

Reading Revelation Right!



The book of revelation is like an artistic Blockbuster. It is full of powerful images and dramatic scenes designed to captured the readers' hearts and minds.

Key Theology

Here's how scholar GK Beale summarises the key theology that ought to capture the readers' minds.

1. Willingness to suffer for Christ is the path to ultimate victory. Conquering through the Cross.
2. Sovereignty of God in human history. God is at work in creation and redemption for his glory.
3. New creation is the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy. The people of God have no other destiny than the destiny of the Lamb.

5 Keys to Reading Revelation

To dig into this wonderful book you'll need these 5 Keys to Reading Revelation

1. Consider the style

2 Reflect on the original hearers

3 Symbols and symbolism

4 Old Testament Allusions are critical

5. History from God's perspective

And, on the last page there is an outline of the **Structure of Revelation**.

1. Consider the style

Revelation is written in an apocalyptic genre (genre is a fancy word for style). Just like our modern writing has different styles so do parts of the Bible. (Consider the differences between the styles used in writing poetry, comics, novels, newspaper articles and scientific papers. Each of these is a genre.) In the apocalyptic genre the the writer aims to reveal to the reader the hidden spiritual reality. It is heaven's understanding of what is unfolding on earth using word pictures.

Not only is Revelation apocalyptic it is also prophetic. It is written to bring the Word of God to his people so they might respond in trust and obedience.

2. Reflect on the original hearers

Revelation is written first to John's original hearers. It really was a message to the Christians in the seven churches and those living in the Roman empire in the first century. written around 90 AD. John writes using Old Testament prophetic ideas, images and symbols from the 1st century to critique the economic, political, military and social culture of the time. He uses prophetic truths and symbols to fill and inform the imagination of his hearers. He is writing a blockbuster full of substance to capture the hearts and minds of God's people

So, we have to keep asking, 'What did God want his original hearers to know?' From this we can work out implications for us as God's people now. It is, first, God's word to them. If the meaning we derive from it wouldn't make any sense to the first century readers it is an indicator we've got it wrong.

3. Symbols and symbolism

We use symbols because they are a direct way to communicate a lot of information. Think of a stop sign or a rude gesture! Short, direct and powerful. Scholar GK Beale says that when reading revelation you should think symbolically, rather than literally. This use of symbolism doesn't mean it isn't true. A stop sign or an apple computer image still communicate a true reality (stop here! This is an apple product!). It just takes a bit more work and thinking because 2000 years have passed since these symbols were used. But by looking carefully at the symbols and their context we can work out their meaning. Here's a code to get you started.



Symbol	Meaning, but context is also key!
Seven	Completeness or perfection (Perhaps from the seven days of creation)
Six	Incompleteness or imperfection (one less than the completeness symbolised by the number seven)
Seven Spirits or sevenfold Spirit	The ever-present Spirit of God (seven signifies his complete or perfect presence)
Four	Geographic completeness (four corners of the earth, four directions N, E, S, W)
Horn	Strength, might
Eyes	Sight or wisdom (insight)
Sea	The forces of chaos
Living creatures	Power or imperial power
White robes	God's declaration of the wearer's purity, righteousness and vindication
Earthquakes	Earth shattering events (so not just earth quakes but anything that shakes the world)
1,000	Many. A really big number
12	The completeness of God's people from the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 Apostles
144,000	12 x 12 x 1000 = the great completeness of God's people = all of God's people
Rainbow	Covenant faithfulness and mercy of God (Noah's rainbow)
Virginity	Faithfulness to God (ready for the marriage of the Lamb)
Adultery	Unfaithfulness to God
Trumpets	Warnings of judgment, victory or battle
Times, times and half a time	If <i>time</i> is 1 year, <i>times</i> is 2 and so 3.5 years is the time in view. But what it is really pointing to is a short period, in contrast to 7

4. Old Testament allusions are critical

John is writing using dramatic and powerful Old Testament images and allusions. Scholar GK Beale comments that every verse in Revelation has an Old Testament allusion! To read Revelation right we need to be reading it in light of the Old Testament passages.

In other words, interpret the Bible by the Bible. To do this use the margin notes in a good Bible that cross reference the passages. It can make things tricky but John is building a deeper picture of who God is, what his purposes are and how they are fulfilled in Jesus. Let's look at two examples: Jesus and the beasts.

Jesus

¹³ and among the lampstands was one like the Son of Man, dressed in a robe and with a golden sash wrapped around his chest. ¹⁴ The hair of his head was white as wool—white as snow—and his eyes like a fiery flame. ¹⁵ His feet were like fine bronze as it is fired in a furnace, and his voice like the sound of cascading waters. ¹⁶ He had seven stars in his right hand; a sharp double-edged sword came from his mouth, and his face was shining like the sun at full strength. Revelation 1:13-16

→ and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was white like snow, and the hair of his head like whitest wool. His throne was flaming fire Daniel 7:9

→ Daniel 10:5-6

→ Isaiah 11:4, Isaiah 49:2

On the left is the apocalyptic picture of Jesus. It is powerful and arresting. But now notice it is the same image as the Ancient of Days on his throne! Jesus is divine and rules with the power and authority of the Father.

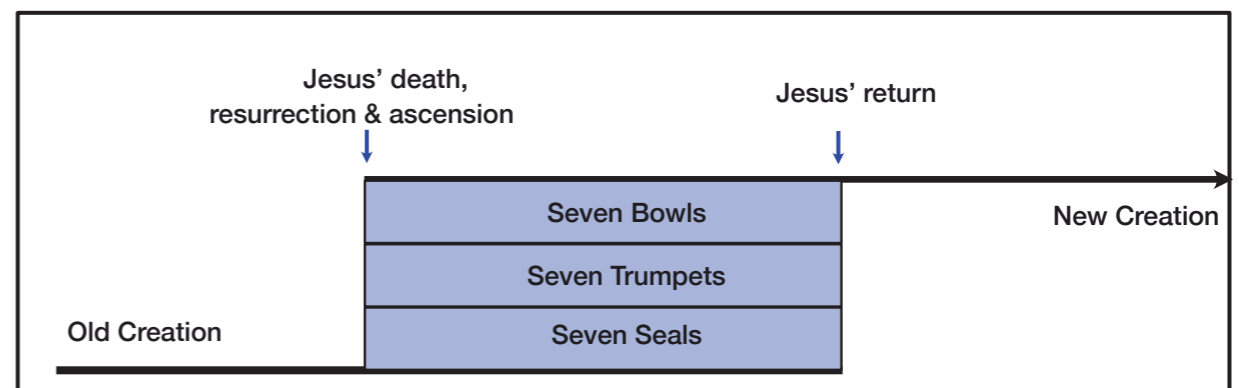
Beasts

And I saw a beast coming up out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads. On its horns were ten crowns, and on its heads were blasphemous names. ² The beast I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth Revelation 13:1-2

→ ¹⁶ I approached one of those who were standing by and asked him to clarify all this. So he let me know the interpretation of these things: ¹⁷ 'These huge beasts, four in number, are four kings who will rise from the earth. Daniel 7:16

This makes it clear, the beasts represent imperial power or powers: rulers, kings, governors and the like. Revelation is not predicating that a Gigosaur will suddenly erupt from Tokyo harbour!

5. History from God's perspective





4. History from God's perspective continued...

The diagram above shows that the events in Revelation are *not* one long sequence of events in world history. Rather it is the story of Old Creation to New Creation brought about by the work of the Jesus. And this unfolding story is told and retold in Revelation from many angles and perspectives. One way of thinking about it is like watching a player score a try or a goal in sport, and then on the television watching the same event unfold in slow motion, but then watching it again with the spider camera that sits above the play on the field. History isn't repeating itself, rather in Revelation we are seeing God's perspective on history again and again.

Structure of Revelation

1:1-3:22	Jesus the Faithful witness among Seven Lampstands Introduction to Jesus the Faithful witness Letters to the Seven Churches 2:1-3:22, the lampstands
4:1-5:22	The Vision of God and the Lamb on the Throne Heavenly door opened 4:1 The Lamb is worthy to open the scroll 5:1-9, esp. 9
6:1-7:17	Seven Seals on the Scroll Gathering in of God's people between the sixth and seventh seal being opened 7:1-12
8:1-11:18	Seven Trumpets Seventh seal opened 8:1 1/3 of human race destroyed (sixth trumpet) Interlude of the Mighty Angel and Two witness: 10:1-11, 11:1-14
11:19-15:4	Conflict Heavenly temple opened 11:19 Seven visions 'And I saw'
15:5-16:21	Seven Bowls Heavenly tabernacle opened 15:5
17:1-19:10	City of Babylon – the Whore Come I will show you ... 17:1
19:11-21:8	Conflict Heaven opened 19:11 Seven visions 'And I saw'
21:9-22:5	City of Jerusalem – the Bride Come I will show you ... 21:9
22:6-21	Epilogue

Reading Revelation is possible! And it is incredibly exciting. Read Revelation with these five keys. Enjoy the ride and may God fill your heart and mind with these great truths.

Bibliography / Resources:

Revelation for You by Tim Chester.

Gospel Coalition podcast; Greg Beale on Revelation.