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How to Read the Book of Revelation



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This new edition is again dedicated to our son Ben, who was 5 when it was first written, and is now his own man. He has indeed become a soldier for the Lord, and companion in kingdom, suffering and patient endurance.

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1

How to Begin

After 2,000 years, the Book of Revelation continues to both attract and repel. Many Christians find the book intriguing or even attractive, drawn by the graphic imagery, the obscure numerology, and the promise of answers they would never otherwise discover. Yet at least equal numbers find the violence repulsive, the imagery bizarre, and the whole thing more confusing than enlightening. I have been reading Revelation now for around 40 years, and studying it seriously for more than 20, and I still find it challenging and difficult to read, yet also fascinating and amazingly insightful. It remains one of the most important, and certainly the most misunderstood and neglected, books of the Bible.

Why Should Reading Revelation be so Difficult?

Example 1

Imagine you are preparing to travel to a foreign country, and you want to start learning the local language. Perhaps you go to an evening class, or you study a book. Either way, you are likely to find it a taxing experience and rather technical. And yet there are three-year-olds in that country who have no trouble speaking the language! Reading anything from another time, culture and language will involve these sorts of challenges—most of the time when we are reading the Bible we forget this and assume we can understand without any effort.

Example 2

Cars are continually becoming more complex, and fewer and fewer people do their own car maintenance. If you open the bonnet of your car, it looks very confusing; try reading a maintenance manual, and it gets more complex still! The Book of Revelation claims to ‘lift the lid’ on what is really happening in our world, and—as with understanding what is under the bonnet—it needs a whole new way of thinking and speaking to make sense of it.

This booklet does not seek to give you the answers to all the questions Revelation throws up. It would need to be a lot longer for that! But what I will

do is highlight some of the most important things we have to think about in reading Revelation. I will do this with two sets of convictions:

- 1 *God has given us the Bible to enlighten us, not to puzzle us* (this is sometimes known as believing in the ‘perspicuity’ of Scripture). But this idea is sometime misunderstood as implying that a 21st-century Christian, sitting on his or her own, without any other knowledge, can make perfect sense of even the most difficult parts of the Bible. In fact, the Bible was given to the church as a whole, the Christian community—reading on one’s own, to oneself, is a relatively recent innovation. We need the help and insights of others—including those who have read before us, as well as scholars and specialists—to make sense of Revelation.
- 2 *Study and belief are not in opposition, but should work together.* For a lot of its history, ‘academic’ and devotional study of Revelation have been widely separated and rarely influenced each other. For example, the most widely accepted scholarly view of the meaning of ‘666’ in Rev 13.18 was proposed by four German scholars as long ago as the 1830s (see chapter 6 below)—and yet very few ordinary Christians know of it. Some scholarship of the past has failed to pay attention to the role that Revelation has in the church—but much devotional reading has also ignored scholarly insights, to its peril. The resulting vacuum of understanding has sucked in all sorts of bizarre and improbable interpretations and this has only served to make Revelation even more off-putting.

As we explore the issues, see what the problems are and discover where we might find answers, I hope that we will also learn things that help with our reading of the other parts of the Bible—and I hope it will make you excited about engaging with the Book of Revelation afresh.

Reflection

Before going any further, take a few moments to reflect:

- What has been your experience of reading Revelation up until now?
- What have you enjoyed about it? What have you struggled with?
- How has God already spoken to you through this book?
- In what contexts have you read Revelation? How might this have shaped your reading?

2

How to Read Different Kinds of Writing

In everyday life, we come across many different kinds of writing—though without thinking about it too much. As we read, we automatically go through a process of identifying what kind of writing we are looking at, and we read it with certain expectations accordingly. The technical term for ‘kind of writing’ is *genre*. Genre is the way that writers communicate what expectations they think we should have when we read what they have written—which is what makes it important.

Reflect

How many different kinds of writing can you think of? Here are some examples to start you off.

- My darling Ian
- Dear Sir (account number 10473519)
- Take 250g of plain flour and shake through a sieve
- Received: from grovebooks.co.uk [195.74.102.116] by mail.web-minders.com
- New wave of fire strikes to start in ten days

What is it that alerts you to the kind of writing in each? How does this affect the expectations you have as you read? Are they personal or impersonal? Important or trivial? Of lasting significance or temporary? Of local or wider significance? Inviting what kind of response?

There are two important things to be aware of in thinking about genre. Firstly, genre not only affects our expectations as we read, it actually shapes the way we interpret what we are reading. Consider the following text:

The stars will fall from heaven,
the sun will cease its shining;
the moon will be turned to blood,
and fire and hail will fall from heaven.
The rest of the country will have sunny intervals
with scattered showers.

What is it that makes this funny? Superficially, the vocabulary, grammar and style of the two sections appear very similar. But something alerts us to the fact that they belong to two different genres—‘apocalyptic’ and ‘weather forecast.’ As a result, we will interpret the two differently. The first we might take figuratively (non-literally), and see it has having religious and cosmic significance; whereas we would normally read the second fairly literally, but attribute to it nothing more than immediate and local significance.

Secondly, we can only correctly identify the genre of a piece of writing if we are familiar with that genre through our knowledge of previous examples. In all the examples listed above, you can identify the kind of writing each belongs to because you have seen plenty of other examples before, and you understand what is expected of you as you read them. There was, in fact, quite a bit of literature of the ‘apocalyptic’ kind around at the time Revelation was written—but most people today have never read it. The only other examples we are familiar with are elsewhere in the Bible, in Ezekiel and Daniel in the Old Testament.

There is a further issue in Revelation to add to these. If we need to identify what kind of writing we are looking at in order to know how to read it, the last thing we want is for the genre to keep changing from one verse to another—it is like trying to shoot at a moving target. But this is precisely what Revelation does. Some of the changes in genre in chapter 1 are shown here in table 1:

<i>Revelation 1</i>	<i>Genre</i>
1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to show his servants what must soon take place...	Apocalypse
3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy...	Benediction
4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia...	Letter
5 ...To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood...	Doxology
7 Look! He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him...	Apocalyptic
8 ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God...	Prophecy
9 I, John, your brother...	Letter

These changes in genre make the text feel very uneven and difficult to read—and also throw us off the scent when trying to make sense of it. We are already beginning to see that Revelation is in some ways even more complicated than it appears!

Reflect

We have seen that Revelation contains short sections that are in a number of different genres. But it also explicitly claims to be:

- a letter—1.4 and 9 represent standard conventions for letter-writing in the ancient world, and what John writes is to be sent to particular people living in particular places.
- a prophecy—the book calls itself a prophecy at both its beginning (1.3) and end (22.7, 10, 18, 19) and makes reference to prophecy within the text (19.10, 22.6).
- a revelation—the Greek for ‘revelation’ (*apokalypsis*) is the first word of the text, and gives us the general word for this kind of literature, though the word occurs nowhere else except here.

These three genres raise questions, some of them conflicting, about the way we should read Revelation.

- How do we listen to God speak to us about our situations through something that was written to a specific group of people in a different situation with different concerns from us?
- Is prophecy concerned with the future, or with the present time of those to whom the prophecy was first given—or does it somehow relate to both? Note that most Old Testament prophecy was concerned to bring God’s perspective to the present (‘forthtelling’), rather than predict the future (‘foretelling’).
- What is the purpose of a vision or revelation from God? Is it to challenge us or comfort us—or a bit of both? Note also that elsewhere in the NT ‘revelation’ most often has to do with our understanding of the gospel, rather than some esoteric vision (see, for example, Rom 16.25, Eph 1.17).

3

How to Read in Historical Context

Since Revelation claims that it is a letter, this means that in the first instance it was understood to be God's message to people in a particular time and place. So it is no surprise that it makes reference to things that they would be familiar with—the location and life of their cities and the stories and beliefs common in the environment they lived in.

A Note Concerning the Date of Writing

There are two main dates proposed for Revelation: around AD 65 during the reign of the Roman Emperor Nero; and around AD 95 during the reign of Domitian. Commentators often add interest to their reading of Revelation by reconstructing what life would have been like at the time of their preferred date, and relating the text to this. But our information about the period is relatively scant; most of the information we have applies to the general period, and so much of the historical information we have applies equally whichever date is right.

The single biggest issue here is whether or not the Christians in Asia Minor faced 'persecution,' which is often thought more likely to have been the case under Nero. But a number of recent commentators have suggested that Revelation was written to provoke a sense of crisis by highlighting the need to choose one's allegiance—Christ or the Emperor—at least as much as comforting Christians already under pressure.

The Laodiceans' Lukewarmness

One of the best illustrations of the importance of local context on the meaning of the text relates to the 'Laodicean lukewarmness' in Rev 3.15–16: 'Because you are neither hot nor cold, I will spew you out of my mouth.' This had long been a problem for commentators—what kind of coldness could be preferable to being lukewarm? The natural reading, of 'hot' as signifying faithful commitment, 'cold' as indifference, and 'lukewarm' as somewhere in between, does not make sense. What would these terms mean to local people at the time?

Laodicea is situated in the Lycus Valley. The river itself dries up in the summer, but the area has a number of springs. The best known of these are the hot springs at Pamukkale (ancient Hierapolis) with its striking calcified terraces, six miles across the valley from the site of Laodicea. (You can find pictures of

Pamukkale in just about any brochure advertising tourism in Turkey or by an online image search.) Not far away, Colossae was renowned for its cold water springs. But Laodicea had neither. The remains of an aqueduct, recently obliterated by farming, showed that the city relied on water from hot springs some five miles away which would cool on its journey. The pipes in the aqueduct were encrusted with deposits. The lukewarm water on its arrival no longer had any therapeutic value, yet it was not fit to drink, and most likely had to be left in jars to cool and the calcium deposits settle before it could be used.

The reference to 'hot,' 'cold' and 'lukewarm' is not then a description of the Laodiceans' lack of faith, but of their ineffectiveness. In the same way that drinking the lukewarm water as it arrived in the city would make a person throw up, the Laodiceans' lack of effective works made God sick.

The Other Churches

The order of the messages follows the order one would visit them in traveling a circular route from Ephesus clockwise. There are numerous aspects of the messages to the churches that appear to relate to their local situations:

Smyrna To this church, Christ is described as the one 'who was dead and came to life' (Rev 2.8). The city itself was destroyed in 600 BC and refounded in 300 BC, and its name means 'myrrh' which was used in burials (see John 19.39). Before the closing formula of the message is a promise of 'the crown of life' to the faithful (Rev 2.10). Smyrna was famous for its games, in which the winners would be awarded a 'crown' in the form of a laurel wreath. As a city it was also known as 'the crown of Asia' and featured a crown on its coins. Along with Philadelphia, it receives no rebuke; it is the only city where the church has survived into modern times.

Pergamum The threat to the church here is expressed as their living 'where Satan's throne is' (Rev 2.13); the city is dominated by an acropolis that appears throne-shaped as you approach from the previous city, Smyrna. Part of the promise to those who conquer is a 'white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name' (Rev 2.17). The natural stone in the area was black, and for inscriptions on buildings slabs of white stone were specially transported there for carving.

Sardis The challenge to the church here is to 'wake up' (3.2-3). Twice in its history, the city had been taken by attackers during the night, when the defenders thought they were safe.

Laodicea The church here is accused of arrogant self-sufficiency: 'I am rich, I have prospered, I need nothing' (3.17). After a devastating earthquake in AD 61 the city had taken the unusual step of refusing imperial aid in the re-

building process. The church is charged with being ‘poor, blind and naked’ (3.17); the city was a centre of banking, ophthalmology, and a clothes industry producing black wool.

The parallels and contrasts between the messages to the churches and the situation of the cities demonstrate the importance of reading the text in its first-century context. In some places the impact of the message is amplified; at others the actual meaning of the text is at stake.

It is also important to note that, at the end of each message, there is an injunction to ‘listen to what the Spirit is saying to the *churches* (plural). In other words, though the encouragements and warnings apply to each congregation, every one has something to learn from each message—suggesting that those overhearing the conversation might learn something too.

Reflect

This part of the message of Revelation suggests that God often speaks to us in terms that are related to our own context and history. It also offers words of both commendation and rebuke. Are there ways in which the life of your church reflects the local community positively? Are things related to the history or situation of your community that God would want to rebuke?

When new people came to the church we used to help lead in Poole, they often commented on what a welcoming church it is. This reflects the fact that Poole has, since the arrival of the railways, been a popular place to visit, so welcoming has been an important part of local life. But it also reflects God’s hospitality and welcome to those who come near to him. On the other hand, people are much less used to busyness and to change than in (for example) London, so we had to work hard to face new challenges and new opportunities that were confronting us.

4

How to Read in Biblical Context

As the early church developed, it was recognized that some of the writings of the apostles had a unique authority, and should be added to what Christians already counted as divinely inspired writings (what we now call the Old Testament). Though the first identification of these writings was made quite early on, it took around 300 years before there was a clear consensus as to what should be included—and, despite being included early on, Revelation was one of the last to be agreed. This list of what could be counted as Scripture was called the ‘canon’ (from the Greek word meaning ‘rule’ or ‘measure’). To read ‘canonically’ therefore means to read one book of the Bible with a view to its place in the whole.

This is especially important for reading Revelation. In its 405 verses, some people reckon there are as many as 676 different allusions to the Old Testament, even though there is not one single quotation.

The allusions are most frequently to Isaiah (128 times), Psalms (99), Ezekiel (92), Daniel (82) and Exodus (53).

The exact numbers are debated—after all, how many words do you need in parallel before something counts as an allusion or echo of another text? But the main problem most ordinary readers face is simply not knowing the Old Testament well enough to recognize the parallels in the first place.

Revelation 7—the Marking and Numbering of the Tribes

The first part of Revelation 7 describes the marking of the servants of God with a seal on their forehead. Though there are not many exact words in parallel, the episode has strong similarities with the marking of the faithful in the vision of Ezekiel 9. In both cases, those marked are saved from the destruction of God’s judgement. The passage goes on to enumerate those who have been sealed, tribe by tribe. This is something we find rather tedious—so much so that early versions of the Good News Bible summarizes it as one verse, ‘twelve thousand from each tribe’!

But for anyone familiar with the Old Testament, and especially with the Pentateuch (the first five books), it would have had strong echoes of the numbering of the tribes during the wanderings in the desert, from which the book of Numbers gets its name. The purpose of this numbering is to determine the fighting strength of the people in preparation for war. Having *heard* this numbering, John then *sees* a great multitude, and it is explained (7.14) that these are the ones who have remained faithful to God through great suffering. In other words, these are images of the same group of people. (In a number of places in Revelation, what John *sees* explains what he *hears*.)

So, when we read this part of Rev 7 canonically, we can see that the vision is portraying God's people as both a faithful remnant who are saved from the effects of God's judgement, and a people who have left oppression (Egypt) but yet to arrive in the Promised Land, who are ready for conflict. The theme of the Exodus wanderings appears elsewhere in Revelation (see below under 'How to Read the Numbers') as does the theme of conflict.

Whilst Ephesians 6 pictures each believer as a soldier, Revelation 7 offers an image of the people of God as an army, and as such is the only picture in the NT of corporate 'spiritual warfare.' What aspects of this idea might be helpful pastorally in the local church context? What aspects of it might be unhelpful, and in what situations? Have you experienced this idea being either used well or misused?

Revelation 12—the Characters in the Drama

Revelation 12 and 13 form the longest piece of continuous narrative in Revelation. The shape of the action in Rev 12 seems very strange, for reasons we will explore in the next chapter. But the 'players' look familiar if you know your Old Testament.

- The woman in the pain of childbirth looks remarkably similar to the people of God longing for deliverance as imagined in Isaiah 26.17 and 66.7 and Micah 4.10 and 5.3. Being aware of this guards against interpreting her as standing for a particular individual.
- The dragon is the opponent of God (Ezekiel 29.3), the primeval serpent (Genesis 3.13) and accuser of God's people (Job 1.6, Zechariah 3.1), links which are made explicit in Rev 12.9.
- The male child is the expected Messiah, the king to come (Psalm 2.9), whose victory is the victory of the champion of Israel (Michael, Daniel 10.13).

This whole episode is about the victory brought about by Jesus' death on the cross, the 'blood of the lamb,' as is made clear in 12.11.

Revelation 21—the New Jerusalem

Revelation makes extensive use of the book of Ezekiel, and a number of key passages derive from it—the vision of God's throne in chapter 4 (Ezekiel 1), the sealing of the saints in chapter 7 (Ezekiel 9), the eating of the scroll in chapter 10 (Ezekiel 3), the measuring of the temple in chapter 11 (Ezekiel 40). Now, the climax of Ezekiel's whole experience is the vision of the temple, symbolizing not just a restored nation, but a renewed spiritual vitality in worship. The climax of Revelation is rather different—there is no temple in the new Jerusalem (Rev 21.22), or rather, the whole city is a temple, being a cube like the Holy of Holies (Rev 21.16). With the incorporation of Gentile believers in the people of God, the vision for renewed worship has a new inclusivity that goes beyond the worship of the Jewish temple.

How to Read in Cultural Context

5

The quest for power is a universal human phenomenon. In the past, as today, people sought power over their own destiny, power over their environment, power to make their own choices, and power over others.

The theme of power is close to the surface throughout Revelation. Who is in charge of the world? Who has the power to understand what is happening? To whom do we have to give account of our lives? Who is the true source of peace and prosperity in a violent and uncertain world?

Magic

At a popular level, a common phenomenon associated with pagan belief was an interest in magic. A figure named Hekate was worshipped as, amongst other things, the goddess of witchcraft in many parts of the Mediterranean world. (The paradoxical combination of computer technology and a resurgence of interest in paganism means that you can find out a lot about Hekate through a simple web search of the name.) We rather take for granted three phrases attributed to Jesus in Revelation, 'I have the key to Death and Hades' (1.19), 'I am coming quickly' (five times) and 'I am the Alpha and the Omega' (four times) but it is worth noting:

- these are all unique to Revelation in early Christian writings, including the rest of the NT;
- they were phrases attributed to pagan gods in the context of Graeco-Roman magic rituals, particularly in the cult of Hekate.

In other words, in Revelation Jesus takes over these phrases of power; he is the only one who has power over life and death, a claim which denies the counter-claims of these religious and magical rituals.

But there is a second, even more fundamental area where Revelation makes radical claims about sources of power.

The Imperial Cult

There has been some debate over the significance of emperor ‘worship’—was it truly a ‘religious’ phenomenon, or was it really just political? Such a debate assumes a modern separation between the ‘religious’ and the ‘political’ which would have been quite unknown in the ancient world. What was clear was that there was perceived to be a serious conflict of loyalty. The Roman Emperor claimed in various ways to be the source of peace and prosperity within the Empire and therefore deserving of a distinct loyalty—something both Jews and Christians had difficulty with. We see evidence of this conflict sporadically in the gospels (as in the debate about paying taxes, Matt 22.15f and parallels).

Revelation 4

Chapter 4 is the first part of the main vision of the book. In it, John has privileged access to see the worship of God on his throne in heaven. A little reflection on this passage teaches us numerous things about the nature of worship—access to God’s presence is by his Spirit (v 2); worship has to do with recognizing God’s authority (vv 2, 3) and surrendering ourselves to him (v 10); encounter with God is awesome (v 3) and involves all our senses—and so on. We might go one stage further, and recognize the way this passages uses images and ideas from the Old Testament. God is on a throne surrounding by four living creatures, as in Ezekiel; the jewels are reminiscent of those on the high priest’s ephod; lightning and thunder recall Mt Sinai. All of these will shape our reading. But there are still other features—in particular the twenty-four elders in white, casting their gold crowns—which are harder to place, until we know a little about pagan worship and the imperial cult.

- When on his travels around the Empire, the Emperor would be accompanied by various officials and advisers. On arriving at a city, he would take his seat in a (moveable) throne room surrounded by

these officials. Domitian changed the number of officials (*lictors*) from twelve to twenty-four.

- In the OT, entering into God's presence was the province of the priesthood alone, yet in Revelation it is 'elders' who surround the throne. This follows the pattern of imperial visits, where the Emperor would be greeted first by elders from the city he was visiting.
- White was the normal ritual apparel in Greek culture, in contrast with the coloured garments of OT priests (see Exodus 28).
- The wearing of gold crowns and the casting of these crowns before the ruler had been a feature of Greek worship since Alexander. By contrast, elsewhere in the NT the use of 'crown' probably refers to the victor's wreath in the games (see 2 Tim 4.8, 1 Peter 5.4).
- The choruses sung to God here and elsewhere in Revelation are simpler and more repetitive than either the Psalms or texts that appear to have functioned as hymns in the early church (such as Phil 2.6–11 or perhaps Col 1.15–20). In form they more closely resemble the acclamations that were repeatedly sung or shouted to the Emperor as he approached a city.

We can read without knowing these things, but they add a new dimension—or, to change the analogy, it is like watching television in colour when we had previously only watched in black-and-white. The basic outline has not changed, but we see new depth and significance. Now we can see that Revelation 4–5 combines a great variety of OT imagery with contemporary practices of pagan worship and obeisance to the Emperor. In doing this, it is claiming for God alone all expressions of worship, and so offers a powerful critique of the acknowledged sources and structures of power in the first-century world.

Revelation 12

This chapter is of great importance in Revelation as a whole. Almost every commentator notes its significance within the structure of the book, yet there are very different interpretations of what it is about. The characters in the story (the woman, the dragon, the child, Michael) are familiar enough from the OT, as we saw in chapter 4 above. But the shape of the story is unfamiliar, and interpretations diverge widely here. As with Rev 4, there is still much we can learn, but the passage gains new significance if we put it alongside a story about Apollo and Python that was widely known in the ancient world.

Python, son of Terra, was a huge dragon. He was accustomed to giving oracles on Mount Parnassus before the time of Apollo. He was

informed by an oracle that he would be destroyed by the offspring of Leto. At that time Zeus was living with Leto. When [Zeus' wife] Hera learned of this, she decreed that Leto should give birth at a place where the sun does not reach. When Python perceived that Leto was pregnant by Zeus, he began to pursue (her) in order to kill her. But, by order of Zeus, the North Wind (Aquilo) lifted Leto up and carried her to Poseidon; Poseidon protected her, but in order not to rescind Hera's decree, he carried her to the island Ortygia and covered the island with waves. When Python did not find Leto, he returned to Parnassus. But Poseidon returned the island Ortygia to the upper region, and it was later called the island of Delos. There, holding on to an olive tree, Leto gave birth to Apollo and Artemis, to whom Haphaestus gave arrows as a gift. Four days after they were born, Apollo avenged his mother. He went to Parnassus and killed Python with arrows.

In case this is feeling rather academic, think of stories like this as being the ancient equivalent of our soap operas. The reason why this one is so important is that Roman emperors frequently used the stories of Apollo as imperial propaganda. The Emperor was a new Apollo, slaying the chaos monster of barbarism, and ushering in the peace and prosperity of the Empire in the lands the Romans had conquered. Rev 12 turns this on its head. Imperial power (the beast from the sea in Rev 13) is actually an agent of the primeval chaos monster, the opponent of both God and God's people, and this force of chaos has been defeated by the true Prince of Peace in the person of Christ.

Reflect

Who has power in the society or culture that you live in? What are the symbols and practises associated with that power?

How might recognizing that all such power properly belongs to God shape our worship?

6

How to Read the Numbers

Revelation's use of numbers is the most intriguing aspect of the book, but also the area where we are most likely to go astray. We are not used to reading texts which make a serious and systematic use of numerology and so we are most vulnerable to speculative and misleading readings. Are there any guidelines that might help us here? Before getting immersed in the details, I would like to suggest three principles which we can then use in thinking further about Revelation's numbers.

How to Avoid Crazy Readings

Any credible interpretation of the numerology of Revelation should do these three things:

1 Make sense of the whole data of the text

The first test a reading must pass is to make sense of the text. This might sound obvious, but it is surprising how often readings of Revelation sound exciting and coherent, until you realize that they do not actually match the text of Revelation itself! The most convincing interpretations will make sense of the whole of the text, rather than taking one small section and reading it apart from the wider context of the book as a whole.

2 Be a possible meaning for the author and his original audience

We noted early on that Revelation claimed (amongst other things) to be a letter—it was written by someone with a pastoral concern for the Christians he was writing to in order to share with them God's message. This implies that what he wrote must have made some sense to them (or at least he hoped it did), and so we should start our interpretation by finding out, as far as we are able, what that sense was. If we fail to take this seriously, then we will stumble at the very first stages of interpretation. How could we even attempt to translate the book (written in Greek) if we think the message did not make sense to first century readers? Christians have long believed that, in the same way Jesus combines humanity and divinity in himself, the Bible is God's inspired word while also being fully the words of the human authors. We therefore have to begin with what the author was trying to say and what his first readers would have understood—even though the significance of the text for us might not be limited by this. This is widely accepted as a sound

<i>Word or phrase</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Possible Significance</i>
seven Spirits in the Spirit Serpent (in Rev 12) lightning, rumblings and thunder	Four	Natural number for the world (four winds, four corners)
blessed sickle (in Rev 14) Lord God Almighty one sitting on the throne Alpha and Omega/ first and last/ beginning and end Christ testimony/ witness to Jesus prophecy I am coming	Seven	Completeness (days in the week, known planets, seas) rather than divinity
inhabitants of the earth	Ten	Another natural number
Jesus Spirit saints	Fourteen (= 2 x 7)	Completeness (as twice seven) and witness (since true testimony needs two witnesses, Deut 17.6, Rev 11)
[judgments, including the thunders of Rev 10.3–4] [cargoes in Rev 18.12–13] tribes (multitudes, kings)/ languages/ peoples/ nations lamb	Twenty-eight	Complete in the whole world (7 x 4)

Table 2: Word and Phrase Repetitions

principle for reading other parts of the Bible, and there is no reason for approaching Revelation differently.

3 Fit with the wider message of the book

It is a good general principle that we should make sense of what is obscure in the Bible in the light of what is plain. In the case of Revelation’s numerology, this means that our understanding of the significance of the numbers should support what is central to the text—that Jesus is the faithful witness who died for our salvation; he is deserving of worship with God who is seated on the throne; faithfulness to Jesus will draw us into conflict with other powers; but one day all evil will be driven away and our relationship with God will be unhindered.

With these principles in mind, let us look at the different ways that Revelation uses numbers.

a Word and Phrase Frequencies

This is perhaps the most easily understood way that Revelation uses numbers—but the least obvious as you read the text, as it requires studying the words in a rather different way. You can look at word frequencies yourself using any searchable computer-based Bible program. But remember that, unless the translation you are using is careful always to translate a Greek word by the same English word wherever it occurs, the frequency of words in English will not match the frequencies of words in the original. For example, the NRSV translates the Greek word *christos* as ‘Messiah’ in 11.5 and 12.10, but as ‘Christ’ in the other five places it occurs (1.1, 2, 5; 20.4, 6); ‘I am coming’ is translated ‘I will come’ in 2.5 and 2.16 in most English versions. Table 2 shows some word and phrase repetitions.

What is the significance of these word frequencies?

- Firstly, it shows what an extraordinarily piece of literature Revelation is. Some scholars have argued that Revelation was put together from a number of visions by someone who did not understand them, but the evidence suggests that the book we have was very carefully constructed. If the whole thing represents a direct, uninterpreted account of a vision from God, it was clearly a very highly structured and ordered vision.
- Secondly, it says something profound about God as the one who brings order to the world. It is notable that the terms associated with the forces of evil that oppose God consistently avoid this careful patterning—‘dragon’ occurs 13 times, ‘Satan’ eight times, ‘beast’ occurs 38 times (excluding 6.8) and ‘Babylon’ occurs six times. We have already seen how the forces of evil are seen as sources of chaos when thinking about chapter 12.
- Thirdly, the frequencies themselves reinforce the ‘surface’ meaning of the terms.

Jesus is described as a ‘faithful witness’ only here in the New Testament, and in fact it is a central theme in Revelation. The number 14 is the number of perfect witness, since it combines seven, the number signifying completeness, with two, the number of witness derived from the requirement in Deut 17.6 (see John 8.18 for an echo of this theme). Similarly, the Spirit is closely associated with this witness (Rev 19.6) and the saints are called to emulate it; both also occur 14 times.

There are 28 (= 7 × 4) items in the list of cargoes mentioned by the merchants who mourn the destruction of Babylon, which is

most commonly understood to refer to ancient Rome (18.12–13). Although each item has its own significance, the point is that Rome traded everything there was (seven, the number of completeness) in the whole world (four). Nothing and no place was beyond Rome's economic exploitation.

It appears that only terms of significance occur with these special frequencies, and they also seem to fit with the wider message of the book. There is little doubt that the first Christians will have studied Revelation very carefully, and many would have been familiar with Jewish rabbinical study of the Old Testament, where careful attention was given to the precise words and even letters used in the text.

So this understanding of word frequencies does satisfy our criteria for avoiding speculative readings.

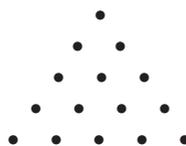
b Square, Triangular and Rectangular Numbers

Living in a technologically developed society, it is difficult to imagine the significance that numbers had in the ancient world. Pythagoras may have given us insight into trigonometry when we were at school, but few of us realize that the Pythagoreans were not just interested in doing sums. They were a religious sect, for whom numbers had a mystical or even magical significance. In a world unfamiliar with the concept of zero, mastering mathematics meant mastering the technologies of construction and warfare—and this mastery made no small contribution to the dominant power of the Roman Empire.

There was a particular interest in arrays—numbers laid out in a shape. We are familiar with 'square' numbers ($1 \times 1 = 1$, $2 \times 2 = 4$, $3 \times 3 = 9$, $4 \times 4 = 16$ and so on). They are called 'squares' because they are the numbers of objects laid out in a square array. Anyone with an interest in snooker will be familiar with the fact that 15 is a 'triangular' number, in that there are 15 red balls laid out as a triangle at the beginning of a game (the 'triangles' are 1, 3, 6, 10, 15 and so on). A third, related category is that of 'rectangular' numbers, those formed by an array with one side one object longer than the other ($1 \times 2 = 2$, $2 \times 3 = 6$, $3 \times 4 = 12$, and so on).



Square



Triangular



Rectangular

From the diagram it is possible to see that these three kinds of numbers are closely interrelated. Square numbers can be formed by adding consecutive odd numbers ($1, 1 + 3 = 4, 1 + 3 + 5 = 9$ and so on); rectangular numbers are the sums of evens ($2, 2 + 4 = 6$ and so on) and triangles are the sums of successive numbers. As a result, there are a number of ways that the different kinds can be formed from each other. Each rectangle is double its corresponding triangle, but triangles can also be formed by adding rectangular numbers to square numbers.

What has this to do with Revelation? Of the whole numbers that occur in Revelation, 4, 7, 12 and 24 have fairly clear significance as mentioned above under 'Word and Phrase Frequencies.' The 1,000 years of the millennium need particular attention, and I look at this in chapter 7 below. This leaves four other numbers whose significance is not so clear:

- The *square* 144 is related both to God's people in 7.4, 14.1 and 14.3, as well as the New Jerusalem in 21.17. As noted above, the shape of the New Jerusalem corresponded to the shape the Holy of Holies in the temple, and in the Old Testament horned altars for sacrifice had to be square (Ex 27.1), which probably contrasted with the altars of surrounding religions.
- The *triangle* 666 is used in 13.18 to identify the beast who makes war on the saints. 666 is in fact the triangle of 36, and 36 is one of the few numbers that is triangular as well as square. So 666 could be described as 'doubly triangular.'
- The *rectangle* 42 (months) is used for the period of trampling of the temple in 11.2, and similarly for the time of the authority of the beast in 13.5.
- The *rectangle* 1,260 (days) appears to refer to the same period of time, but with a different emphasis. (Note that 42 'ideal' months of 30 days contain 1,260 days in all.) In 11.3 it is a time for the witnesses to prophecy; in 12.6 it is the period during which the woman in the wilderness is nourished by God.
- Both these expressions are identified with the 'time, times and half a time' (three and a half days/years or 'half week of years') that Daniel describes as the period of the oppression of the saints (Dan 7.25, 9.27 and 12.7).

So it appears that square numbers are associated with God, triangular numbers with the opponents of God, and rectangular numbers with the time of conflict between these two forces—the overlap of the ages, when the kingdom

of God had broken into this world, but has yet to be fully revealed. Revelation highlights this paradox from the beginning; John shares with his readers both the 'kingdom' and the 'suffering' ('tribulation' in the AV, 1.9) and the twins themes of suffering and victory recur throughout the book.

Again, we have found something that at first looks as though it might be purely speculative. But closer inspection has shown something that looks remarkably coherent, that makes sense of the text as we have it, that would have been well understood in the first century, and that relates very well to what Revelation says in other, less ambiguous ways. So again, this satisfies our criteria for avoiding speculative reading.

c Words and Numbers—gematria or isopsephism

This is the most interesting but also the most unusual way that Revelation uses numbers, and so it will be the most important area where we apply the criteria of avoiding crazy readings.

In Rev 13.18, at the climax of perhaps the most terrifying part of Revelation describing a dragon and two beasts who trampled and destroy God's people, we find this enigmatic clue to the identity of the first beast that rose out of the sea in 13.1:

Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is a human number, its number is 666.

From earliest times, people reading this have tried to fit all sorts of names to this 'encoding,' with some bizarre results! As a result, some commentators have argued that we should not look for a name that fits this number; the significance of it is that it falls short of God's ideal of seven, three times over. The trinity of evil (dragon, beast from the land, beast from the sea) falls short of God's glory in every respect. Whilst this significance of the number is true (and remember that 666 is a doubly triangular number), the main difficulty with this is that the text actually *asks* us to work out the name! Unless John was doing something very odd, he expected his first readers to know the answer.

To make sense of this, we need to know a few facts about words and numbers in the ancient world.

- 1 Ancient alphanumeric systems had no separate symbols for numbers, and so letters were used to indicate numerical values. The Romans used the letters I, V, X, L, C and M to represent 1, 5, 10, 50, 100 and 1000 respectively, and constructed numbers by placing these letters in order, subtracting or adding their values depending

on the relative position of the letters. This system is still used today in dates of television programmes (for some reason).

- 2 In Greek and Hebrew, *every* letter was given a value. A common system was to allocate 1 to 10 to the first ten letters of the alphabet, 20, 30 up to 100 to the next nine letters, and 200, 300 and so on to the remaining letters (Hebrew has 22 letters, and Greek has 24). This meant that any word has a value; you simply add up the value of each of the letters in the word.
- 3 We know of numerous examples of this use of numbers in other writing, including writing important to Christians. In Pompeii, there is an inscription: 'I love her whose number is 545.' In the Christianized apocalyptic work the Sybilline Oracles, it is 'predicted' that the Messiah will have a name whose value is 888, and several hints are given that this must be Jesus. 'Jesus' in Greek does indeed have this value, and the number 8 was associated with the Messiah and the beginning of the age to come. It is worth noting that this is a 'one-way' code; it is simple to calculate the number of a name, but nearly impossible to go the other way and deduce a name from a number—unless you already know the answer!
- 4 The most common way this technique is used is to 'prove' that two things are to be identified by showing that their numbers are the same. The Roman historian Suetonius quotes a popular saying in his biography of seven emperors: 'A new calculation: Nero killed his own mother.' In Greek the value of 'Nero' and 'killed his own mother' both came to 1005. Some rabbis taught that the Messiah would be called Menachem (meaning 'Comforter'), since in the messianic title 'branch of David' (see Jer 23.5) the word 'branch' in Hebrew has the value 138, the same as the value of Menachem. (This adds a new dimension to Jesus saying that the Spirit would be 'another Comforter' in John 14.16.) This use of numbers is called *gematria* in Hebrew and *isopsephism* in Greek. The 'iso-' in *isopsephism* means 'same.'

This last point 4 is especially interesting, since Rev 13.18 is saying that the number of the beast is equal to the number of a man, and this number of 666. Most speculation about 666 tries to find a person's name that equals 666 without paying attention to 'beast.' But if you write the Greek word for beast (*therion*) in Hebrew letters, and add up their value, the value of the word comes to—666! And if you do the same with the name Caesar Neron (we know from inscriptions that Nero's name was sometimes written with a final 'n') you get—666! The number of this man's name is the same as the

number of the beast. Revelation is not telling the Christians something new, but demonstrating the truth of what they knew already—that Nero, the first great persecutor of Christians, embodied the true spirit of the empire that was the great opponent of the people of God.

You may have noticed a footnote in your Bible, explaining that some early manuscripts have the value 616, not 666. If you do the calculation with the Greek for ‘of the beast’ (*theriou*) and Caesar Nero (without the final ‘n’) both give the value 616. Some early scribes appear to have known this meaning for the text, though apparently not the significance of 666 as a triangular number.

Strange as it may seem to us, this reading of the text meets our criteria for avoiding crazy readings. It makes good sense of the data of the text; in fact, it occurs elsewhere in Revelation in 21.15 where the word for ‘angel,’ written in Hebrew letters, adds up to 144, the dimensions of the city he is measuring. The technique would have been known amongst Christians reading this, and appears to have been familiar to those copying the text for wider circulation. And it fits with the wider message of Revelation. The theme of the Empire embodying opposition to God and being in conflict with God’s people is present right the way through the book, as we saw in chapter 5 above.

So how do we make sense of this for today?

Reading Revelation Metaphorically

The most pervasive characteristic of Revelation is its imagery and symbolism. This is one of its distinctive features in comparison with other apocalyptic literature; Revelation offers a far more thorough-going depiction of an alternative ‘symbolic universe’ in which it invites its readers to participate.

Although this aspect of the text is described as ‘imagery’ or ‘symbolism,’ it is more correctly called ‘metaphor.’ Part of the reason why Revelation has been difficult to read is that, in the development of Western thought, we have not been very good at understanding metaphor.

Metaphor involves bringing together two things that are unlike, that do not belong together. If I describe a friend as ‘eating like a horse’ I am bringing together two things that are different—a person and a horse—and making some identification between them. But the identification is only partial; I am suggesting that my friend is like a horse only in some respects (in this case, in eating large quantities) but not in others. How do we know which aspects are brought together, and which are not? Firstly, by knowing something of the context—how much horses eat, and what my friend is like. But we also need

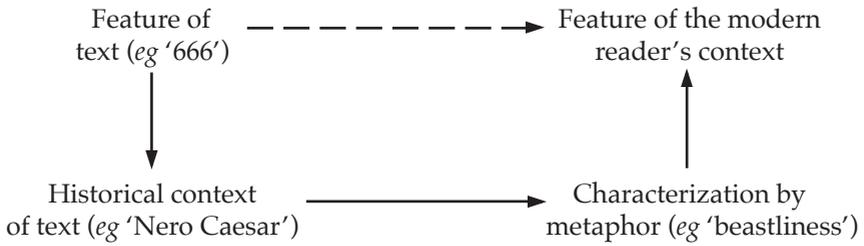
to understand conventions, and the previous use of this kind of language. We all understand what it means to 'sleep like a baby,' but the strange thing is that babies rarely do it! The meaning of this metaphor (which has become a figure of speech) has been shaped by its use. So to read Revelation, we need to understand both its historical and wider literary context.

You might like to reflect on other biblical metaphors and think about where we look for an understanding of their content—God as shepherd (Psalm 23, John 10), God as potter and people as clay (Jeremiah 18), God as Father (Romans 8 and Jesus' use of 'Abba'), the church as body (1 Cor 12).

How do we know which aspects of the metaphor carry meaning—for example, if God is a potter and we are the clay, does that mean that we simply do nothing and wait to be squished into shape?

The partial nature of the metaphorical identification holds the key to understanding how Revelation continues to speak powerfully to modern readers. In chapters 12 and 13, Roman imperial power is identified with the beast from the sea, acting alongside the beast from the land, and with the power of the dragon. As such it is characterized by repressive violence, conflict with the true people of God, control of economic systems, and the maintenance of respect for its image. In characterizing it this way, Revelation is shearing off many of the historical particularities of the Empire—it is creating a kind of caricature, in which certain aspects of reality are focussed on and others ignored. Such a caricature is then easily seen to apply to other contexts, wherever there are regimes marked by repression, persecution, economic control and maintenance of image. The metaphorical nature of the language makes it widely applicable beyond its original context, and in fact appears to invite us to similarly re-imagine our world using biblical categories in the way Revelation itself does.

The openness and applicability of Revelation's metaphors means that there is a constant temptation to make a direct connection between the text and our own world—to think that *the* referent of the text is the world of our day (dotted line). But Revelation was not, in the first instance, written about our own context, even if it speaks to it. We need to look first at the historical realities the text might be referring to, see where there are parallels in our own situation, and only *then* discern what the text is saying to us (solid lines). To take the short cut is to court disaster by opening the meaning to unchecked speculation. On what grounds could we discern whether John was writing about our day when he himself did not know he was doing so?



According to Revelation's theological scheme, we continue to live in the 'in-between' time before the return of Christ, when God's rule has only partially broken in and Satan's defeat is yet to be made complete. God continues to call his saints to faithful witness in the face of suffering, and the final destiny of all powers opposed to God will be the same as the judgement prophesied for the Roman Empire.

How to Understand the Millennium

7

Understanding the millennium is one of the knottiest problems in the study of Revelation, and deserves a booklet of its own. Fortunately, there is one—*The Meaning of the Millennium* by Michael Gilbertson, booklet B 5 earlier in this series. If you are interested in exploring this further, I suggest you look there. On the supporting page to this booklet on the Grove web site, I have included a table which compares the four main schemes that have been proposed to make sense of the millennium—and shows why none of them is wholly satisfactory!

If we cannot find a *scheme* which fits well with the text, can we still *learn* something from it? Surely we can! The aim of the text is not to give us an end-times timetable, but to shape our lives in the light of the future that is to come. Michael Gilbertson suggests that the millennium emphasizes:

- **The Victory of God** The final triumph of God is the horizon that is constantly in view; what is true in heaven becomes true on earth, and the millennium is the first moment when the sovereignty of God is manifest on earth.
- **The Lordship of Christ** The establishment of God's sovereignty on earth is triggered by the appearance of Christ. The imitation by the beast of Christ (wounded, 13.3/5.6, mysterious name, 13.18/2.17, having authority, 13.1/5.6) is finally exploded as pretence.
- **The Vindication of the Saints** The hidden dimension of reality becomes visible—defeat and failure of martyrdom turn out to be a glorious victory. As the humiliation has been public, so the vindication by God is public.
- **The Renewal of the Earth** God's plan is to transform the earth, not simply do away with it. 'There must come a time on earth when it is true to say: "the sovereignty of the world has passed to our God and his Christ." Unless the world is moving to such a goal, Christ has won only a hollow victory which leaves the powers of evil in possession' (George Caird).

8

How to Read the Violent Texts

One of the things that makes Revelation an uncomfortable book to read is the violence of its imagery. Slaughter with a sword, hail and fire mixed with blood hurled to the earth, the destruction of the environment, the torture of scorpion stings, plagues, sulphur, beasts from the abyss, rivers of blood—it does not make for easy bed-time reading.

What can we say as we find ourselves repulsed by this litany of destruction? The first and most important is that Revelation does not invite us to make a response of violence to the oppression we find in our world. Right from the outset, the writer is clear that he is speaking to those who share the ‘patient endurance’ (1.9) required by any who suffer because of their witness to Jesus. Jesus is consistently depicted as the suffering ‘faithful witness’ (Greek: *martyrs*) and that we are to follow his path. But there are four other factors we should bear in mind when considering Revelation’s violence.

Culture

In the West, we live in a culture in which we are, by and large, insulated from the violence that is an everyday occurrence in other parts of the world, and with which people have been familiar throughout history. We pay professional soldiers to fight for us; our experience of violence is mostly second-hand through the media; we can even enjoy a Sunday lunch without having to wring the chicken’s neck. All this makes us quite unusual and prone to being easily shocked by violence that for most of humanity has been part and parcel of daily living.

Metaphor

As I have mentioned above (in chapter 6), Revelation’s language is largely metaphorical. But because it is a strange genre, we are constantly inclined to read it literally. I do not believe that Revelation 8.9 is depicting a third of the sea literally turning to blood, and yet the image makes us stumble. This is true even for scholars. One feminist scholar describes being appalled by the idea of the kings of the earth going into the New Jerusalem, the bride, in Revelation 21, because this is an image of ‘mass intercourse.’ But to read the book like this involves ‘literalizing’ the text in a way that fails to take seriously its genre, and we can easily do the same with its violence. Much of the conflict

depicted is a metaphor for the spiritual conflict between God and the powers that oppose him and his people and needs to be read as such.

Interpretation

How we interpret the different parts of the text makes an enormous difference to some of the images of violence. If we adopt a 'futurist' reading, which understands Revelation as describing things that are going to happen, the four horsemen in chapter 6 then become end-time disasters that God is going to unleash on the world; they look very literal, and the problem of the violence is at its most acute. But a 'contemporary historical' reading (on which see the next chapter) which sees Revelation 12 as a depiction of Jesus' death, resurrection and victory over the spiritual forces that oppose God, reads chapter 6 rather differently. It is a depiction of the world *as it already is*, and the cross shows God's response of love and judgement to this world and is ultimately the means by which God's perfect future will come about. The violence in the text is a reflection of the violence in the world.

Canon

We must continually remember to read Revelation in the context of the rest of the Bible, and especially the rest of the New Testament. For Revelation is not the only part of the New Testament to use violent imagery, and in fact Jesus' teaching contains repeated references to judgement in fairly graphic terms. His language of the fire of hell which does not go out and the worm that never dies (in, for example, Mark 9.48) is remarkably close to Revelation's language of judgement (for instance in Rev 14.11 and 19.3). So the problem of violence and judgement in Revelation is part of a larger question that relates to the whole New Testament, and which needs a separate discussion of its own.

In Revelation, as in the rest of the New Testament, the vividness of the imagery serves to make us realize what is at stake, to highlight the seriousness of the decision that faces us. Being a faithful follower of Jesus really is a matter of life and death. Those of us who are most likely to suffer from comfortable complacency need to be challenged and stirred into action for our own sake and the sake of those around us. Those who daily pay the price of commitment to Christ—as many do around the world today—need to know that their sacrifice is not in vain.

9

How to Relate Revelation to Life Today

How do we make sense of Revelation in our own situation? What relevance does it have to 21st century life? Interpreters of Revelation have generally taken one of four approaches:

- ***Idealist***. This sees the text as describing timeless spiritual truths about the nature and purposes of God, and the relationship between the church and the world. Some of the earliest allegorical interpretations of Revelation were of this sort, but this approach has more recent exponents too.
- ***Futurist***. A rival school of early interpreters saw in Revelation the prediction of an imminent end and the advent of the millennial age. Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth century understood it as predicting the end in his time, and there has been a strong revival of this approach in the twentieth century.
- ***Church historical***. As the centuries passed, it became increasingly attractive to see Revelation as having some historical references, but not to the 'end times' only. Berengaud in the ninth century was the first to suggest that Revelation described events through history to the writer's day.
- ***Contemporary historical*** (or *preterist*). The rise of biblical criticism and the rediscovery of the historical context of Revelation's writing has made it possible to argue that Revelation is primarily speaking to its own day, and only secondarily (and derivatively) to later readers.

Some comment on the approach taken is usually featured at the beginning of works on Revelation, and these four are not necessarily mutually exclusive. But the most important thing to notice about these 'approaches' is that they are actually conclusions from reading the text, not assumptions made on approaching the text. Why should we treat Revelation any differently from other NT texts in asking questions about its author, first readers and literary shape? When we read (say) 1 Corinthians, we normally assume that Paul was writing to a specific group of people in a particular time and place—and yet

this does not prevent God speaking to us through it. Why should Revelation be any different?

My own approach is to see some value in each of the four traditional ways of thinking. Clearly, Revelation is speaking to first-century Christians, and we need to know as much as we can about them to make sense of it (contemporary historical). But Revelation makes sense of their present situation in the light of the ultimate destiny of the world, and we need to do the same (futurist). We might even see ways in which God's promise and judgement have been worked out in history (church historical), and all these things will teach us truths about the nature of God and his relation to the world (idealist).

Revelation as Story

There is now a widespread recognition of the importance of story in defining the identity of individuals and communities. When someone wants to know who we are, they will often ask to hear our story. And we define ourselves by the stories we tell others and tell ourselves concerning who we are.

One of the most important things that the Bible does is set out a story—the story of God's dealings with his people—and invite us to become a part of that story, invite us to accept its story as *our* story. And Revelation does this in an especially vivid way. For if metaphor makes new connections between things and so reconfigures the way we perceive the world, then narrative (story) takes these metaphors and animates them. Here we have not a series of tableaux, but a world in motion, a world which we are invited to enter and in which we are invited to live out our lives. We are not simply to sit and watch as passive observers as the epic battles unfold on the big screen before our eyes. We are invited in, as supporting cast, to participate in the struggles but also to share in the victories.

The most important way Revelation relates to life today is in its invitation to us to live in its story. We are like lampstands among which Jesus himself walks. We are the ones who, in lives given up to him, are continually casting our crowns before him. We live in a world where the four horsemen are galloping far and wide, and yet where we are gathered as an army, ready to do battle with dark spiritual forces. We know what it is to be crushed under the heel of power, but we also know the protection and nourishing God provides in the secret place. And we live out this story, already knowing how it will end—with the powers of oppression defeated, and the glory of the city that is paved with gold.

How to Go Further

The best way to understand more about Revelation is to read it! But it also helps to learn from others who have read and reflected, and these are my suggestions of whom you might like to sit with.

Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993). Short but packed with the distilled thoughts of many years' work on Revelation. Cannot be beaten as an introduction. See also Bauckham's outstanding in-depth studies *The Climax of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993).

Alan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1987). A lively and gripping reading of Revelation from then-Apartheid South Africa.

David deSilva, *Seeing Things John's Way* (WJK, 2009). A mid-length study focussing particularly on John's rhetorical strategy in Revelation.

Gordon Fee, *Revelation: New Covenant Commentary* (Cascade, 2011). An excellent mid-size commentary attending to the text and offering application.

Michael Gilbertson, *The Meaning of the Millennium* (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 1997). Clear and helpful exploration of the millennium in Revelation 20.

Michael Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly* (Cascade, 2011). An accessible thematic introduction by a reputable NT scholar.

Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999). A really interesting study, connecting the original political context of Revelation with its political implications for today.

Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Eerdmans, 2001). One of the best short introductions, including a broad-brush narrative commentary.

Craig Koester, *Anchor Bible Commentary on Revelation* (Yale, 2014). An outstanding detailed commentary—probably the best and most usable big commentary now available.

Howard Marshall, Stephen Travis and Ian Paul, *Exploring the New Testament (vol 2)* (London: SPCK, 2002). Very good introduction to the NT; my section on Revelation covers some of the issues discussed here in a little more depth.

Ben Witherington III *Revelation* (CUP, 2003). Another good mid-length commentary, including some focus on John's use of language.

There is a wealth of extra material at www.grovebooks.co.uk.

After 2,000 years, the Book of Revelation continues to both attract and repel. Where should we start in trying to make sense of its bizarre imagery? How do we go about relating it to life in the 21st century? And how can we tell the difference between sensible interpretation and misleading speculation?

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Ian Paul studied maths and worked in industry before training for ordination and researching the interpretation of the Book of Revelation. Following 10 years in parish ministry, and 10 in theological education, he now teaches, writes and blogs at the widely read Psephizo.com and is writing a commentary on Revelation. He is a member of General Synod and Archbishops' Council.

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