

It helps to think of the visions of the Revelation spatially rather than as a straight line. Think of the text as being overlapping spherical visions (something like a Venn or Euler Diagram, but in three dimensions). As John follows the line of one sphere, the vision may intersect with another. The visions and/or the events being referenced are seen in two or more ways at the same time.

So, What to Do?

Be Open to Not Understanding It All

We are wise *not* to approach the text with only one absolute interpretation in mind. For example, it is generally held that “the Beast” is a figure also called “Antichrist” (following 1 John 2:18–22). There is no reason *not* to believe there will be a person who will arise to rule the world in the end times; but that does not exclude a preterist reading that sees particular rulers are antichrists or a spiritual/idealist view that there can be a spirit of antichrist in every age (1 John 4:3; 2 John 7). All three can be true without any one of them being necessarily incorrect.

N.T. Wright once said, “One third of what I am about to say is wrong. I just don’t know which third.” While this is a humorous way of putting it, it is a sound principle for us to incorporate into our hermeneutics (interpretation of Scripture). It is always possible that we’re missing something or misunderstanding other things. Be open to a growing understanding.

Remember Symbolic Language is not Allegory

Do not try to create some kind of morality play out of the Revelation. Allegory is a way of interpreting history and prophecy as “application” while ignoring its reality and substance. The Revelation presents reality to us. Whether you take it as a reality that has already come to be or one that will be in the future, you need to read the book as presenting reality—not some abstract concepts.

When All Else Fails, Remember This...

Jesus is coming soon. Maybe the details are fuzzy. Maybe we don’t have all the pieces in the right places. Maybe we aren’t supposed to understand it all. We should heed the Lord’s command:

*“Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book,
for the time is near.*

*Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy,
and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.”*

- Revelation 22:10 -

The Revelation

Background

Internally, the text indicates it was written by John (probably the apostle) while exiled on Patmos, placing it somewhere during the reign of Domitian (AD 81–96). *Revelation* is a translation of the Greek word *apokalypsis*, literally “the uncovering” or “the emerging.”

Summary

The Revelation employs the most extraordinary imagery and rhetoric in the Christian Scriptures *to present the New Jerusalem (Christ’s kingdom) emerging from the ashes of Fallen Babylon (the world system)*. The Revelation was written to give hope to those being persecuted and attacked for being Christians in the second and third generation of the Church. Since Christ had not yet returned, would he return? How could he be King when Caesar ruled supreme? Where was order, justice, and faith? The revelation of not only Jesus’s character and power but also the reality of the way the world system was making war against Him and his Church provided hope, especially as history marched toward the second and third centuries, which were marked by heavy persecution and opposition.

Basic Outline

Outlining the Revelation is notoriously difficult because it lacks any kind of systematic structure (see below). This outlines provides broad strokes. Items marked with a hyphen (-) are major visions while items marked with an asterisk (*) are tangential, meaning they occur within the overall arc of a major vision but are not inherently connected.

1. Prologue (1:1–20)

The opening of the text is meant to bridge many different influences—the Hebrew Scriptures, common Jewish expectations, Christian doctrine, and Greco-Roman culture. It emphasizes the authority and deity of Jesus, over both the church and the world.

2. Epistles to the Churches of Asia (2:1–3:22)

Although they have prophetic importance, these seven church were historical churches. They existed and the problems detailed here were real issues. These are issues the church has struggled with throughout its history.

3. The Throne Room of the Ancient of Days (4:1–11:19)

The judgments of the text begin not on earth but in heaven, with heavenly beings exalting “he who sits on the throne” (Dan 7:9) as well as delivering his message and curses upon the world.

- The Heavenly Throne and Eternal Lamb (4:1–5:13)
 - The Seven Seals from the Scroll (6:1–8:6)
 - * 144,000 of Israel and the Great Multitude (7:1–17)
 - The Seven Trumpets (8:7–11:19)
 - * The Little Scroll (10:1–11)
 - * Two Witnesses in Jerusalem (11:1–14)
4. The Heavenly Signs (12:1–16:21)
John's focus shifts to a series of visions, which culminate in the pouring out of seven bowls of wrath (Isa 51:17). These visions reflect the powers at work in the world, attempting to stop the witness of the gospel.
- The Woman and the Dragon (12:1–17)
 - Beasts Rising from Sea and Earth (13:1–18)
 - The Lamb and the 144,000 Witnesses (14:1–5)
 - The Harvesting of Wrath (14:6–20)
 - Seven Plagues/Bowls (15:1–16:21)
5. The Fall of Babylon (17:1–18:24)
While the world system (Babylon) seems unstoppable, in reality, it is already fallen. The Lamb (Christ) has already overcome it. The components of this world power, which include both the Prostitute (anti-Christ human powers, here featuring clear references to Rome) and the Dragon (Satan), refuse to admit their fall.
- The Vision of the Prostitute and the Beats (17:1–18)
 - The Song of the Fall of Babylon (18:1–24)
6. Heaven's Victory on the Earth (19:1–20:10)
The powers of heaven are arrayed against the powers of the world. There are two victories, separated by 1,000 years in which Satan is imprisoned. (Perhaps no section of the text has more interpretations than this one.)
- The Song of the Lamb's Marriage Supper (19:1–10)
 - The Triumph of the Rider on the White Horse (19:11–21)
 - A Thousand Years and a Final Battle (20:1–10)
7. The Final Judgment and Restoration (20:11–22:4)
A great judgment hall appears, where all living and dead are judged. The righteous are welcomed into the New Heavens and Earth, with New Jerusalem at its center. Those who aligned with Satan and the powers of the world are cast into the eternal Lake of Fire.
8. Epilogue (22:6–21)
John closes the text with words given to him by the Lord, uniting Revelation with the testimony of the Hebrew prophets, the apostles, and the words of Jesus himself. He also references Greco-Roman authority structures and philosophical ideas to convey that the message is for all the world, not just for a small group.

Controversy and Multivalence

There is such a diverse variety of approaches to the Revelation that there is no way to discuss the book without upsetting or annoying someone. Below are four basic approaches to the text that assume the text is predictive or prophetic:

1. *Historicist*: the text is a prewritten record of the course of history from the time of the apostle to the end of the world.
2. *Preterist*: the prophecies were fulfilled shortly after the authors' own time, so the text is prophecy from the author's perspective but history to ours.
3. *Futurist*: the majority of the prophecies (usually everything from chapter 4 onward) are yet to be fulfilled.
4. *Spiritual/Idealist*: the text depicts a transcendent message concerning the conflict between God and the world in all ages.

The Revelation is multivalent in its form and structure. Multivalence is a linguistic term, indicating that a word, image, or concept can have multiple meanings or interpretations simultaneously. To emphasize one or the other too heavily is to bias your reading. This makes the Revelation a very complicated work to interpret, and this complexity lends to multiple, seemingly contradictory approaches to the text. Here, I offer three thoughts to aid in reading.

Missing Referents

Part of the complexity of the Revelation comes from the fact that we know so little about its immediate context. We should be cautious about interpreting it in our context or assuming knowledge based on partial information about the context.

The Carnival Effect

Add to this the fact that the narrative of the Revelation is *not strictly chronological*. John's gospel does not follow a strict chronology, and there is no reason to assume the Revelation does. There is great deal of "skipping" and "flashing back" in the text. I refer to this as *the carnival effect*. Like a child at the carnival, seeing all that is happening, John's attention shifts all over the place through the narrative. We are presented with visions within visions, sometimes without understanding entirely what one is before the next arrives.

Overlapping Imagery

The visionary images are often redundant and superimposed, meaning different images can represent the same thing. There are times when things are clearly meant to be distinct (as in the case of the two women, one clothed in the heavens and the other drenched in the corruption of the earth). In other cases, it may be that elements overlap significantly.