

Five Keys to Understanding Revelation

Scott Postma — July 10, 2014

Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins sold more than 65 million copies from their 16-volume *Left Behind* series. Seven of their titles reached #1 on the [New York Times](#), [USA Today](#), and [Publishers Weekly's](#) bestseller list.

And, in October of 2014, there's a movie coming out based on the series starring Nicholas Cage.

“No other book of the New Testament evokes the same fascination as the book of Revelation,” wrote the late dispensationalist and long-time president of [Dallas Theological Seminary](#), John Walvoord.

And if success of the *Left Behind* series is any indicator, he was definitely right. People are fascinated with this particular book of the Bible.

Anyone even remotely familiar with the Bible knows there are a lot of peculiar and unsettling images in Revelation. And, fascinating as they are, the problem is knowing how to interpret them.

David deSilva rightly describes the current interpretive trend—the one reflected in the *Left Behind* series: “Many popular interpreters of Revelation try to make sense of its visions by looking to the future, decoding its images in terms of contemporary politics and forecasting how our history will unfold.”

But is this contemporary political sensationalism the message John was trying to deliver to his readers? And is it

the message he meant for us to have who live some 2,000 years later?

Of course it's beyond the scope of a single blog post to try and unravel all the mysteries of Revelation, but in order to aid readers in properly interpreting this fascinating book, we'll take a look at the genre and the five basic keys you need to begin your interpretive journey.

Literary Genre

Instinctively, we know how to interpret various genres we are familiar with. For example, we don't read a newspaper the same way we read poetry, or a shopping list. Each of these media has its own texture and contour that shapes the tone and weightiness of its content.

The book of Revelation is no different.

Evangelicals rightly affirm the Bible is the Word of God. But frequently they don't recognize it has been given to us in a particular literary form called the *apocalyptic* genre.

If we attempt to interpret Revelation without considering the features of its apocalyptic nature, we will fail to grasp the purpose and message intended for the original audience—which, of course, is fundamental to proper exegesis. And, we will fail to grasp the theological principles preserved for our benefit.

Apocalyptic Literature

The apocalyptic genre was widely used in Jewish literature dating from the second century B.C. through about the first century A.D.

In addition to sharing a belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the most basic features of the apocalyptic genre are: visions and dreams, cryptic and symbolic language, appearances of otherworldly mediators, fantasy-like images that draw from both Old Testament and non-Jewish literature, the dividing of times and events into neat

packages, a concern with future events—primarily the end of history as a means of interpreting the present sufferings and persecutions, and most often, written pseudonymously (This last characteristic is where the Revelation stands apart from other apocalyptic literature because it identifies its author as John).

In short, Revelation uses cosmic imagery to allow followers of Christ to see what otherwise could not be seen—realities about who God is and what he is up to—for the purpose of speaking a word of hope about the future in times of suffering when it seems like evil or injustice is prevailing.

Five Keys

There are at least five keys to properly interpret Revelation.

1. Remember the letter has a pastoral function. It was written to address the seven churches in Asia Minor with the revelation of Jesus Christ (1:4).
2. Keep in mind, the imagery of the genre “is primarily that of fantasy.”
3. John will interpret most of the important images himself (e.g. Christ, 1:17-18).
4. Much like parables, interpret visions as a whole. While the details add to the “evocative nature of the imagery,” they shouldn’t be pressed too far.
5. Revelation is fundamentally about the unveiling of Jesus—not about geopolitical issues. It’s about the conquering Lion in the form of a slain Lamb (5:5-6). Ultimately, Revelation is a unique, profound, and imaginative proclamation of the gospel of Christ.

That said, the focus of Revelation as apocalyptic literature is not the political sensationalism of the “prophecy experts,” but the offering of hope and comfort to an audience in the author’s present orientation by pointing to who God is, what God has done, and what God will do in the future.

As apocalyptic literature, Revelation reminds us God is in control of the history John is watching unfold. God has won the war in Jesus Christ. This life that the Christian is now

living is a life “between the times” of the already and not yet, between the inauguration of the kingdom and its consummation.

Revelation, in essence, “flips the script” and helps suffering believers see the violent powers that be are actually the defeated enemies of God. It further “ups the stakes” and shows the Christian that complicity with the Babylon-like powers means complicity with the dragon.

When read correctly, Revelation makes profoundly clear the resurrection is the Christian’s future hope, and “the ultimate goal is not life after death but the life after the life after death—the resurrection of the body.”

It is with that vision of heaven, believers can be assured the God who is unveiling history is the God who restores, redeems, and recreates. He is not throwing stuff away; he’s making it new—and he doesn’t have a “Plan B.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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Jeff says

July 11, 2014 at 10:29 am

Great article/blog. Good information for as little space as you used. I think I'll steal it, tweak it, change some things, and calle it mine. LOL. I don't know if I couldn't packed as much info in such small a place. The curse of preachers, usually, is not knowing when to stop talking (or writing).

[Reply](#)



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July 11, 2014 at 10:32 am

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[Reply](#)



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July 11, 2014 at 2:03 pm

Thanks, Jeff... Stopping is the hardest work of all sometimes.
Blessing!

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“Discipleship on the Edge – An Expository Journey Through the Book of Revelation” to your list. He brings much clarity to some of the things John likely assumed his reader (at least those contemporary to his writing) already knew (local geography, politics, culture, religions, etc.), and this exposition is really helpful for today’s readers to get what John was writing about. Another thing Johnson focuses on as a guiding theme is that part of the pastoral message in Revelation is not that Jesus will eventually prevail but that he has already triumphed: the Lamb who was slain is presently on the throne.

Cheers,
Tim

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July 11, 2014 at 2:01 pm

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Christian Humanism and the Puritan Social Order - by Margo Todd January 1988. The impact of Christian humanist reforms on university curriculum and pedagogy during the Henrician and Edwardian periods has been described at some length because of the importance of the university experience of later puritan divines for the formation of puritan social thought. The sermon was, after all, the primary vehicle by which ideas were propagated in early modern England, especially among fervent protestants. An increasingly literate populace read printed sermons (frequently aloud, to less educated auditors), and sermon and lecture attendance was a popular form of entertainment among Humanism, system of education and mode of inquiry that originated in northern Italy during the 13th and 14th centuries and later spread through western Europe. The term is alternatively applied to a variety of Western beliefs, methods, and philosophies that place central emphasis on the human realm. Thank you for your feedback. Our editors will review what you've submitted and determine whether to revise the article. Join Britannica's Publishing Partner Program and our community of experts to gain a global audience for your work! External Websites. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy - Renaissance Humanism.