

What's the Big Picture of Revelation?

Revelation 1:1–3

Studies in Revelation #2

The Dutch pastor, theologian, and even prime minister, Abraham Kuyper, once wrote, “No book of the Bible has provoked such radically different interpretations as the Revelation of St. John.”¹ If you’ve ever read it and started to read books about it, this is evident very quickly. We here in the States, of course, are the petri dish of all sorts of these interpretations. The twentieth century saw a new and novel idea—what we call “Dispensationalism”—become the dominant position on what will happen at the end. This theory says God really loves Israel, but since Israel rejected her Messiah, God created a new entity, the church, but one day he will secretly rapture or take the church up to heaven, so that he can start again with Israel. Many of us know what I’m talking about.

So last Sunday we began a journey through Revelation. And I said I was going to spend two weeks giving you an introduction to the book. If you weren’t here last week I encourage you to listen online to the five keys to reading Revelation. This morning I want to give you *the big picture of Revelation*.

1. *The Big Picture of Interpretation*
2. *The Big Picture of Theme*

¹ Abraham Kuyper, *The Revelation of St. John*, trans. John Hendrik de Vries (1935; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), 18.

3. *The Big Picture of Content*

The Big Picture of Interpretation

The first thing I want to explain is *the big picture of interpretation*. As I mentioned, no book of the Bible has so many radically different interpretations because there are various interpretive methods or schools of thought about Revelation. In other words, the glasses we put on are going to affect how we see. If you put on my glasses, which allow me to see far, and I put on your bifocals that allow you to see near, we're not going to be able to see clearly, are we? So let me quickly mention these different glasses or interpretive methods because through this series no doubt you'll go online or you'll pick up a book and hear these terms.

There is the *preterist interpretation*, which says that the book was fulfilled in the first century, except for the vision of the new heavens and new earth in chapters 21–22. There is the *historicist interpretation*, which was the understanding of the sixteenth and seventeenth century Reformers. It says Revelation is a chronological book of church history; so the farther along in Revelation you read the farther along in the past two thousand years you are.² There is *the futurist interpretation*, which is the prominent view today of evangelical churches that hold to a Dispensationalist eschatology, and says Revelation is about the so-called “end times.” Finally there is the *idealist interpretation*, which says Revelation

² It's interesting that Pieters considers Hendrickson's “recapitulationist” view as a subset of the historicist interpretation. *Studies in The Revelation of St. John*, 46–47.

speaks of big doctrinal “ideals” through its imagery.³

All these views except the idealist look to verses 1 and 3 as key: **the things that must soon take place and the time is near**, which are both echoed in chapter 22 (22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20). The preterist says, “You see, everything in Revelation took place in the first century.” The historicist says, “Yep, the parts that were to take place in the first century took place, just like they would for every age.” And the futurist says, “Well, what he means is that when the ‘last days’ begin these words begin to be fulfilled.” The fact is, John uses language here that intentionally echoes the book of Daniel 2:28–32, which spoke of what has to happen in the “latter days,” and now John is saying is happening now because the church has been in the last or latter days since the coming of Jesus.⁴

For me, I think the best interpretation takes the strong point of the preterist interpretation and says Revelation was originally written to seven congregations to comfort and encourage them, and the best of the idealist interpretation and says since seven is a symbolic number, Revelation speaks in signs and symbols of big theological ideas that find continued application in any age of church history, including ours.⁵

³ E.g., Ramsey, *Revelation*, 35–36.

⁴ See G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 152–170, 181–182, 185–186.

⁵ Paul Rainbow calls his view that of “Preterite Idealism.” See *The Pith of the Apocalypse: Essential Message and Principles for Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), vii–viii. For an older explanation of this view, see Pieters, *Studies in The Revelation of St. John*, 64–72.

The Big Picture of Theme

Second, I want to reiterate what I said last week about *the big picture of theme*. Children, remember I said last week that when you write a report for school you have to keep the main thing the main thing? If you're writing about The Titanic, don't write about the USS Midway. What's the main thing about the book of Revelation? Jesus Christ. And all the imagery in this book proclaims that because Jesus Christ is Lord and King of the universe (1:5) God is working out his purpose in history, therefore God's people are to be comforted that he will preserve his suffering church, exhorted to persevere in their trials, and assured that he will win victory over his and our enemies. How does Revelation proclaim this? That's what I want to focus on this morning. I want us to survey the entire book to see this idea.

The Big Picture of Content

Finally, I want to give you *the big picture of content*. You've heard the saying, "Don't miss the forest for the trees." In other words, look at the big picture and don't get bogged down in intricate details. So let's have our Bibles open like an old school road map and I want to show you how we get from point A to point B.

If you look at the beginning in 1:1–20 there is a prescript and then if you look at the end in 22:6–21 there is a postscript. In both you hear the direct voice of Jesus.

The book then has its prophetic messages to the seven churches in chapters 2–3. Notice how verse 10 says John was “in the Spirit” and then that he heard a loud voice “like a trumpet.” One of the ways we know chapter 4 begins a new section is that in 4:1–2 this pattern is reversed, as John first hears a voice “like a trumpet” (4:1) and then he is “in the Spirit.” Also, notice how John sees a vision of Jesus Christ at the end of chapter 1 and then he receives the messages to the seven churches in chapters 2–3; in chapters 4–5 he again sees a more elaborate vision of God and the Lamb and then he writes what he sees in the visions of human history unfolding in chapters 6–22.

The heart of the book is this vision of heaven in which God is in control of the universe on the throne in chapters 4–5 and then his plan for human history in the scroll that Jesus alone can open in chapters 6–22. In these chapters there are seven main visions that mostly parallel each other, describing the period from Christ’s first to his Second Coming. So each of these seven sections climactically concludes with the Final Judgment. This is what is called “recapitulation,” literally, “returning to the top.” It’s like painting a wall. You start at the top, roll down to the bottom, then roll back to the top, only to begin all over again. John is painting a picture for us of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to do this he starts at the beginning and takes us to the end, but then he repeats it several different times.⁶

⁶ This rule has been applied to Revelation in various ways since the ancient church. E.g., Tyconius, *The Book of Rules* (ca. 380), Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, and the Venerable Bede, *An Explanation of the Apocalypse* (ca. 710).

The *first cycle* is in 6:1–8:5 with the seven seals. The scroll that God the Father held in chapter 5, which no one was worthy to open except Jesus, Jesus now begins to open by breaking the seven wax seals on it. And when he does this he sends judgments upon the earth. What happens when he opens the sixth seal? It's the Second Coming and Final Judgment (6:12–17). Then chapter 7 gives a parenthetical vision of comfort to the church before returning to the scene of judgment in 8:1–5.

The *second cycle* is in 8:6–11:19 with the seven trumpets. First the seals were opened but now trumpets blast. What do trumpet blasts do? They have been used throughout human history to announce the arrival of someone or something of importance. And notice how the trumpets escalate the impending judgment as one-third of everything affected is destroyed. Chapters 10–11 give another parenthetical vision of comfort that the church will be preserved in the midst of judgment. And how do the seven trumpets end? Again, with the Second Coming in 11:15–19.

The *third cycle* is in 12:1–15:4 with the rise of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. This section introduces the enemies of Christ and his Church, who will be defeated later. The dragon is identified to us as “that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan” (12:9). And notice that his war is in heaven, meaning, it is a spiritual war. But then after Satan is cast down to the earth in 12:9 two beasts rise, one out of the sea and one out of the earth, to fight the church. Then again at

the beginning of chapter 14 there is a parenthetical vision of the church's preservation before we read of the Final Judgment in 14:14–15:4.

The *fourth cycle* is in 15:5–16:21 with the seven bowls. Again, notice the progression from taking seals off the scroll, to trumpets announcing the judgments, and now the vision of bowls. What happens if you tip a bowl over? Whatever is in it pours out. Here the judgments of God are poured out. With the seventh and final bowl we reach again the Final Judgment in 16:17–21.

The *fifth cycle* is in 17:1–19:21, which takes us back to the two beasts in chapter 13. The first beast is now identified as Babylon and the second beast is now identified as the false prophet. Why Babylon? Babylon was the ancient civilization that took captive the church in 586BC. Babylon, then, was a symbol of the ungodly empires of the world. Who was the Babylon during the time John wrote to these seven churches? According to 17:9 Babylon, also portrayed as a prostitute, sat upon seven hills. Which empire was known as *urbs septicollis*, the city on seven hills? Rome. So that's the original intent to the seven churches. How does this apply to us and every age? Over the past two thousand years what have we seen? Every empire that has persecuted the church has fallen. This is a comfort to us that the gates of hell cannot prevail against the church; this is a warning to our nation. This cycle ends in 19:11–21 with the Second Coming, once again.

The *sixth cycle* is in 20:1–15, which takes us back to the first enemy we read of in chapter 12, the dragon. Now we read of his judgment. This is that great chapter about the thousand years, the so-called "millennium." Obviously, you

should be getting the hint that it's not really about a one-thousand year earthly period at all. It's about the devil being Christ's devil and Christ judging him for what he's done! At the end of this chapter in 20:7–15 we read again of the Second Coming and Final Judgment.

Finally, we come to the glorious and comforting end of all things after Christ returns in the *seventh cycle in 21:1–22:5*: the new creation. In contrast to the prostitute woman who was judged in chapter 18, we read hear of a pure bride who enters into marriage with her husband. Who is the bride? The church. Who is the husband? The Lord Jesus Christ. And when that beautiful wedding takes place, all things are made new, the curse is reversed, and all that God intended for his creation and his people is realized.

Conclusion

There is so much confusion about the book of Revelation today. But as we rely on the Holy Spirit's illuminating assistance, and as we see how it was written to real Christians in a time of real need and then how it applies to us, as we keep the main thing of Jesus Christ and his Lordship over all the main thing, and as we keep the big picture in mind even as we focus in on the details, we will be enabled to experience that promise of 1:3: **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.** Amen.