

## SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The book of the Bible belongs to “apocalyptic literature.” The Greek word for “revelation” is *apocalypsis*. It is similar to parts of the Old Testament, like Joel 2, Isaiah chapters 24-27, 33,65; Ezekiel 38-39; Daniel; Amos 5:16-20; 9:11-15; Zechariah 12-14. These refer to the approaching “day of the Lord.” Some books between the end of the Old Testament and the New Testament had the names of Israel’s past heroes, Enoch, the twelve patriarchs, Moses, Isaiah, Baruch, and Ezra. Jews wrote them during their conflicts with other nations. These “apocalypses” dealt with the end of the present world order and the age to come. We can expect that Revelation will reveal or unveil some hidden things. The New Testament apocrypha include such writings. We should read Revelation with an eye on references elsewhere in the Bible. For example, the vision of Christ in Rev. 1:12-15 is very similar to passages in Ezekiel 1:24, 9:2-3, 9:11, and 43:2.

The first verse contains the statement: “And He signified it and sent it through His angel to His servant John.” The vision of John came by way of symbols. The book uses the letters “Alpha” and “Omega” symbolically for the beginning and the end like our A and Z. It uses poetic language, including symbolic meanings for numbers. Revelation mentions two witnesses (Rv 11:3); seven visions, letters to seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls of wrath. It refers to the Holy Spirit as “Seven Spirits.” Two doxologies contain seven nouns (Rv 5:12, 7:12). It has seven statements beginning with the word “Blessed.” It mentions seven golden lampstands, seven stars, seven horns, seven eyes, seven thunders, seven signs, seven crowns, seven plagues, seven hills, and seven kings. 3½ (half of seven) is regularly associated with evil spiritual forces that oppose the church. The main time of the New Testament is 3½ years. Three and a half days of sore trouble follow them before the end. The signs of the end that Jesus predicted (Mt 24, Mk 13, and Lk 21) included a time of trouble just before the end. We should probably understand 666 as a number that three times over fails to reach God’s number, seven.

Ten is the number of perfection or completion. A thousand is ten cubed.

The Old Testament had twelve tribes, and the New Testament had twelve apostles. The 24 elders represent the people of God of Old and New Testaments. Multiples of twelve: 144, 12,000 and 144,000 represent the church. 144,000 represent symbolically the total number of believers who will be saved. Revelation speaks of 12 stars, 12 gates, 12 angels, 12 foundation stones, 12 stones, 12 pearls, and 12 kinds of fruit. The book reckons months as having 3x 10 days.

People who forget the symbolic nature of the book and read their own literal meanings into Revelation do a great deal of harm. People should be wary of interpreting 1,000 years as 1,000 literal years, and the mark of the beast as a physical mark. Discussion about the “mark” of the beast should perhaps bear in mind that Paul refers to Baptism as the “seal” of the Spirit. We must interpret Scripture by Scripture, and explain the more difficult passages in the light of passages that are clear. We should explain the beast from the earth and the beast from the sea (Rv 13: 1-10; 13:11-18) with the four kingdoms in Daniel chapters 2, 7, and 8 in mind. We find it difficult to explain various plagues, but the ten plagues in Egypt at the time of Moses provide clues to some of them. For example, in 8:8: “a third of the sea turned to blood.” We encounter many challenging difficulties. Why are the tribes Dan and Ephraim omitted from the 12 tribes in 7:5-8? and the names of Joseph and Levi included instead?

Through the book of Revelation God comforts His people, gives them hope, and makes them more patient. Between the breaking of the sixth seal and the seventh seal there is the whole of chapter 7, in which special care is taken that no harm comes to God’s chosen (“those who were sealed”).

Hebrews says that the Old Testament tabernacle was a copy of the genuine one in heaven. In Revelation “temple”, “New Jerusalem”, “tabernacle”, “ark”, “holy city”, and “lamp” are heavenly counterparts of earthly things.

Chapters 4-5 present a vision of God on his throne, with the Lamb and the Spirit; surrounded by concentric circles of four living creatures, 24 elders, angels, and every creature in heaven and earth.

Five chapters near the end deal with the victory over Antichrist (Babylon, the Great Prostitute) and God’s victory over Satan. Chapter 19 is a psalm of praise to God after the fall of Babylon.

The descriptions in Revelation help to remind Christians that the life to come exceeds their imagination by far. For example, the city New Jerusalem is 12,000 stadia long, wide, and high. A translation 1,500 miles loses the symbolic use of the number 12,000. However, can you imagine a city 1,500 miles high?

The last chapter of Revelation is a picture of the Garden of Eden restored, and far more than restored, with avenues of the tree of life (Rv 22:2). The book ends with dialogue between the angel, John, Christ, the Spirit and the bride (the church). The repeated “Come” emphasises Jesus’ return. A number of other books of the New

Testament end with a reference to Jesus' coming. "Marana-tha" ("Our Lord, come") was a word used in the liturgy of the Lord's Supper in the early church. We can imagine Christian congregations going on to celebrate the Lord's Supper after they had heard a letter from an apostle read in church.

Preterists understand Revelation exclusively in terms of its first-century setting. They say that all the events took place then. Futurists place the interpretation of the book entirely in the end times. Idealists say that the book gives a symbolic picture of such timeless truths as the victory of good over evil. Historicists say that Revelation describes events from when John wrote to the end of history. It seems best to interpret the Book of Revelation as describing a long chain of events from the time of the apostle John to the end of history. It is going too far to take each of the seven churches as representative of stages in church history, because all seven existed when John wrote. We should not understand the breaking of the 7 seals, the blowing of the 7 trumpets, and the pouring out of the 7 bowls of wrath as happening consecutively. Each major vision discusses a different aspect of the same period, and each vision ends with Jesus' return and the end of the world. John is using a spiral method of writing.

As we study the signs of the end in Mark 13 and parallels, we say that most of them are long range, and the end could have come at any time since Pentecost. We should have the same conviction about the Revelation of St John. As in other prophecies, it is important to be cautious in interpreting them too dogmatically before events make their fulfilment clear.