

Session 01 Principles of interpretation

What sort of literature? – is it “Apocalypse” or Prophecy? Both make use of vivid pictures and symbols. “apokalupsis” is a Greek word meaning “revelation, unveiling, or disclosure”, but it can be confused with a particular Jewish use of the term.

- Jewish apocalypses take a very pessimistic view of the world, past and present. It is seen as being incurably wicked and that the only hope is a catastrophic intervention by God, destroying the wicked and rewarding the righteous who are being oppressed. , e.g. as the Essenes believed.
- Usually they are anonymous, written in the names of long-dead heroes, during the inter-Testament period when the voice of prophecy was silent.
- The “prophetic” element is really history as written by the long-dead “author”.

Four main approaches:

- **A detailed forecast of the future.**
- **Everything fulfilled during the first century**
- **Gradual fulfillment during the whole period of the Last Days.**
- **A timeless allegory about the conflict between good and evil**

The Book (Letter) of Revelation is a true prophecy, 1:1-3, 22:18-19. Note the line of communication.

It speaks to the present situation, and requiring obedience and action.

It also speaks about future events, in continuity with present and past ones, and is based on what God has already done through His Son. There is an unbroken flow of history, stretching back to the beginning and restoring the brokenness that entered God’s creation, as recorded in Genesis 3. There are about 500 allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly from Exodus, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zachariah, but few quotations.

John was writing to a Church that was experiencing persecution. The messages, coded” by means of the pictures and symbols were relevant to them, 1:9, in the same way that O.T. prophecies related to current and impending situations in Israel. They would also recognize the actual persons and groups referred to in some of the letters to the churches. They would interpret the pictures in relation to their circumstances, e.g. the beast would for them be the Roman Empire and its 10th horn would probably be the Emperor Domitian who claimed divine identity and severely persecuted Christians.

The relative absence of persecution in the West obscures its message and leads either neglect of the book or to a fascination with prophetic programs (so that it becomes the province of the “far out”). **Revelation was addressed to the “martyr church”.**

The prophecy mostly takes the form of complex and often bizarre visions. They are not allegories (where every detail has to have a corresponding meaning) but are often designed to give a big message, painted on a big canvas. **Much of the symbolism is based on the previous Scriptures.** This is a key to interpretation, but in Revelation the symbols are often reworked rather than simply repeated.

As in previous history/prophecy, e.g. the Exodus, the immediate situation becomes a prophecy or prototype for future events, often on a bigger scale. The Roman Emperor was a current manifestation of “antichrist”. Future generations of believers would encounter other examples, culminating in the final, extreme, manifestation. Each generation would find comfort in the message of Revelation – **God is in control and His purposes will succeed.** Revelation, therefore, has permanent relevance.

John saw the visions, and recorded them, in a certain sequence, but they are not chronological, (e.g. by 6:17 the great day of His wrath has come). Rather than seeing Revelation as a long film we should see it as a series of “video clips”, forming a logical rather than a chronological sequence (rather like Genesis 1). **There is a beginning in historical time** (chapter1). **In the central section** there is **recapitulation and repetition**, with variation to

emphasize aspects of judgement and salvation. **As we draw nearer to the end of the book, (chapters 21-22), there is a greater focus on “end-time events” and their consummation in eternity.**

The scene repeatedly shifts from earth to Heaven.

- **From the perspective of the earth empires seem to have almost absolute power and are invincible. God’s people are vulnerable and persecuted.**
- **From the heavenly perspective everything is seen to be totally under the control of the Sovereign of the Universe.** His purposes are on course. The persecuted saints are called to see things from this point of view and live accordingly – this is the nature of faith.

Symbolic numbers.

Seven is, by far, the most frequent number, (almost 60 times). It signifies completeness or perfection.

- **Seven initially meant “rest” – God’s creation was “very good”,** Gen. 2:1-3. Seven determined the weekly Sabbath, Ex. 28:8-10, the fallow year for the Land, Lev. 25:3-7, Jubilee, Lev. 25:8-17, seven clean animals saved, Gen. 7:2, Pharaoh’s dreams, Gen. 41, sprinkling the blood seven times, Lev. 4:3-4, the “leper” was pronounced clean on the seventh day, Lev. 13:5-6.

Passover and Tabernacles lasted seven days and Pentecost came 7x7 days after Passover, (completing it).

The blowing of trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and Feast of Tabernacles were in the seventh month.

Jericho was encircled for seven days and seven times on the seventh day, and the priests blew seven trumpets, Josh. 6:4-15.

Solomon built the first Temple in seven years, 1Kings 6:38.

In Revelation the message is sent to seven angels concerned with seven churches, described as seven lamp stands. The Spirit is seven(fold). There are seven flaming torches, seven seals, and the Lamb has seven horns and seven eyes. There are seven angels with seven shofars, seven thunders, and a dragon with seven crowns on seven heads, signifying seven hills and seven kings. There are seven angels with the seven last plagues contained in seven golden bowls. There are seven blessings.

Major themes in Revelation.

- A symbolic presentation of world history for the whole church age from two related perspectives – visible events on earth and invisible realities in Heaven.
- The sovereignty of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Judge. Everything that happens, even the activities of the dragon and his associates, demonic and human, is subject to His permission and direction, regardless of how it seems at the time. Worship is a prominent theme, centred on the throne of God and the Lamb
- The Lamb is God’s agent of redemption and battle and judgement, in co-operation with the Spirit. By His obedience and suffering He has become qualified to reveal God’s plan for history and bring it to its appointed destination.
- The Lamb is beyond the dragon’s reach. He attacks the Lamb through His followers, both externally (persecution), and internally (deception and unfaithfulness).
- The followers of the Lamb are protected (sealed). They will suffer and even become martyrs but they are eternally secure. Their prayers for vindication are heard and are part of the process to release warning judgements on earth.
- There will be a climax to the struggle when the church will seem to have been defeated but the Lamb will win the final battle. Evil – its perpetrators and their followers – will be defeated, judged, and destroyed.
- The eternal state will be inaugurated by the marriage supper of the Lamb, a prelude to life in the presence of God. The broken creation will be restored. The events of Genesis 2-3 find their resolution in Revelation 21-22