

Notes on the Book of Revelation

New Horizons January – April 2025

Schedule	
16 th Jan	Chapter 1 – A vision of Jesus and what is yet to come
6 th Feb	Ch 2-3 - Letters to the churches
20 th Feb	Ch 4-8:5 – Heaven and the opening of the seals
6 th Mar	Ch 8:6-11:19 – The trumpets are sounded
20 th Mar	Ch 12-17 - The Lamb, the woman & the beast
3 rd Apr	Ch 18-22 – Babylon falls, and the new heaven and new earth are revealed

Session 1 – An Introduction to Revelation

What kind (genre) of writing is it?

Most of Revelation is Apocalyptic Literature

= Greek word: Ἀποκάλυψις / Apokalypsis - meaning "an unveiling, or unfolding of things not previously known and which could not be known without that unveiling."

Type of literature that first developed within Judaism in the centuries following the exile in Babylon.

In our Bible it can be found in parts of Daniel (ch7-12). Ezekiel (esp. ch1), Zechariah, and smaller sections in Isaiah (ch24-27), Jeremiah, Joel and Zephaniah.

It can also be found in many Jewish writings from between the two testaments (e.g. in the books of 1st and 2nd Enoch, 2nd Baruch and 4th Ezra, as well as a number of books each called The Apocalypse of..., or the Testament of ...)

Apocalyptic writings usually had certain characteristics in common

- An unveiling of God's activity in the distant future
- Revealed or explained by a heavenly/angelic intermediary
- Portraying a violent end to history involving suffering & pain for God's people
- Dualistic perspective – the view that there are only two fundamental concepts, good and evil, and life is about the battle between them
- Deterministic – history is following a predetermined course & schedule (not the same as the belief that everything in our lives is predetermined)
- Hopeful – God will ultimately destroy evil, save his people and usher in an age of peace and righteousness
- Contains lots of imagery that is highly symbolic

Apocalyptic literature is different from prophetic literature

	Prophetic	Apocalyptic
Given to...	A chosen prophet	A chosen individual
With the purpose of...	Being shared with others	Being written down
Focused on a...	Specific nation or city	The nations of the world; the cosmos
To do with the...	Immediate or near future	More long-term future
Warning of...	Judgment & suffering if people don't repent	Suffering & persecution for God's people (even for the repentant)
Intended to inspire...	Repentance	Hope, faithfulness & perseverance
Promising in the short-term	Rescue for a faithful remnant	God's sovereignty & restraint on evil
Promising in the long-term	A coming messianic age & fulfilment of God's promises	Ultimate victory for God & his people; an age of peace & righteousness

Keep in mind the purpose of apocalyptic literature

- It is not intended to scare us into faith in God
- Rather, it aims to give hope

We can read the Book of Revelation on four different levels

As a work of literature.

But that fails to do justice to its place in the Bible and its theological significance.

As a record of an individual's heavenly visions

But those visions or dreams are not ours, so that will not help us understand them for ourselves.

As visions containing striking images that are meant to provoke an emotional response in us

The visions are meant to communicate something to the reader or listener. But that something could be very different depending on how we understand those images.

As visions containing images that are symbolic of significant things in the real world

These images are not meant to be taken literally – they are symbols of something. They represent something real in our world, while not actually describing it literally, or too specifically.

Examples of symbolism in the Book of Revelation

Human-looking beings – ‘one like a son of man’ (e.g. Rev 1:12-18; 14:14-16; 19:11-21)

Refer to Jesus Christ

The image finds its origin in Dan 7:9, 13-14 and is interpreted by Jesus in Matt 24:30 as referring to himself

Courtroom/Thrones (e.g. Rev 4; 5; 7; 11:16-19; ch14; ch19; ch20)

Also found in Dan 7:9-10, 26; Ezk 1:26-28, 10:1; 1 Kg 22:19-22; Ps 9:7; Isa ch6

When not obviously referring to earthly thrones, these relate to the Jewish concept of the heavenly court where God issues instructions to his angels to carry out his purposes in the world, but also where all humankind and all the spiritual beings who have opposed God will ultimately be judged. In the OT it is where prophets are sometimes taken in a vision to see what God is doing.

Precious stones (e.g. Rev 4:2-3, 21:9-21)

Also found in Ezk 1:26, 10:1; Ex 24:9-11

Represent the precious, priceless and beautiful characteristics of God on his throne, but also ultimately the Church when, at the end of time, it comes to truly represent the image of God

Also found in passages where those who put themselves in God's place are shown to mimic His characteristics while actually being full of violence, e.g Rev 17:1-4, 18:16-17; Ezk 28:11-19

Clouds (e.g. Rev 1:7; 10:1; 11:12; 14:14-16)

Also found in Dan 7:13; Ezk 1:4; 10:3-4; Ex 13:21-22; 19:9; 20:21, 24:16-18, 40:34-38; 1 Kg 8:10-12; 2 Chr 5:13-14; Ps 68:4; Isa 19:1; Mk 9:7; 14:61-64; Acts 1:9 (cf also Isa 14:12-14)

Represents the close presence of God, particularly emphasising His holiness and judgment

Fire (e.g. Rev 1:14; 8:5; 11:5; 16:8-9; 18:8; 19:11-12; 20:7-15)

cf Dan 7:9b-11; Ezk 1:4-5, 13, 27; Gen 15:12-21; Ex 3:1-3, 13:21-22

Like clouds, this represents the presence of God, again with an emphasis on His power to judge

Stars (e.g. Rev ch1, ch 4)

Also found in Dan ch7; Ezk ch1; Isa ch6)

Often, though not always, refer to angels/heavenly beings. Not all such angels are good

Horns (e.g. Rev 5:6; 12:3; 13:1, 11; 17:3, 7, 9-14)

Also found in Dan 7:7-8; 1 Sam 2:1; Ps 75:10, Ps 92:10; Jer 48:25

Represents the idea of strength and power of rulers or nations (or sometimes the ruler or nation itself). If the horn is raised up or grows it represents an increase in that strength. If the horn is described as being cut off, removed or broken, it represents the removal of that power

Sea & sea monsters/serpents/dragons (e.g. Rev 12:3-17; 13:1-4; 16:13-14; 20:1-2; 21:1)

Such symbolic images can also be found in Gen 1:2, 10, 21; Job 38:8-11; Isa 51:15; Nahum 1:4; Job ch41; Ps 74:12-17; Ps 89:9-13; Isa 27:1; Dan 7:1-2

These represent non-Jewish/non-Christian views on how the world was made and what forces are at work within it, and therefore the spiritual forces that are opposed to God's purposes.

In Ancient Near-East religions, the sea was seen as a place of chaos and danger. The danger was represented by the god Yam in the Canaanite religion or the goddess Tiamat in the Babylonian. Yam fought with the god Baal (and Tiamat with Marduk) representing the ever-present struggle with the forces of chaos in the world. These religions explained that struggle as wars between different gods. It was something that depended totally on the whim of the gods and goddesses.

In contrast, the Bible portrays the sea and the sea-monsters, and therefore the forces they represent, as totally under God's control.

Beasts (especially hybrid ones) (e.g. Rev 11:7; ch13; 14:9-12; ch17; 19:19-21)

Also found most notably in Dan 7:3-7

Represent oppressive forces, authorities, rulers and governments and the evil spiritual forces behind them. The hybrid nature of many of these beasts emphasises their perversion of the natural order God intended. Different beasts melded into one can also represent the combination of several characteristics (e.g. speed of a leopard, strength of a lion, ferocity of a bear)

Not be confused with the 'four living creatures' in Rev 4,5,6,7,14,15,19.

Numbers (e.g. Rev 1:4,11,12,16; 4:4,6-8; 5:6; 6:1-8; 7:1-9; 8:1-2; 9:18; 11:1-4,9-13; 12:1,3,6,14; 13:11,16-18;14:6-12; 15:1-7; 16:1,19; 17:3,7,9-14; 20:1-8; 21:10-17; 22:1-2)

Also found in Dan 7:2,7,8,23-25; 8:14; 9:24-27; 12:11-12

These are often not be taken literally, but rather symbolic of the following characteristics

Four – from every direction, representing all of creation (as in 4 corners of the world)

Seven – completeness, wholeness, fulfilled (as in 7 days of creation)

Ten – also representing completeness (as in 10 commandments)

Twelve – all of Israel (as in the 12 tribes) and/or all of the Church (as in the 12 apostles)

Hundred/Thousand – a large number

Multiples of these numbers (e.g. 70 = 7x10, or 144,000 = 12x12x1,000 or 12x12x10x10x10) represent a combination of the above characteristics.

Variations or fractions of these numbers (e.g. 666 = always falling short of 777, or 3½ being half of 7) can also be used to represent a perversion or limitation of these characteristics.

Actual fractions (e.g. a third) indicate God withholding his final, comprehensive judgment.

General principles for reading & interpreting apocalyptic literature

1. Try to read with the ear of an ancient Hebrew listener
2. Be sensitive to the setting (esp. of crisis and suffering of God's people)
3. Expect symbolic language and treat it with caution
4. Recognise the oral nature of ancient society
5. Remember the purpose of apocalyptic writing

Chapter 1 – A vision of Jesus and what is yet to come

1:1 A revelation (*apokalypsis*) of (or from) Jesus Christ which God gave and made known by an angel to John

1:4 It was a letter originally addressed to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia which made up just the most westerly part of modern-day Turkey

1:9 It was written by John on the island of Patmos where he had probably been sent into exile by the Roman authorities, possibly around 95-96 AD.

In this first chapter John sets up themes that will run through the whole book

1:5 – faithfulness and testimony, resurrection and power over death, Jesus as the true ruler and authority

1:6 – Jesus' love for his Church, its redemption from sin and its role as ruler and servant

1:1 & 19 It's a vision of 'what must soon take place', but also of what John 'has seen, what is now, and what will take place later'.

We can therefore expect what is described to include all of those time scales.

1:12-20 **It's first and foremost a vision of Jesus, described in phrases used for God**

- Note the symbolism in the head of white hair (cf Dan 7:9), the burnished bronze feet, eyes of fire, powerful voice and shining face (cf Dan 10:4-6)

It's significant that a book about the future starts with a vision of Jesus. If we are to get a proper perspective on what is going on in the world and to hang onto a clear sense of purpose and hope, then we must begin with Jesus.

Note the symbolism in v12 & 19-20 in

- the 7 golden lampstands (representing the 7 churches, cf Ex 25:31-40 and especially Zech 4:2-10 where the single lampstand in the temple represents the whole people of God)
- the 7 spirits of God (representing God's presence among His people, cf Zech 4:6)
- the 7 stars (representing the angels of the churches but, through those angels, also representing all those who remain faithful and lead others to righteousness, cf Dan 12:1-3)



The Roman province of Asia and surrounding provinces



The seven churches of Revelation