

101 Answers
to Questions About
the Book of
Revelation

Mark Hitchcock



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To Jerry and Sherry Roberts

Thank you for your faithful friendship and love for our Lord and my family. You and your family are a blessing beyond description to us and so many others.

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We are living in the strangest days that man has ever known. The world has passed through terrible times before, but never has the whole earth been so bound together in its wild plunging through one catastrophe after another as today. There have been wars down through the ages, but never wars that have touched so many nations as the conflicts through which we have passed in this generation. There have been political crises, but not on a scale that touched all of the continents.

Civilization has brought so many new means of communication that the matters which affect one nation affect all. Events that take place in Europe and Asia become news that vitally concerns the farmer in the Mississippi Valley. Thoughtful Bible students agree almost universally that we are living near the end of the age, and that at any moment the outline of prophetic events preserved for us in Scripture will begin its course of fulfillment. The world will then rush rapidly through all of the scenes of history which God has written in advance.

The book of Revelation is the book for the present hour.¹

Donald Grey Barnhouse

Generally speaking there are two extreme attitudes toward Revelation. Some say the book cannot be understood, and therefore should not be studied, taught or preached. Differences of interpretation, they point out, have divided Christians, and therefore the book should not be interpreted. Others consider themselves so sure of every detail of the book that they set dates and propose highly fanciful interpretations. To them Revelation seems the only book in the Bible worth studying... Let our approach be neither theoretical and detached but always personal and involved... God can motivate believers today by the understanding of those things which He has revealed through John in Revelation.²

Charles C. Ryrie



Preface

WHERE ARE WE TODAY? HOW much longer do we have? What on earth is happening? Where are we on God's prophetic calendar? Whatever one's background or beliefs, these are the questions on the minds of people everywhere today.

The book of Revelation is the capstone of God's Word to man. It tells us where this world is headed. It answers the great questions we all have about the future. Yet for many it remains a closed book. Sadly, its panorama of prophecy is a sealed mystery for most Christians.

There are many excellent commentaries and studies on Revelation, but many people find them too intimidating, too in-depth, or too irrelevant.

Given what is happening in the world today, it has never been more important for people to understand Revelation. Yet at the same time, many don't seem to know where to begin. I thought it would be helpful to put together a book that answers the key questions about Revelation in an accessible, user-friendly format. When this idea was presented to the folks at Harvest House, they enthusiastically agreed that this format would offer

a fresh, unique contribution alongside the many fine commentaries that are available on Revelation.

At Faith Bible Church in Edmond, Oklahoma, where I serve as pastor, we took a full year to complete a verse-by-verse study of Revelation. As an adjunct professor at Dallas Theological Seminary in the Department of Bible Exposition, I've had the privilege on several occasions to teach through Revelation. Even after having done these studies, I don't claim to have all the answers about the book of Revelation. But I do believe I've become familiar with the kinds of questions people are asking. I've compiled 101 of those questions in this book, and my hope is that this resource will help you understand Revelation better, and that it will also deepen your love for God's Word and our Lord, who is the subject of Revelation.

In this book I have two goals: (1) to answer key questions about Revelation in a clear, concise manner, and (2) to motivate us to live as God would want us to in light of what is to come in the days ahead.

PART ONE



The Interpretation of Revelation



Why study the book of Revelation? Why is it important?

REVELATION IS AN IMPORTANT BOOK to study if for no other reason than it is the capstone of God's self-revelation to man. Revelation is the book of consummation. It tells us the ending of the story that began in Genesis 1. The greatest value of Revelation is what it teaches us about the future. It discloses that this world is headed for a devastating seven-year period of divine judgment; the rise of a final world ruler; a global government, economy, and worship; the great war of Armageddon; the second coming of Christ; the 1000-year reign of Christ on earth; the final judgment; and the new heaven and new earth. Revelation tells us where this world is headed, and where we are headed.

Revelation is also important because it reveals and reaffirms many of the great doctrines of Scripture. Revelation is theologically rich. It displays the sovereignty and holiness of God. It teaches us that God is in control, that He has a plan that He is bringing to fulfillment. It reveals that God alone can foretell the future and that He does so with 100 percent accuracy.

The Christology (doctrine of Christ) is glorious in Revelation. Jesus is the Lamb (28 times) who was slain, yet is alive forevermore. He is God (Revelation 1:17; see also Isaiah 44:6). He is worshipped as God (Revelation 5:13). He is the focus of all

history and prophecy (19:10). Salvation comes through Christ alone by faith alone in His death on the cross (1:5). Only His blood can wash away our sins (5:9; 7:14). He is the Lion of Judah who is coming again as King of kings and Lord of lords (19:16).

Revelation unveils the total depravity of man, who deserves judgment, and shows man's desperate need for the grace of God. Nowhere in Scripture do we see a more awful picture of man's depravity, rebellion, and blasphemy. The book of Revelation provides a divine view of history. We see that no human empire can endure. Man's day will come to a tragic end.

In the 404 verses in Revelation, there are about 278 allusions to the Old Testament. Revelation is saturated with the Old Testament. John believes the Old Testament Scripture is the Word of God, and he claims that his own message is divinely inspired and authoritative (1:2).

Revelation has a great deal to say about angels and demons. In fact, it talks about angels more than any other Bible book. Angels are active throughout the chapters, especially in bringing God's wrath to the earth. The reality and evil of Satan and his demonic host is also evident. Satan accuses and persecutes God's people, hates the Jews and tries to destroy them, empowers the Antichrist and the false prophet, and finally, is doomed to the lake of fire.

One final reason to study Revelation is that it's the only book of the Bible that contains a special blessing for those who read it and keep the things written in it (Revelation 1:3). For this reason Revelation has been aptly called "the Blessing Book." I pray that the Lord's rich hand of blessing will rest upon you as we study this book together and strive to understand and apply its truths to our lives.

What are the four main views of Revelation?

The vivid imagery and striking symbolism in Revelation have led to very different views on how it should be interpreted and what time period it describes. Broadly speaking, there are five main ways that people approach the book of Revelation related to how and when its prophecies are fulfilled: past, present, future, timeless, and a mixture of the previous four.

1. Preterist View (Past)

This view holds that Revelation is primarily a prophecy of events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. There are two main branches of preterism: partial (moderate) and full (extreme or radical). R.C. Sproul, a partial preterist, defines the preterist approach: “An eschatological viewpoint that places many or all eschatological events in the past, especially during the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.”³

Preterists believe that Christ returned in AD 70 during the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. Sproul says, “Preterists argue not only that the kingdom is a present reality, but also that in a real historical event the *parousia* [Christ’s coming] has already occurred.”⁴ They believe that Nero was the beast of Revelation 13; that the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments were judgments on unfaithful Israel; that Babylon in Revelation 17–18 was Jerusalem; and that Revelation 19 describes the coming of Jesus in AD 70 to destroy Jerusalem.

The primary distinction between partial and full preterists is that partial preterists, while maintaining that most of Revelation was fulfilled in the past, still believe in a future second coming of Christ. Full preterists believe that all prophecies—including those pertaining to the second coming and the resurrection of believers—are past events. They view the resurrection

as spiritual. According to this view, we are beyond the millennium and are presently in the new heaven and new earth. Full preterists don't know if there is an end to history. By rejecting orthodox biblical truths about the second coming of Christ, the bodily resurrection, and the final judgment, full preterists are outside the pale of orthodox Christianity.

When preterists defend their viewpoint, they lean heavily on the “timing” statements in Revelation, such as “soon” (1:1) and “at hand” (1:3). They argue that these words demand the fulfillment of the prophecies in Revelation soon after the book was written. They date the writing of Revelation as having taken place around AD 65.

While there are many problems with preterism, two stand out as particularly indefensible. First, when proponents of this view try to relate and limit the global, catastrophic events described in Revelation to the period leading up to the fall of Jerusalem, they are unable to stay consistently literal in their interpretation of the scriptural text. As they work their way through Revelation, they frequently shift back and forth between spiritualizing and allegorizing the text or taking it literally. When the text of God's Word doesn't fit what actually took place in AD 70, they abandon literal interpretation.

Second, as will be discussed in Part 2 of this book, there is strong evidence that Revelation was written in AD 95 by John; therefore, it cannot be a prophecy about events that occurred 25 years earlier in Jerusalem. If it's true that Revelation was written in AD 95, then that serves as a death blow to the preterist view.

2. Historicist View (Present)

This view, which began with Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth century, interprets Revelation as a panorama or overview of

the entire church age. This view was very common among the Reformers at the time of the Protestant Reformation. It was held by John Wycliffe, John Knox, William Tyndale, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Sir Isaac Newton, George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, and Matthew Henry. However, very few hold this view today. The key problem with historicism is that there is little agreement on what the symbols in Revelation refer to and thus what the book means.

3. Idealist View (Timeless)

Idealism, also known sometimes as the spiritual approach, does “not look for individual or specific fulfillments of the prophecies of Revelation in the natural sense,” but believes “only that spiritual lessons and principles (which may find recurrent expression in history) are depicted symbolically in the visions.”⁵ For idealists, the symbols in Revelation picture the ever-present struggle between good and evil and teach ideal, timeless principles to inspire believers as they endure the setbacks and suffering of life.

According to this view, the great themes of the triumph of good over evil, of Christ over Satan, of the vindication of the martyrs and the sovereignty of God are played out throughout Revelation without necessary reference to single historical events. The battles in Revelation may be seen as referring to spiritual warfare, to the persecution of Christians, or to natural warfare in general throughout history. The beast from the sea may be identified as the satanically inspired political opposition to the church in any age, and the beast from the land as the opposition of pagan or corrupt religion to Christianity. The Harlot represents either the compromise church or the seduction of the world in

general. Each broken seal or sounded trumpet depicts some reality (famine, war, natural disaster) which happens in history on a recurring basis as part of the sovereign outworking of God's purpose in history.⁶

Idealism grew out of the allegorical method of interpreting Scripture, upheld by Origen and Clement, and gained traction through the amillennial view held by Augustine. This is probably the predominant view today among scholars.

The main appeal of idealism seems to be the desire of its proponents to relate the message of the book to readers in every period of history. However, this aspiration is offset by idealism's inability to give concrete meaning to the symbols of the book. This is a serious shortcoming. The book of Revelation is filled with symbols, yet these symbols refer to things that are literal. They have literal referents (see, for example, the explanation that appears in Revelation 1:20). The idealist view has no interpretive anchor that helps hold Revelation together. This view is extremely reader-centered and not tied to the original meaning of the text. Meaning becomes a moving target. Moreover, if the purpose of Revelation is to teach timeless principles by the use of symbols, then what timeless principles are we to draw from this book, and are they really relevant? Idealism is not a reliable guide to the meaning of Revelation.

4. Futurist View (Future)

Futurists interpret Revelation 4–22 as describing real people and events yet to appear on the world scene. Many of the luminaries in the early church adopted a futurist view: Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Victorinus. Some contemporary futurists are John Walvoord, John MacArthur, Charles Ryrie, Tim LaHaye, J. Dwight Pentecost, and Thomas Ice.

One main objection to the futurist view is that “it removes Revelation from its original setting so that the book has little meaning for the original audience.”⁷ After all, some would argue, how can Revelation have been relevant to the original readers if the events described in it wouldn’t take place until more than 2000 years in the future?

There are two answers to this objection. First, one could make the same argument about hundreds of Old Testament prophecies. For instance, Isaiah’s prophecies about the coming Messiah, such as the virgin birth in 7:14, were written 700 years before His birth. Micah’s prophecy about the birthplace of the Messiah in Bethlehem (in Micah 5:2) was also written about 700 years before His coming. Many of Daniel’s predictions weren’t fulfilled for centuries, and some of Daniel’s prophecies, written over 2500 years ago, have still not been fulfilled today.

All these Old Testament prophecies were relevant at the time they were given because the readers did not know when they would be fulfilled. Likewise, the believers in Asia Minor who first received the book of Revelation didn’t know these events wouldn’t be fulfilled for over 2000 years. They believed the prophecies could very well take place in their lifetime. And each subsequent generation that has read and studied Revelation has lived with the hope that the prophecies within it could be fulfilled in their generation. Not knowing when these events will come to pass makes them relevant for every generation.

Second, knowing how history will end, whether it is in our lifetime or not, gives great comfort and hope. Revelation teaches us that God is sovereign, that He rules from His throne in heaven, that He has a plan, and that His kingdom will ultimately come to earth. These great truths apply to people of every generation for as long as we await the consummation of the ages.

I believe the futurist approach is far superior to the other views. It is the only view that consistently follows the principles of interpreting Scripture literally. Moreover, it makes sense that the final book of God's Word would focus on the future and tell us how everything finally comes out in the end, just as Genesis told us how everything began. Bible teacher Ed Hindson summarizes the futurist approach in this way:

The Apocalypse reveals the future. It is God's road map to help us understand where human history is going. The fact that it points to the time of the end is clear throughout the entire book. It serves as the final consummation of biblical revelation. It takes us from the first century to the last century. From persecution to triumph. From the struggling church to the bride of Christ. From Patmos to paradise.⁸

5. Eclectic View (Mixture)

This is a newer approach to Revelation that attempts to combine the four other views to maximize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses.⁹ Some of the more prominent eclectics are Greg Beale, G.R. Beasley-Murray, and Craig Keener. Proponents of this view seek to understand the message to the original audience and take special note of the historical-cultural context of Revelation. They also acknowledge that some of the events will be fulfilled in the final consummation. While claiming to be eclectic, it seems to me that most who adopt this approach still lean primarily toward idealism.

The strength of this view is its desire to avoid the weaknesses of some of the other positions and present a balanced approach. Yet I believe its idealistic leanings leave it open to

the same subjective, inconsistent patterns of interpretation that plague the idealistic view.

When all factors are taken into account, I believe the futurist view provides the best explanation for a clear and consistent understanding of Revelation. This is the approach adopted throughout this book.

What are some of the keys to interpreting Revelation, especially all the symbols?

The book of Revelation may be the most neglected book in the Bible. There are undoubtedly many reasons for this, but a chief one is that there are people who either claim or assume that no one can really understand what it means. They view Revelation the same way that Winston Churchill once described the Soviet Union: as “a riddle wrapped up in a mystery inside an enigma.” With all the mystifying symbols and striking images that appear throughout the book, many people despair of ever understanding the book. Even many pastors never preach on Revelation. Or if they do, they preach only from the first three chapters.

This neglect of the capstone of God’s revelation to man is tragic. As we observed earlier, Revelation gives us the end of the story just as Genesis gives us the beginning. To not take the time to understand Revelation would be like reading a mesmerizing novel but not finishing it to see how the story ends.

There are three practical keys to unlocking the meaning of this great book—keys that can help every reader understand it better. The first key is to recognize that the Lord *meant* for us to understand Revelation. To say that it can’t be understood by believers denies the truth behind the title of the book—“The

Revelation of Jesus Christ.” The word “revelation” is a translation of the Greek word *apokalupsis* which means to uncover, to unveil, or to take the lid off something. In other words, the purpose of this book is not to hide the truth from us or make it confusing, but for Jesus Christ to uncover or take the lid off the future so we can know about the end times.

Remember, the Lord promises a special blessing on those who study and apply the message of Revelation to their lives: “God blesses the one who reads this prophecy to the church, and he blesses all who listen to it and obey what it says” (1:3). The fact God chose to mention this blessing seems to anticipate that the subject of Bible prophecy—especially in connection with the book of Revelation—would be ignored and neglected by many.

This final book of the Bible contains seven blessings or beatitudes throughout its pages (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14). The blessing in 1:3 is the first and most comprehensive one. It is a blessing that anyone reading Revelation can experience. And notice that it is threefold:

The one who reads In the early church not everyone had a copy of the Scriptures, so someone would read them aloud to the people. Today this blessing extends to all who read this grand climax to God’s prophetic program.

The one who listens Just to hear the book of Revelation read (and other prophecies of the Bible) is a great blessing in troubled times like today.

The one who obeys It is not only important to read and

hear Bible prophecy but also to observe, pay attention to, and obey what is written. After reading and listening to what Revelation is teaching us, we should pay attention and watch for the events that signal the coming of the end times.

The fact that those who hear the words of this book are to keep, practice, and obey what it says presupposes that they must be able to understand what it means.

The second key to unlocking the meaning of Revelation is to realize that most of what is in the book is not new information. There's an old saying that Revelation is the Grand Central Station of the Bible because it's where all the trains of thought throughout the whole Bible come in. While it is certainly true that Revelation looks ahead and reveals the future, it also looks back and brings together all the threads running through the first 65 books of the Bible. Revelation contains 404 verses, and 278 of them allude back to the Old Testament. Revelation has no direct quotations from the Old Testament, but contains a total of 550 allusions or references (which appear in 278 verses) back to the Old Testament. So a significant portion of Revelation brings together content from the Old Testament into a comprehensive sequence of events. Arnold Fruchtenbaum observes:

The majority of things found in the first twenty chapters of Revelation are found elsewhere in the Old Testament. Only the last two chapters deal with things totally new. If this is true, what is the importance of the book of Revelation? The Old Testament prophecies are scattered throughout the books of Moses and the various prophets and Writings. It would have been impossible to develop these prophecies into any

chronological sequence of events. The value of the book of Revelation is not that it provides a lot of new information, but rather that it takes the scattered Old Testament prophecies and puts them in chronological order so that the sequence of events may be determined. This book provides a framework for the understanding of the order and the sequence of events found in the Old Testament prophecies. This is the reason for so many references to the Old Testament. However, the material found in the last two chapters is totally new material which describes the Eternal Order. The Old Testament prophets never foresaw anything beyond the Messianic Kingdom. Indeed, the Kingdom was the high point of Old Testament prophecy and no prophet ever saw anything beyond that. But the Eternal Order is the high point of New Testament prophecy, and Revelation 21 and 22 provide new information, as they describe the Eternal Order.¹⁰

The third key to understanding Revelation is to correctly interpret the symbols in the book. When we come to Revelation, we often feel like Alice in Wonderland, who ran down a rabbit hole and stumbled into a world of fantasy, make-believe, and enigma—a world of talking caterpillars, rabbits, etc. People often feel like they have fallen into another world when they step into the book of Revelation, for it includes a broad assortment of symbols, such as horns, beasts, stars, and varied colored horses to graphically communicate its meaning.

This has led some people to end up adopting one of two extremes in interpretation. Some say that the presence of so many symbols means that the book cannot be understood at all. They say that we are able to discern that the book talks about a cosmic struggle between good and evil, but that none

of the specific details can be understood. The other extreme is unchecked speculation and sensationalism that manipulates all the symbols so they represent certain people or events of our time—in other words, the reader makes the text mean whatever he wants. Those who follow this method can best be described by the old saying, “Amazing things in the Bible I see, especially those put there by you and by me.”

The proper method of interpreting the symbols in Revelation involves two steps. The first is to remember that when symbols are employed, they refer to something that is literal. Symbols are not just symbols of nothing. They aren’t meaningless. They aren’t just symbols of symbols. They refer to something that is literal. Paul Benware notes,

Symbols are valuable tools of communication. Symbols communicate truth concisely, and they communicate it graphically. In Revelation 11 the apostle John could have spent a great deal of time describing the spiritual and moral conditions of Jerusalem. Instead, he called the city “Sodom and Egypt.” Quickly and vividly he communicated a volume of truth that remains graphically fixed in our minds. Symbols and figures of speech, then, represent something literal. It is the task of the interpreter to investigate this figurative language to discover what literal truth is there.¹¹

There’s a clear example of this at the very outset of Revelation as Jesus stands in the middle of seven golden lampstands holding seven stars in His right hand (1:13,16). At the end of the chapter, Jesus identifies the seven lampstands as the seven churches of Asia and the seven stars as seven angels (1:20). Jesus Himself is providing us with a key to unlock the meaning of symbols in Revelation—that is, when we see a symbol in prophecy, we

are to look for the literal referent, or the literal person, place, or event that the symbol represents.

Step two of properly interpreting a symbol in Revelation is to recognize that all the symbols in the book are explained either in Revelation itself or in other parts of the Bible. We cannot make them mean whatever we want them to mean. No interpreter has the freedom to make a symbol mean whatever he wants. Scripture sets the parameters for our interpretation of symbols. The infallible guide to the meaning of these symbols is God's Word. As Fruchtenbaum says,

While recognizing the existence of symbols, there will be no resorting to guesswork. Rather, this study will proceed on the premise that all symbols in the Book of Revelation are explained elsewhere: either in a different part of the Book of Revelation or in some other part of the Bible. There are symbols, but the Bible itself will explain what these symbols mean either by direct statement or through a comparison of the usage of the symbol elsewhere in the Scriptures. The meaning of the symbols will not be determined by speculation.¹²

The first place we should look when we encounter a symbol is the immediate context to see if there's a built-in interpretation. Often we don't have to look any farther for the meaning of a symbol than the immediate context. The example I just gave of Jesus in Revelation 1 is an apt illustration of this. Jesus tells the reader the meaning of the seven lampstands and the seven stars in the same chapter (1:20). This kind of built-in interpretation occurs often in Revelation. Frequently, the meaning of a symbol is given by John in the immediate context, sometimes even in the same verse. Here are a few examples.¹³

Symbol	Meaning
the seven stars (1:16)	seven angels (1:20)
the seven lampstands (1:13)	seven churches (1:20)
the morning star (2:28)	Christ (22:16)
the seven lamps of fire (4:5)	the sevenfold Spirit of God (4:5)
the seven eyes (5:6)	the sevenfold Spirit of God (5:6)
the incense (5:8)	the prayers of God's people (5:8)
the fallen star (9:1)	the angel of the abyss (9:11)
the great city, Sodom and Egypt (11:8)	Jerusalem (11:8)
the stars in the sky (12:4)	fallen angels (12:9)
the woman and the child (12:1-2)	Israel and Christ (12:5-6)
the large, red great dragon (12:3)	Satan (12:9)
the ancient serpent (12:9)	Satan (12:9)
the times, time, and half a time (12:14)	1260 days (12:6)
the beast out of the sea (13:1-10)	future world ruler and his empire (13:1-10)
the beast out of the earth (13:11-17)	the false prophet (19:20)
the great prostitute (17:1)	the great city, Babylon (17:18)
the waters on which the woman sits (17:1)	the peoples of the world (17:15)
the ten horns (17:12)	ten kings associated with the beast (13:1; 17:3,7-8,11-13,16-17)

the fine linen (19:8)	the righteous deeds of the saints (19:8)
the rider on the white horse (19:11-16,19)	Jesus Christ, the King of kings (19:16)
the bride (21:9)	the Lamb's wife (21:9)
the bride (21:9)	the holy city, New Jerusalem (21:9-10)

So, the first step to discerning the meaning of a symbol is to look at the immediate context for clues as to its meaning.

If there is no clear interpretation in the immediate context, widen the search to the broader context of the book of Revelation. And if it's not found there, then look to the rest of Scripture. Many of the symbols used in prophetic passages are used elsewhere in Scripture and have an established meaning. J.B. Smith summarizes: "Therefore the conclusion may be drawn that symbols occurring in the book are either explained in the text or may be understood from their use in previous Scriptures. The inference follows that *whatever is not thus explained is to be taken as literal.*"¹⁴

Symbols, therefore, are not meaningless. Neither are they an open invitation to let our imagination run wild. They do not give the interpreter free rein to make the symbol mean whatever he wants it to mean. In most cases the immediate context or the use of that same symbol by other biblical writers will establish the boundaries for proper interpretation.

The bottom line is this: Don't be afraid of or intimidated by Revelation. God wants you to understand and apply the truth of this book to your life. Follow these three keys with thought and care, and ask the Lord to open your heart and mind to the precious truths about our coming King!