prophecy. Couch says,

Among evangelicals there are generally two major camps regarding how prophetic passages should be read. Amillennialists...allegorize large portions of the prophetic Word, especially passages that speak of the Second Advent of Christ and the establishment of the one thousand year literal Davidic kingdom. In contrast, premillennialists...treat the Second Coming with the same literal hermeneutic as they would the First Coming of Jesus. They hold that the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, should be understood literally from a normal reading...

The most serious charge that can be leveled against non-literal interpretation is that of **attacking the character of God**. God made covenant promises with Israel in the OT. If God does not fulfill His promises to Israel then what does that say about God's character. Is a god who does not fulfill promises faithful? The fact is, God is not faithful if He does not fulfill His promises to Israel (Rom 9-11; 2 Tim 2:13). Those covenants with Israel come in contract language. Why do we sign contracts? Why do we have contracts? We have contracts in order to "measure behavior". If you're not making your monthly payments then that reflects negatively on your credit report. The credit report tells loan institutions whether you are a trustworthy, reliable person or not. So, contracts are designed to "measure behavior". This is why God made contracts with Israel. He wanted to show them that He was reliable and faithful and they were not! I would love to be able to allegorize my home loan contract with American State Bank on North Llano. I could just tell Gwen that I didn't interpret the contract the same way they did. When it said I must make a \$750 payment each month I thought that just meant I need to pay what I can each month. Do you see how nonsensical that approach is? In fact, the entire Bible is a contractual document. If there is one feature of the Bible's language that sticks out it is the legal terminology. Contracts, by definition, must be interpreted literally. You can't allegorize contracts. You may want to allegorize contracts but the fact is you have to take them at face value because they are designed to "measure behavior". And all standards for measurements must be set, immovable standards. What this means is that God must fulfill His terms in the contract. If He doesn't then His character is untrustworthy and unreliable. I would go so far as to say that if the Bible is not to be understood literally then you can't know anything at all about anything at all because god would be a god of caprice and arbitrariness. You certainly couldn't say "I know I'm saved" because you only know that on the basis of a promise of God. And if God can break His promises then you're not safe in the hands of Christ, your in constant danger of hellfire and damnation. When a non-literal view of Revelation is adopted, this robs Israel of the promises God gave them and attacks the immutable character of God:

Now, if you have any questions about how to interpret Scripture and how we're going to approach this book then you'll want to write those down on any old

piece of paper and put them in the little church in the back of the church and I'll get to them next week. To recap what we're saying. *First*, we're saying that Revelation was meant to be understood and if we follow literal interpretation we can understand it. *Secondly*, we're defining literal interpretation as "interpreting according to normal principles of grammar and facts of history, remembering the peculiar nature of predictive prophecy throughout the Bible." *Third*, we're saying that this one way of interpreting Scripture is sufficient for understanding everything from Genesis to Revelation. *Fourth*, we're saying that this takes into account figures of speech and symbols. We are not wooden literalists. *Fifth*, we're saying that this leads to Premillennialism; the view that Christ will return before the 1,000 year kingdom on earth.

Next week we will look at the five major interpretations of Revelation and then we will begin looking at God's design for world history in Genesis, the Book of Daniel, Matthew, and finally Revelation.

ⁱ Alva J. McClain, [The Greatness Of The Kingdom](#) (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1959), 6.

ⁱⁱ Leon Morris' book *Apocalyptic* seems to be at the head of this departure from the normal use of the word Apocalyptic. "Prophecy" and "Apocalyptic" used to be interchangeable terms but that changed with Morris' book.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas, Robert, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1992), 35.

^{iv} Dr. David L. Cooper coined the popular Golden Rule of Interpretation in the early 1900's by saying, "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense, therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise."

^v The New Testament uses the term "Israel" 73 times and not once does it identify "Israel" with the "Church". The most popular texts used those who claim the "Church" is "Israel" is Gal. 6:16. Others include Rom 2:28-29; 9:6; 1 Pt 2:9. But none of these make that identification. "Israel" means "Israel" and "Church" means "Church".

^{vi} Another good example of the text tipping us off is Gal 4:24 where Paul says he is speaking allegorically.

^{vii} Augustine quoted by Rene Pache, *Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing Company, 1992), 157.

^{viii} Couch, Mal, *Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2000), 36-37.

^{ix} Morris, Henry, *The Revelation Record* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1983), 13.

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