

The Book of Revelation

By [Jonathan Menn](#), J.D., M.Div.

Director of Equipping Church Leaders-East Africa

A brief summary of Chapter 11, in the book entitled,
Biblical Eschatology (2nd ed., Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018)
by Jonathan Menn

Genre

Virtually all interpreters recognize that Revelation comprises three genres: letter (epistle); prophecy; and apocalyptic.¹ Revelation as a whole, beginning with Rev 1:1's use of *sēmainō* ("communicate by symbols") and *deichnumi* ("show"), together with the repeated introductory formula "I saw" or similar expressions,² denote the fact that the general nature of the book is symbolic, not "literal" or didactic.³ John's primary sources for the imagery he uses are the OT, inter-testamental literature, and the Greco-Roman world of his own day, with which his first-century readers were familiar.⁴ The extent of Revelation's dependence on the OT for its symbols is seen in the fact that Revelation contains approximately 630 allusions to the OT alone.⁵ Consequently, to understand John's imagery we must look, not to political and other events of our day, but to the literature and socio-political situation of John's day.

Interpretive approaches

Important questions regarding the book of Revelation are: To what extent is the book related to the first century (i.e., the time when it was written and the circumstances and audience to which it was addressed)? To what extent is it related to the period just before Jesus comes again? And to what extent is it trans-historical or principiant (i.e., deals with principles that apply throughout history, without specifically referring to particular historical events)? Different answers to these questions have led to five main interpretive approaches to the

¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 12; see also Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, 714-16.

² Rev 4:1; 12:1-3; 13:1-3; 14:1; 17:1-3, 20:1.

³ Beale, *Revelation*, 973; see also Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 40.

⁴ Osborne, *Revelation*, 17.

⁵ UBS4, 891-900. See also UBS4, 900-901 for additional allusions to biblical apocrypha and Jewish apocalyptic literature.

book.⁶

* The preterist approach contends that the book relates to the events in the first century. John is telling the churches how to cope with oppression and how God would deliver them from their oppressors.

* The historicist approach views Revelation as a symbolic prophecy of the entire history of the church, from its beginning until the *parousia*. The book's various symbols designate different historical movements and events in the Western world and the Christian church, such as the Goths, Muslims, the medieval papacy, the Reformation, etc.

* The futurist approach essentially takes Rev 4:1-22:5 as depicting the "tribulation period" and its aftermath (i.e., the future period of time immediately before and after the *parousia*).

* The idealist approach sees Revelation as a symbolic portrayal of the conflict between good and evil, the kingdom of God and the powers of Satan. Strict idealism focuses on the trans-historical principles that the symbols represent.

* The eclectic approach (which most Evangelical and Reformed interpreters utilize and is the approach of this book) take aspects of each of the above approaches in interpreting Revelation. Prophecies in the book are based on specific events and are reworked and applied to result in themes and principles that apply throughout history. Thus, "the book of Revelation reflects conflict among Christians, conflict between Christians and Jews, and conflict between Christians and the representatives of Rome. The work attempts to interpret these conflicts and to resolve them in accordance with its own perspective."⁷

Purposes and themes

As we observe the situations of the first-century churches and consider Jesus' analysis of those churches in Revelation 2-3, we will see parallels to the trials we face and issues we confront today. The purposes and themes of the book help orient us to the book and give us an overall grasp of what it is all about. In general, the book of Revelation: explains to the church how God is dealing with the world; is a call to perseverance in the struggle with the powers of evil; and comforts and encourages Christians because Christ is victor. Revelation demonstrates that God is sovereign over all of history, over all evil, and is

⁶ Beale, *Revelation*, 44-49 and Johnson, *Triumph*, 351-63 provide succinct overviews of the major interpretive schools. Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views*, is a parallel commentary (preterist, historicist, futurist, and idealist [spiritual]) of the entire book of Revelation.

⁷ Yarbro Collins, "Book of Revelation," 400.

orchestrating the events of history to glorify his name and bring about a glorious, eternal conclusion for his people.

Structure

The more one studies the book of Revelation the more one is impressed by the intricacy of its design. Part of Revelation's complex, unified literary structure is revealed in its pattern of the repetition of phrases and ideas, often in widely separated passages, and sometimes in slightly varying form. Richard Bauckham points out, "These repetitions create a complex network of textual cross-reference, which help to create and expand the meaning of any one passage by giving it specific relationships to many other passages."⁸ For example, phrases, substantive ideas, and promises to the church introduced at the beginning of the book (chapters 1-3) find their fulfillment at the end of the book (chapters 19-22).

Many commentators see a basic two-part structure of the content of the book: chapters 1-11 and 12-22. These two major sections can be seen as unfolding the messages of the two books (scrolls) of Revelation: the sealed book of 5:1-5, whose message is unfolded in 6:1-11:19; and the "little book" of 10:2, 8-10, whose message is unfolded in 12:1-21:8.⁹ William Hendriksen further comments on the content of the two halves of the book: "The first major division (chapters 1-11) reveals the Church, indwelt by Christ, persecuted by the world. But the Church is avenged, protected and victorious. The second major division (chapters 12-22) reveals the deeper spiritual background of this struggle. It is the conflict between the Christ and the dragon in which the Christ, and therefore His Church, is victorious."¹⁰

It is important to recognize that the book is not simply a chronological narrative. Stephen Travis emphasizes the crucial point that in Revelation "the fact that the *visions* follow in sequence is not necessarily a reason for believing that they represent a continuous *historical* sequence."¹¹ In light of the above, most commentators see the book's different sections as being essentially parallel to each other: the same substantive events may be repeated in different visions (using different imagery) and in different literary units. These parallel sections encompass the entire church age; they overlap both temporally and thematically (i.e., recapitulate each other); and they conclude with the end of the age, the *parousia*, the judgment, and the new heavens and new earth. Even though they recapitulate each other, the parallel sections show some chronological and thematic progression, i.e., earlier in the book the end is reached, but the end assumes greater focus and becomes more exhaustively described in later

⁸ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 22.

⁹ McGinn, *Anti-Christ*, 50.

¹⁰ Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 23; see also Payne, *Encyclopedia*, 594.

¹¹ Travis, *I Believe*, 142; see also Johnson, *Triumph*, 32, 43, 129, 140, 146, 163, 215; Schnabel, *40 Questions*, 67-68, 274.

parallel accounts. Hendriksen first called this “progressive parallelism” because the different sections of the book are “arranged in an ascending, climactic order. There is progress in eschatological emphasis. The final judgment is first *announced* then *introduced* and finally *described*.”¹² Progressive parallelism is clearly seen in how the seals in Revelation (Rev 6:1-17; 8:1-5) parallel Christ’s Olivet Discourse and end with a description of the end of the age. Similarly, the trumpets (Rev 8:6-9:21; 11:15-19), the woman and the dragon (Rev 12:1-14:20), and the bowls (Rev 16:1-21) all are parallel and end with a description of the end of the age.

The church in Revelation

Both John’s introduction (Rev 1:1-4) and his concluding reference to the church in Rev 22:16 (“*I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches*”) make clear that the *entire book* concerns the church. The church is described in various symbols in virtually every chapter. These symbols highlight different aspects of the church. Major symbols and depictions of the church include the following:

- * The “bond-servants” (Rev 1:1; 2:20; 7:3; 11:18; 19:5; 22:3, 6);
- * The seven churches (Rev 2:1-3:22)
- * The “saints” (Rev 5:8; 8:3-4; 11:18; 13:6-7, 10; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 18:20, 24; 19:8; 20:9)
- * Those “purchased . . . from every tribe and tongue and people and nation [who have been made] a kingdom and priests to our God” (Rev 5:9-10)
- * The martyrs (Rev 6:9-11)
- * The “144,000” (Rev 7:4-8; 14:1-5)
- * The “great multitude” (Rev 7:9-17; 19:1, 6)
- * The “temple” and “holy city” (Rev 11:1-2)
- * The “two witnesses” (Rev 11:3-12)
- * The “woman” and “her children” (Rev 12:1-17)
- * The “harvest” (Rev 14:15-16)
- * The victors over the beast (Rev 15:2-4)
- * The “called and chosen and faithful” (Rev 17:14)
- * “My people” (Rev 18:4)
- * The “bride” (Rev 19:7-9; 21:2, 9; 22:17)
- * The “armies” (Rev 19:14)
- * Those sitting on the thrones (Rev 20:4-6)
- * The “camp of the saints and the beloved city” (Rev 20:9)
- * “His people(s)” (Rev 21:3)
- * The “New Jerusalem” (Rev 21:1—22:15)

¹² Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 36.

Overview of major ideas and sections

Rev 1:1-20: prologue

John promises blessing to those who read, hear, and heed the words of the book (Rev 1:3). Even in the introduction, the focus is on Christ (Rev 1:5-8, 13-18).

Rev 2:1-3:22: the letters to the seven churches

Even in the first century, the churches were experiencing the signs Christ had warned about in the Olivet Discourse, including persecution by Jews,¹³ persecution in general including death,¹⁴ false prophets,¹⁵ falling away from the faith,¹⁶ and love growing cold.¹⁷ In this section, Christ encourages the churches to witness and warns them against compromise in order that they may inherit eternal life.

Rev 4:1-5:14: the throne, the book (scroll), and the Lamb

In this section, God and Christ are glorified because Christ's resurrection demonstrates that they are sovereign over creation to judge and to redeem. "The 'book' is best understood as containing God's plan of judgment and redemption, which has been set in motion by Christ's death and resurrection but has yet to be completed."¹⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza states, "The central theological question of chapters 4-5 as well as of the whole book is: Who is the true Lord of this world?"¹⁹

Rev 6:1-8:5: the seven seals

In this section, Christ exercises his role as king and judge by using evil heavenly forces to inflict trials on people throughout the time before his return to purify believers or punish unbelievers. Although Christians are persecuted, the last judgment is God's ultimate response to the saints' prayer in 6:10 that he avenge their blood.

Rev 8:6-11:19: the seven trumpets

In the first six trumpets (Rev 8:6-9:21), God responds to the saints' prayer in Rev 6:10 by using angels to bring judgments on the persecutors of the church. In 10:1-11, John is recommissioned to prophesy about God's plan for bringing in

¹³ Compare Mark 13:9 and Rev 2:9-10; 3:9.

¹⁴ Compare Matt 24:9 and Rev 2:9-10, 13.

¹⁵ Compare Matt 24:5, 11, 23-26 and Rev 2:2, 6, 14-15, 20-24.

¹⁶ Compare Matt 24:10 and Rev 2:14, 20-24; 3:1-3, 15-17.

¹⁷ Compare Matt 24:12 and Rev 2:4.

¹⁸ Beale, *Revelation*, 340.

¹⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 58.

the consummation of the kingdom. In 11:1-13, God's decree ensures his presence with his people and their effective witness, despite their persecution. In the seventh trumpet (11:14-19), God brings final judgment and establishes the consummated kingdom.

Rev 12:1-15:4: the woman, the dragon, and the beast

The visions of Revelation 12-14 begin with the birth (12:1, 4-5) and ascension (12:5) of Christ and may even reach back to the Garden of Eden (12:9). It is at these points when the conflict between the woman and the dragon or serpent began and was most basic and acute. John's visions in this section extend to the *parousia* and judgment (14:14-20) and the vindication and glorification of God's people (15:2-4).

Rev 15:5-16:21: the seven bowl judgments

In this section, God punishes the ungodly during the inter-advent age and brings final judgment at the last day because of their persecution and idolatry. The plagues of the trumpets and bowls occur in the same order and involve: (1) the earth; (2) the sea; (3) rivers; (4) the sun; (5) the realm of evil; (6) the Euphrates; and (7) the final judgment of the world with "lightning, sounds, thunder, earthquake, and great hail." At this point, we must again recall that Revelation is *not* a chronological narrative. As with the seals and trumpets, the bowls are not necessarily sequential but may be simultaneous.

Rev 17:1-19:10: final judgment of Babylon

As is seen throughout Revelation, humanity consists of two, and only two, types or groups: those who are committed to Christ and those who are not. Babylon epitomizes the system and worldview of everything and everyone that is not Christ's. The world's system appears all-powerful but contains the seeds of its own destruction. God's judgment on the ungodly economic, cultural, and religious system of the world leads to the establishment of God's consummated reign (Rev 19:6) and the union with his people (Rev 19:7-9). Rev 13:4 raised the question, "*Who is able to wage war with him [the beast]?*" That is answered in Rev 17:14: the Lamb and those who are with him ("*the called and chosen and faithful*") will overcome the beast because the Lamb is "*Lord of lords and King of kings.*" In yet another recapitulated image, the saints are vindicated, the blood of the martyrs is avenged, and the prayer of Rev 6:10 is answered.

Rev 19:11-21: the second coming of Christ

In this section, Christ reveals his sovereignty and faithfulness to his promises when he comes again to bring judgment on all those who have opposed him and oppressed his people. In keeping with the progressively parallel structure of the book, the *parousia* or its effects have been mentioned or described at Rev 1:7;

6:12-17; 8:1-5; 11:11-19; 14:14-20; 16:17-21; 19:1-6 (the *parousia* or its effects will also be described at 20:7-10, 11-15; and 21:1-2). Revelation 19 symbolically describes the *parousia* in detail. The events of Revelation 19 are clearly linked with previous *parousia* passages.

Rev 20:1-15: the binding of Satan; the reign of the saints; the judgment of Satan; and the final judgment

The “thousand years” or “millennium” is the period between Christ’s first coming until shortly before his second coming. During that period, God limits Satan’s deceptive powers and deceased Christians are vindicated by reigning in heaven.²⁰ The period is concluded by a resurgence of Satan’s deceptive assault against the church. That, in turn, is concluded by the *parousia* and the final judgment. Although there are four paragraphs or subsections in Revelation 20 (20:1-3, the binding of Satan; 20:4-6, the reign of the saints; 20:7-10, the final destruction of Satan and his forces; and 20:11-15, the last judgment), those really are subsets of two larger sections: events before the *parousia* (20:1-6); and events connected with the *parousia* (20:7-15).

The events recorded in Rev 20:1-15 do not follow chronologically from where 19:21 left off. Instead, following the progressively parallel structure of the book, Revelation 20 recapitulates history from Christ’s first coming to the *parousia* and final judgment, adding new details and emphases. Milligan points out, “*The overthrow of Satan*, and not the reign of a thousand years, is the main theme of the first ten verses of the chapter.”²¹ Satan is Christ’s greatest adversary. In Revelation 19, John described the end of the beast and false prophet. It is therefore proper that the end of Satan (the “power behind the throne”) be emphasized separately in this chapter.

Rev 21:1-22:5: the new heaven and new earth: the New Jerusalem

In this section, the new creation and the church are perfected in glory. The word for “new” (Rev 21:1-2, 5; also in 2 Pet 3:13) is *kainos*. Richard Trench explains the meaning of *kainos* in this context: “*Kainos* refers to something new in *quality* and is contrasted with that which has seen service—the outworn, the exhausted, or that which is marred through age. . . . Thus, in the kingdom of glory, everything will be new: ‘the new Jerusalem’ (Rev. 3:12; 21:2), the ‘new name’ (2:17; 3:12), ‘a new song’ (5:9; 14:3), ‘a new heaven and new earth’ (21:1; cf. 2 Pet. 3:13), ‘all things new’ (Rev. 21:5).”²² Consequently, Wilbur Smith concludes that “this passage does not teach that the heavens and earth are now brought into existence for the first time, but that they possess a new character.”²³

²⁰ An aspect of this reign begins on the earth. See Kik, *Eschatology*, 41-49.

²¹ Milligan, *Revelation*, 336, emphasis in original.

²² Trench, *Synonyms*, 233-34.

²³ Smith, “Revelation,” 1521; see also Osborne, *Revelation*, 729-30.

Rev 22:6-21: epilogue

The epilogue of the book is consistent with the rest of the book and with prophecy in general. Prophets spoke oracles of judgment and oracles of salvation to warn the people and exhort them to change their ways and return or stay faithful to the Lord. Revelation specifically was written to inform, exhort, comfort, and encourage the churches.

Revelation ties together and completes the entire Bible

The last two chapters of Revelation clearly are linked, often by contrast, with the first three chapters of Genesis. However, the new creation of Revelation surpasses the original creation of Genesis. Jonathan Moo concludes, "John's intent is to assure the churches that they have not . . . been abandoned to a world of sorrow, pain and mourning. Instead, the triumph of the "Lamb that was slain" means that the creator's fidelity to his creation—hinted at in the rainbow around the throne [Rev 4:3], sign of the Noahic covenant—is expressed finally through nothing less than the renewal of the cosmos, an event in which the world is brought beyond any threat of future rebellion or sin."²⁴

Bibliography

Aland, Barbara, et al., eds. *The Greek New Testament*, 4th rev. ed. New York: United Bible Societies, 1993.

Bauckham, Richard. *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993.

Beale, G. K. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Carson, D. A., and Douglas Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015.

Gregg, Steve, ed. *Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997.

Hendriksen, William. *More Than Conquerors*. Grand Rapids, Baker, 1962. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982.

Johnson, Dennis. *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001.

²⁴ Moo, "The Sea," 166-67.

Kik, J. Marcellus. *An Eschatology of Victory*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971.

McGinn, Bernard. *Anti-Christ: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.

Milligan, William. *The Book of Revelation*. New York: Armstrong, 1896. Online: <https://books.google.com/books?id=98DYAAAAMAAJ>.

Moo, Jonathan. "The Sea that is No More: Rev 21:1 and the Function of Sea Imagery in the Apocalypse of John." *NovT* 51 (2009): 148-67.

Osborne, Grant. *Revelation* (BECNT). Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002.

Payne, J. Barton. *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980.

Schnabel, Eckhard. *40 Questions About the End Times*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011.

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (PC). Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.

Smith, Wilber. "Revelation." In *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, edited by Charles Pfeiffer and Everett Harrison, 1491-1525. Chicago: Moody, 1962.

Travis, Stephen. *I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.

Trench, Richard. *Synonyms of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989. Online (another edition): <http://archive.org/details/synonymsofnewtes00treniala>.

Yarbro Collins, Adela. "The Book of Revelation." In *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, vol. 1, edited by John Collins, 384-414. New York: Continuum, 1998.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).