

## Apocalypse Now: Session Two

### How Do We Read This Book?

*Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.*

- Rev 1:12-16

“The book of Revelation is not merely a futurology but also a redemptive-historical and theological psychology for the church’s thinking.” – G.K. Beale, *NIGTC: Revelation*

### Questions to Ask Before Reading Any Book:

- What kind of book is it?
- What are the rules for interpreting that kind of book?

### What kind of book is Revelation?

- It is an *apocalyptic* book
  - o Meaning: it provides a God’s-eye-view of history, of what is going on in the heavenly-spiritual realm behind our worldly one, through dramatic visions and symbols, summoning the faithful to persevere to the end when God will bring all history to a climactic end.
- It is a *prophecy* (see Rev 1:3)
  - o Meaning: it is a divine revelation given by God through John to summon God’s people back to their original covenant faithfulness, and to foretell of the eschatological (end-times) events to come. So it speaks of current and future realities.
- It is a *letter* (or *epistle*) (see Rev 1:4 and 22:21)
  - o Meaning: it is to be circulated among the churches and so serve as a means to teach true doctrine and ethics applicable to all believers.

What are the rules for interpreting these books?

- Understand that **epistles** require us to understand *both* the historical setting it was originally given in, and how it applies to us today.
  - o For instance, when Paul rebukes Peter to his face in Galatians 2:11-14. Historical setting of the original event is needed, while also seeing that it is included in the letter for our own edification, today. We too should strive stay “in step with the truth of the gospel,” (2:14).
  - o “The epistolary character of the book indicates that John addresses the situation and circumstances of his readers, and thus the message of the book must be tied

to the historical location of the seven churches. Since we have letters, seven of them, we are reminded that the book wasn't written as a general tract about the end of history but was intended for churches in Asia Minor in the first century...The book was written to readers who occupied a particular social location, and presumably they understood, at least mainly, what was written to them. The hermeneutical significance of this fact is massively important, for it eliminates the popular conception that modern readers interpret Revelation better than the original readers. Those who propose such readings practice "newspaper eschatology" and read the book in terms of current events. Actually, all who pay attention to such things realize that such a hermeneutical approach is arbitrary since the interpretations change as events transpire...It is wiser hermeneutically to locate the book in its historical context and to interpret it in light of the situation and the world in which the first readers lived.

At the same time, the reference to seven churches also carries symbolic significance, which suggests that the book was written for all the churches as well. In that sense, the message of the book applies to all churches throughout history. Still, as readers, we rightly focus on the historical situation in which the book was written to decipher the meaning, while also recognizing that the book has a wider significance for the church of Jesus Christ throughout the ages." Tom Schreiner, *The Joy of Hearing*, p. 22-23.

- Understand that **prophetic** literature relies on *repetition*. Hebrew literature, especially prophets, rely on *recursive, not linear, narrative*.
  - "Normally a Hebrew writer would begin a discourse on a particular topic, develop it from a particular angle or perspective, and end by closing down that conversation. Then he would begin another conversation, taking up *the same topic again* from a different angle or point of view and considering it from a different perspective." – Peter Gentry, *How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets*, p. 42
  - Like surround-sound stereos. The music coming out of each speaker is both different and the same. The effect is that you get a more immersive, three-dimensional sound. This is what Hebrew literature offers us.
    - Examples: The two creation accounts (Gen 1-2), the two retellings of the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 14-15), the two retellings of the fall of Sisera (Judges 4-5), the two descriptions of the fall of Gog and Magog (Ez 38-39).
    - This can happen in...
      - units as small as word-pairs (justice-righteousness; steadfast love-faithfulness),
      - to couplets ("Better is a little with the fear of the LORD, than great treasure and trouble with it," Prov 15:16),
      - to chiasms (A, B, C, B', A'),
      - to entire books (especially prophets).

- “Such an approach is completely opposite to scientific writing in our culture, which is based on our Greek and Roman heritage, going back especially to Aristotle. In our culture, a writer...begins at a certain point A, and he moves slowly in a direct line using arguments, evidence, and logic to point B.” – Gentry, *How to Read*, p. 42
- Understand that **apocalyptic** literature relies *heavily* on symbols, *especially when it comes to numbers*.
  - “Symbolic” ≠ “whatever you want it to mean”, the meaning is determined by either the immediate context or book, or by the rest of the Bible.
  - “Symbolic” ≠ “not true”, like a fable, myth, or parable; it simply means that the visionary symbols John sees are heavenly *representations* that do not woodenly map onto earthly realities. For example
    - The sword coming out of Jesus’ mouth (Rev 1:16; 19:15) represents God’s Word, not a literal sword (Eph 6:17; Heb 4:12; Isa 49:2; Hos 6:5).
    - The seven stars and seven lampstands (Rev 1:20) represent seven church’s and seven angels (Rev 1:20).
    - The seven heads of the beast (Rev 17:9) represent seven hills, likely the seven hills that Rome was established upon (Rev 17:9).
      - If we are asking “But are these symbolic representations the way it *really is*,” then we are asking a question that Revelation is not intending to answer.
    - Old Testament Examples:
      - Ezekiel 37 and the valley of dry bones depicts the future promise of the giving of the Holy Spirit in the age of the New Covenant. We realize that when the Holy Spirit is given it does not *literally* transform a skeleton into a living person, but takes someone who was *spiritually* dead and gives them life (Eph 2:1-4).
      - Isaiah 11:11-16 looks forward to the return of God’s people from their exile that will look like a second Exodus event. Verse 15 explains that when the captives of Assyria return to Jerusalem God will “utterly destroy the tongue of the sea of Egypt” (that is, the Red Sea), and will “strike the [Euphrates River] into seven channels.”
        - “I want to ask the question bluntly: Is Isaiah describing the event literally? Will the Red Sea be dried up and the Euphrates divided into seven channels? This did not happen for Ezra and Nehemiah in the physical return from Babylon. No, according to the interpretive principle of using images and the language of God’s deliverance in the past to describe a coming salvation, we form in our minds only the idea that no obstacles will stand in God’s way when he gathers the remnant of his people. This is what the rules of Hebrew literature *require* at this point. It is not a matter of defending a literal hermeneutic. It is a matter of discerning the method of communication used by the prophets and using that

meaning as *determined by the rules of the particular genre or kind of literature.*” – Peter Gentry, *How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets*, p. 85 (emphasis original)

- Understand that the symbols can change throughout the book.
  - At certain points Jesus is depicted as the awe-inspiring Ancient of Days, a lion, a lamb, a baby, a king sitting on a throne, and a rider on a horse.
- Why use symbols? Why not speak more plainly?
  - It captures our imagination
  - It calls us back to God’s acts of faithfulness of old. Think of the imagery of the Exodus, one of Revelation’s most common sources for symbols. We may feel scared and uncertain about our day, about the future, but since Revelation relies so much on Exodus imagery as it interprets the future, it leads us to consider how God redeemed Israel in their great plight before, and this gives us confidence that God can redeem us too.
  - It helps convey *timeless* truths. The details of the book are not intended to describe only the final events a few years prior to the end of the world, but are exposing what is going on the heavenly realm over the expanse of all history since Christ’s ascension. Biblical symbols, thus, prove to be an enduring marker of meaning that can edify every generation.

### **Putting this into action: Revelation 12**

- 1 And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. 3 And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. 5 She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days. – Rev 12:1-6
- Who is this woman?
  - clothed with the sun, moon under her feet, crowned with 12 stars
    - “Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” Genesis 37:9, (Joseph)
    - “And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” Dan 12:3
    - God’s people frequently described as His bride (see esp. Rev 19:7-9; 21:2, 9)
    - God’s people described as rulers of creation, exercising dominion fits this exalted description (Gen 1:26-28; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6; Isa 62:3).
  - Pregnant and in labor pains

- God's people are frequently described in the OT as those in the pains of labor as they await the Messiah (Isa. 26:17–18; 66:7–10; Mic. 4:10).
    - The child Israel is waiting for is none other than the long awaited for son of David, the Messiah (Gen. 3:15; 2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 89:26–27; Isa. 7:14; 9:6–7; Mic. 5:2–4; cf. also Luke 1:32–33; Heb. 1:5)
- Who is the dragon?
  - Great red dragon
    - Red and scarlet are colors associated with the satanic (see Rev 17:3)
    - We are told, explicitly, that this dragon is Satan himself just a few verses later in 12:9 (see also 20:2).
  - The seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns appear to be a satanic parody of Christ, who is described as having seven horns and many crowns (Rev 5:6; 19:12).
  - A terrifying beast reminds us of the book of Daniel, where a mythical, mutant like beast with ten horns stands as an opponent of God's people (Dan 7:7). In Daniel, each of the horns represents a king. In the same way a horn is distinct from, yet grows out of the beast, so too do human rulers opposed to Christ remain distinct from Satan, yet are empowered and influenced by him. "The link between the numbers of the dragon and the number of human rulers suggests the dragon manifests himself in and through human rulers and authorities," (Schreiner, *ESVEC: Revelation*).
  - His tail swipes a third of the stars down to the earth
    - This dragon is incredibly powerful.
    - The stars could refer to angels, describing the time when Satan fell from Heaven originally (cf. Job 38:7 where angels are described as stars).
    - Or, "stars" could refer to God's people, as in Dan 8:10
  - The dragon attempts to devour the child
    - Think of Herod in Matthew 2:1-18 and the slaughter of the children
    - Think of the crucifixion
- Who is the child?
  - A male child
    - The promised male offspring of Gen 3:15 who would crush Satan's head.
  - Who will rule the nations with a rod of iron
    - Psalm 2, *the* messianic psalm, fulfilled: "8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron," (Ps 2:8-9; cf. Rev 2:27).
    - The promise of the all the nations being blessed or destroyed through the family of Abraham, Gen 12:3
  - but her child was caught up to God and to his throne
    - A description of the ascension, where Jesus returns to heaven and sits down upon His heavenly throne.
    - John elides the life and death of Jesus here in his vision, but summarizes the entire life of Jesus from his birth to His ascension to heaven, depicting Satan's plans of devouring the Messiah foiled.

- What is being described?
  - and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.
    - The woman, God's people, have brought forth the Messiah. Satan attempted to ruin this through oppression and persecution, but he was foiled. The Messiah came and has now taken His seat on His heavenly throne.
    - The "wilderness" God's people flee to
      - "The wilderness represents life in the present evil age. Just as God nurtured and preserved Israel during the forty years it wandered in the wilderness (cf. Hos. 2:14)."
      - The wilderness motif in the Bible represents both a place of testing and *simultaneously* God's provision.
        - Note: to prepare for the arrival of the Messiah, John the Baptist retreats to *the wilderness* (The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight." Matt 3:3, citing Isa 40:3).
        - Note: Jesus is *tested by Satan* in the wilderness but was *provided for* by God. "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the *wilderness* to be tempted by the devil." Matt 4:1
  - 1,260 days
    - Remember, all numbers in apocalyptic literature are highly symbolic. This is about 3.5 years, half of seven—a significant number in the book which conveys completion, wholeness, or perfection. So, what could half of seven mean? A limited, incomplete amount of time. Likely not a literal 3,5 years.
    - This time is also used to describe the length of time of the ministry of the two prophets in Rev 11:2-3, and the time of authority the beast is permitted to persecute the saints in Rev 13:5. Also the "time, times, and half a time" of Rev 12:14.
    - This likely references to Daniel 9:24-27, where Daniel is told that after 69 "weeks" (seven year increments), there will be a 70<sup>th</sup> week that will differ from the rest. Something happens in this final week where sacrifices in the temple are ended for "half a week."
      - "When Daniel says sacrifice and offering are ended for "half of the week" (Dan. 9:27), he most likely refers to the death of Jesus, which ended all sacrifices as the final and definitive sacrifice for believers (Heb. 8:1–10:18). Hence, the first half of the seventieth week ended with Jesus' death and resurrection. John picks up the reference to half a week and applies it symbolically to his readers, designating the time after Jesus' death when evil rules. Thus, half a week or forty-two months is not a literal period of time but refers to the entire period between Jesus' resurrection and his second coming." (Schreiner, *ESVEC:Revelation*).