

Blair's Six Keys to Understanding the Apocalypse

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I know a number of Christians from many places who fear the book of Revelation. Some fear the message. It can be scary! They do not want to think about a grim future, especially for loved ones who do not know Jesus. Others fear the style of the book. It is weird! What are we supposed to do with all those beasts and plagues? Some fear they are just not going to understand it anyway. Thus, many Christians have chosen the easy path of leaving that book in the back of their Bibles unopened.

That was me too! I did not understand it, and did not take the time to try. There are so many other 'simple' books of the Bible to preach! Then I dared to preach through Revelation. It was wonderful for me...and I hope for a few of my listeners! I have preached through Revelation in two different international churches comprised of folks from many nations and denominations. God kept us united and praising the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. I was extremely encouraged in my faith. By the grace of God, we gained a deeper hope, confidence, and joy in our glorious Lord Jesus. As we now study Revelation again in BICF ZGC, I want to share six truths that have helped me understand the book. I pray my thoughts about John's vision will be faithful to the meaning of its divine Author.

I am not offering any new ideas about Revelation. I do not believe the 'latest' ideas about Revelation are the 'best.' It is Scripture, not soap. As global believers in the 21st century, we stand on the shoulders of faithful mothers and fathers in faith. As students of Scripture we benefit from almost two thousand years of prayerful reflection by the Church. My thoughts on this book have been guided by authors like William Hendriksen, Dennis Johnson, John Stott, Vern Poythress, Michael Wilcock, and Greg Beale. This sentence summarizes my six key ideas of the message of Revelation:

The book of Revelation reveals the exalted Jesus in magnificent symbols for the blessing of His suffering Church in all eras through a repeated message of hope that interprets and reinforces the ancient prophecies of Scripture.

1. Savior

“The *revelation of Jesus Christ*”

Revelation 1.1

Revelation is a book about Jesus. That seems quite an obvious truth, but it is often missed. The Apostle John tells us his intentions right from the beginning. The word *revelation* is from a Latin word which means to 'reveal,' 'open,' or 'unveil.' (*Apocalypse* is a Greek word with the same meaning). John's Gospel recorded Jesus' earthly ministry; this book reveals Jesus in ascended glory. We learn about many things in this book -- the dark effects of evil in the world, the grim end of those who do not fear God, and the end of the world. Yet all the events of the book are examined in the light of their relationship to Jesus. It is not a book of Revelations, it is rather ONE revelation--it reveals the One who is Lord in His Church standing among the lamp-stands, the Lamb that was slain, the Lion who opens the scroll of history, the Leader of the armies of God, the Lover of His Bride, and the Light who illumines the Temple of God – this book is the revelation of Jesus Christ.

“The centrality of Christ is the ruling theme of Revelation. All things depend on their relationship to him.”

Michael Wilcock

2. Symbols

“Alright,” you might ask, “if this book is for me to see Jesus, why is it such a weird view?” That is a fair question. You are right; it is a strange book. As a modern man I want clear and simple truth. I get impatient with poems and word pictures. But God in His wisdom has given us a wonderful library full of books which we call the Bible. He gave us books of history, poetry, law, prophecy, and symbols and visions like Revelation – something for everyone! The creative diversity seen in God’s World can also be found in God’s Word. Isn’t He great!

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him *to show* his servants what must soon take place.”
Revelation 1.1

John tells us in this first verse that he writes a book of pictures. We are to *see* this book. The pictures not only convey the message, they *are* the message. Paul’s letter to the Romans, for example, is to be studied with accuracy. But Revelation is to be seen with amazement. It is God’s spectacular finale to His Holy Book. Revelation does not contain new information. All its truths can be found in the previous sixty-five books of Scripture. But in this sixty-sixth book God’s wonderful message is painted in vivid, moving Technicolor – along with smells and sounds too!

Revelation’s symbolism is very similar to Daniel’s interpretation of dreams:

“there is a God in heaven who *reveals* mysteries. He has *shown* King Nebuchadnezzar what *will happen* in days to come.”
Daniel 2.28

“The *revelation* of Jesus Christ, which God gave him *to show* his servants what must soon *take place*.”
Revelation 1.1

“A number of authors of commentaries contend that one should interpret Revelation literally except where one is forced to interpret symbolically by clear indication of context. But the message in 1.1 teaches this rule should be turned on its head. We are told in the book’s introduction that the majority of the material in it is revelatory symbolism.” G.K. Beale

3. Saints – From First to Final Century

“Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.”
Revelation 1.3

It is unfortunate that some people fear this book, because it is the only book of Scripture that promises a blessing to the reader. This verse also holds a key to our interpretation of the book. In the almost two thousand years of studying this book, people have often asked ‘*when*’? Did John see a vision of his own day or the last day? When will these things happen? It seems the answer is *all days*. For this blessing is promised to all who read this book-- the whole people of God in Christ from the first to the final century.

This means our interpretation of the book cannot be bound exclusively to any one era of the Church. To do so would limit the blessing. What comfort would it be for us today to know that the beast attacking the Church was Caesar? or Hitler? What benefit would it have been in ages past to know that the ‘stinging locusts’ of Chapter 9 may refer to Apache Helicopters? Such interpretations have been widely publicized. Indeed there are similarities between many people and events of history and the pictures of Revelation. But no one person or event captures

the exclusive meaning. They are at best pointers and examples of the timeless truths of the book. The blessing of this book is for all God's people, from the first to the final century.

“The major symbols of Revelation represent a repeated pattern. This pattern has a realization in the first-century situation of the seven churches. It also has an embodiment in the final crisis. And it has an embodiment now.”

Vern S. Poythress

4. Structure - Spiral Staircase

When something is really important you repeat it. How many times did your Mother tell you to make your bed? How many times have you said, ‘I love you’? God also repeats things that are important. Repetition is commonly used in Scripture. Right from the beginning, the Creation story is told in both seven poetic days (Genesis 1) and from the intimate viewpoint of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2). The Pharaoh had two different dreams of the seven years of feasting and seven of famine. Deuteronomy means ‘second law’ because Moses retold the Law of God to the new generation entering the Promised Land. The Chronicler repeats the stories of Israel's kings first told in Samuel and Kings. The Evangelists give us a four-fold panorama of our Lord and Master – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Paul's letter to the Colossians seems etched out of the template of Ephesians. As people that often do the same dumb things over and over, repetition is very helpful for us.

“Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.”

Revelation 1.19

John writes a series of pictures that describe the Church's struggle through the sweep of history from the first to second coming of Christ. This span of time between His comings is reviewed again and again from the perspective of ‘seals’, ‘trumpets’, and ‘bowls’. Each telling of the story reveals more depth of information as John retraces the familiar ground. The vista becomes ‘higher’ and ‘wider’ -- like a person who climbs a spiral staircase. The same glorious terrain is surveyed, but more insight is gained with each upward step.

“Each section of Revelation spans the entire dispensation from the first to the second coming of Christ. This period is viewed now from one aspect; then from another. In each vision we make a journey that takes us through the entire course of this era, from the first to the second coming of Christ.”

William Hendriksen

When I preached the book of Revelation in Kazakhstan, a wonderful family in our church was moving away from our city just after we had studied the opening of the ‘seventh seal’ (7.9-8.5). In that scene we saw The Church, gathered from every nation, secure in the presence of Her Lord. It is a scene of worship because glory is the rightful response to grace. I told this family not to worry about missing the rest of our studies, because we had already reached the end. Of course I was slightly joking, but my point was serious. The seventh seal, seven being a number of completion, was opened. God's people had arrived in their eternal home. It is a vivid picture of finality. And there was no place left to go back to, because the earth was destroyed with the opening of the sixth seal.

“I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.”

Revelation 6:12-14

Earth and sky were gone! They were removed by the awesome power of a Sovereign God. His people were taken to His home, their new home. The first telling of the story is over. Then the story of the victory of the Risen Jesus and His Church is retold, again and again.

This book is meant to bless and encourage saints – from the first to the final century – who suffer the attacks of this hostile world. We are not given a precise ‘time table’ but we clearly see that our Heavenly Father, and the Lamb, hold time and eternity. We are given promises in pictures to treasure in our hearts by faith. And because we are sinful and stubborn, this glorious message is repeated. It is not hard to understand, but it is sometimes hard to believe. We need to hear this word of hope again and again. We need to gaze on this glorious vista of God’s cosmic redemption from ever new perspectives as we climb higher up the spiral staircase of the message of Revelation.

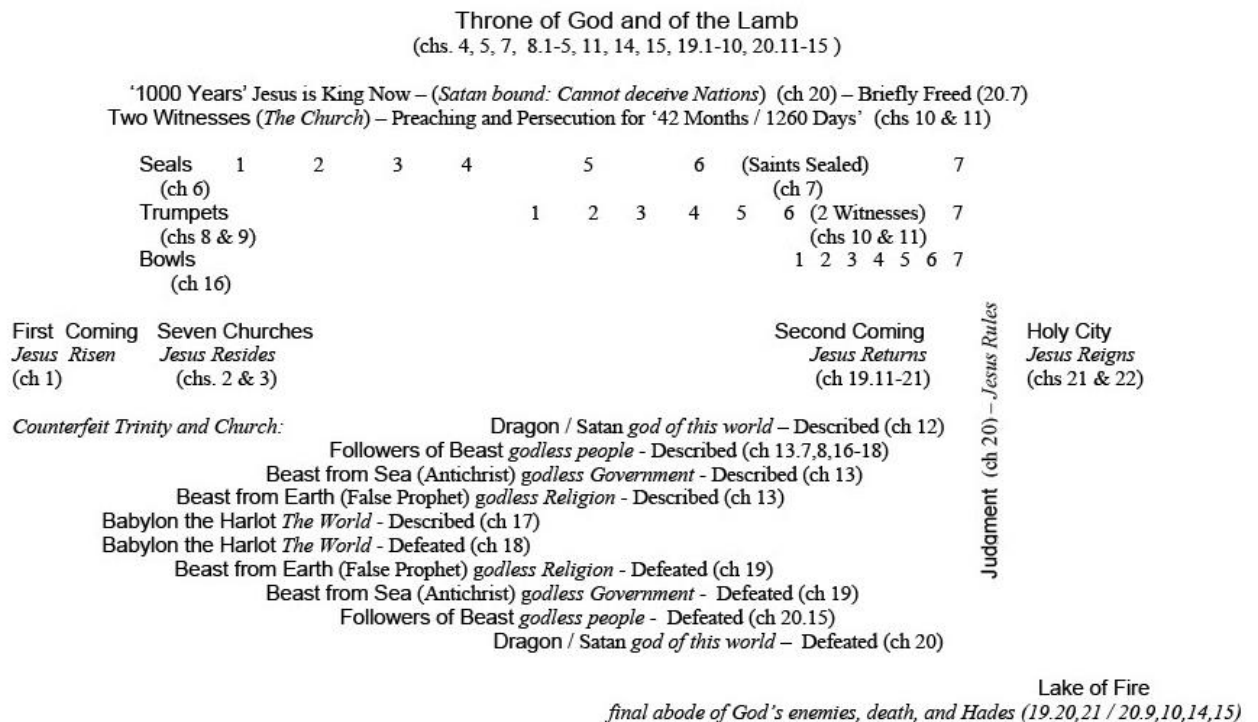


Diagram of the Book of Revelation – Mark Blair, 2014

5. Scripture

Many teachers of Revelation seek to find its meaning in the headlines of today’s newspapers. Looking back on their findings can be a bit embarrassing. Books have been written to prove that this person was the ‘beast’ or that person the ‘false prophet’ – from Hitler to Hussein. Yet those people are long dead, and history moves along. It would seem, despite the fascination many have with such teachings, that the key to understanding Revelation is not the newspaper.

“John, who testifies to everything he saw--that is, the *word of God* and the *testimony of Jesus Christ*”
Revelation 1.1,2

The key to understanding Revelation is Scripture, particularly the Old Testament prophets. One important principle emphasized during the Reformation was ‘Scripture interprets Scripture.’ By this credo the Church was urged to find the meaning of the Bible within the Bible itself. The marvelous plan of salvation promised and provided by our one True God is declared within the

sixty-six books of the Bible. The message is simple but profound. Scripture is not the exhaustive record of all truth, rather it is narrowly focused on “salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). This wonderful news of salvation is traced throughout biblical history, pictured in Scriptural types, extolled in Psalms of praise, foreseen by prophets, declared by four Evangelists, and applied by Apostles. No book can compare with the magnificent tapestry of Scripture. The Apostle John draws from this biblical storehouse to present the pictures of Revelation.

"Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea." Revelation 1.11

John wrote to believers in these seven churches who were familiar with the visions of the prophets. They searched with eager anticipation for their fulfillment. They understood that in Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah has come and the Day of the Lord has begun. Today most of us are too entertained to read Ezekiel. We have no time for Daniel's visions or the sermons of Isaiah. So we do not recognize that the images used by John are borrowed and blended from the ancient prophets of Scripture.

“It is clear that John had studied the Old Testament very thoroughly. Of the 404 verses that comprise the 22 chapters of the book of Revelation, 278 passages contain one or more allusions to an Old Testament passage. John had so thoroughly pondered the Old Testament that when it came to recording the import of his visions of God and of heaven, he expressed himself by using phrases borrowed from the prophets of Israel. Therefore, in attempting to understand John's symbolism, we must consider not only the book itself, but also his use of the Old Testament.”
Bruce M. Metzger

6. Suffering

One's interest in the book of Revelation can be measured by your level of desperation. If your cup is filled by all this world has to offer - if you are at peace with this world – then why waste time thinking about the next world? But if this world is a place of pain and persecution for you, then the message of this book can give you boundless joy and unwavering hope. Christians who enjoy the comforts of this world often approach Revelation as a “puzzle book” trying to decode its message. But believers enduring conflict in this troubled world delight in this “picture book” revealing hope and a future in the Lord Jesus Christ.

John the Apostle wrote from a prison cell on Patmos to believers who were also facing prison, death, and suffering. “I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” Revelation 1.9

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Pastor who was hung by the Nazis, wrote, “Suffering then is the badge of the true Christian. The disciple is not above his master...Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer.”

More Christians were killed for Jesus in the Twentieth Century than in the previous nineteen centuries combined. And in the Twenty-first Century the bloodshed of believers continues. Savage terrorist explosions have spread death to every continent. Missionaries and church leaders have been assassinated. Churches and Christian schools in many lands have been bombed and sprayed with bullets. The killing of Christians happens so frequently it is often unreported – it is no longer news!

But the Savior of the world, the Lamb that was slain, gave His life so countless millions will live in Him. And we are called to follow faithfully in His path of suffering. Be encouraged! More people became Christians in the Twentieth Century than in the previous nineteen centuries combined! Suffering leads to glory.

“They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.” Revelation 17.14

So I offer these six thoughts, packed in this one sentence, with the prayer that they may help you to rightly read and understand this wonderful Revelation.

“The book of Revelation reveals the exalted Jesus in magnificent symbols for the blessing of His suffering Church in all eras through a repeated message of hope that interprets and reinforces the ancient prophecies of Scripture.”

Suggested Resources

Sermons

Sinclair B. Ferguson preached excellent messages through the book of Revelation;
Search: <http://www.sermonaudio.com> / Then: Sinclair Ferguson / Then: Revelation

My Sermons <http://www.pastormarkblair.org/index.php/sermons/new-testament#Revelation>
<http://www.pastormarkblair.org/index.php/sermon-notes/new-testament>

Study Guides

<http://www.easyenglish.info/booklist/revelation.htm>

<http://www.ivpress.com/bible/rev/>

<http://biblehub.com/sermons/revelation/>

“Lord among the Lampstands” a group study guide of the 7 churches for free download at:
<http://www.pastormarkblair.org/downloads/Writings/Books/LordAmongLampstandsEnglishWEB-latest.pdf>

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