

Revelation: An Inspiring Message

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The English word *revelation* normally refers to something which has previously been hidden but which is now *revealed* or *uncovered*. The word *apokalupsis* – which is the Greek title of the book of Revelation – means much the same. On the face of it, it is a title which doesn't really seem to fit the book very well. The Bible's Revelation is a book full of symbols. For many of us, those symbols seem really hard to understand so that instead of *revealing* the message, they *obscure* it.

But John begins the book by telling us it is:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John. (Rev 1:1)

Surely that tells us that this is a book we should be able to understand. Revelation originates with God. It has been passed on to the churches by Jesus Christ for the purpose of telling them about things that will soon take place – or, at least, soon begin to take place. But it's certainly a difficult book to understand; so how can we figure out what it's all about?

There are four recognised schemes of interpretation of Revelation. There is the Historic, in which the prophecy is taken to represent the flow of western history from the time Revelation was written up to the present. There is the Futurist, in which the prophecy is seen as being concerned with events associated with the second coming of Christ. The third is the Preterist, which focuses on events up to the destruction of the Jewish Temple in AD 70. And, lastly, there is the Idealistic, which regards the prophecy as an extended allegory reflecting the struggle between good and evil.

We shall not be following any of these schemes. Rather we shall be suggesting an interpretation which members of the first century churches could have come up with, having only their scriptures and their knowledge of local historical events to go by. If we can go some

way towards following their thinking, we ought to be able to appreciate not only what the message meant to *them*, but what it could mean to us today.

Divine Authority

We begin by considering John's introduction. He writes:

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.
(*Rev 1:4-5a*)

The first thing to notice is that John is writing his account of Revelation as a *letter* to the churches in Asia. He expresses his opening greeting as coming from *God* who he calls the one 'who is, and who was, and who is to come'. This 'title' originates with the name God gave to Moses many centuries earlier. It proclaims him to be the timeless, self-existent one who will manifest himself in the future through 'the one who is to come' – the Lord Jesus.

He then goes on to introduce Jesus as 'the faithful witness', 'the firstborn from the dead', and 'the ruler of kings on earth'. In his ministry, Jesus witnessed to the saving purpose of God through his own death. And because of his faithfulness to the point of death, God raised him from the dead to become 'the ruler of kings on earth'.

But John makes two additional comments. He writes,

Behold he is coming with clouds and every eye will see him. (*Rev 1:7a*)

This clearly reflects the many references in the gospels to the second coming of Jesus. It suggests that Revelation is largely concerned with the events associated with Christ's return to the earth.

The other comment is more challenging. John writes,

even those who pierced him and all tribes of the earth will mourn on account of him.
(*Rev 1:7b*)

The word 'tribes' naturally suggests to us a reference to the tribes of Israel. However, John's mention of 'those who pierced him' is unusual. Other than in this passage in Revelation, the idea of piercing is only used by John in his Gospel. And he uses the term as clearly referring to the piercing of Jesus on the cross predicted by the prophet Zechariah.

According to Zechariah, the time will come when the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will mourn and weep as an act of contrition for their involvement in the death of God's chosen son. So by using Zechariah's words, John seems to be telling us that we may expect the book of Revelation to include something about the repentance of the Jewish people in the days before the return of Christ.

Having in his introduction established the divine authority for what he is about to reveal, John goes on to describe his visions.

The Structure of the Book

Let's consider how the visions of Revelation are arranged. It seems likely that in the first Century, an appreciation of the structure of the prophecy would come from hearing it read. After the introduction, the listeners would hear of John's encounter with the risen Christ, and the messages Christ dictated to be sent to the seven churches.

They would hear about John's invitation to enter the heavenly Temple and they would listen with amazement to the drama of the seven sealed scroll. Then, they would hear seven trumpets sounding, each heralding fearful and perplexing events. When the seventh trumpet sounds, they would hear a heavenly announcement proclaiming that 'the kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ'. And they would naturally think that they had arrived at the climax of the vision.

But they're in for a surprise!

When the reading continues, it would sound to them as though John is starting all over again with a whole new cast of characters. They hear about a woman about to give birth, and of a great red dragon. They hear about two beasts who wield power on earth. Then, somewhat 'out of the blue' they hear of a magnificently dressed harlot who rides one of the beasts. And only after these characters have made their appearance do they hear about the destruction of the forces of evil in the world by a rider on a white horse. This act of divine judgement is followed by a millennial age which involves the revealing of the new Jerusalem pictured as a bride adorned for her husband.

It must, therefore, have appeared to the original listeners of Revelation, that the book consisted of two parts, each with its own set of distinctive characters and its own set of

themes. For convenience we will label the first part God Redeems His People and the second as God Redeems the World.

The first part – God Redeems His People – involves three visions. The first is a vision of Christ walking among lampstands and dictating messages to the seven churches. The second involves John entering the heavenly Temple where he sees a vision of God and of a slain lamb. In the hand of God is a scroll sealed with seven seals which only the lamb is able to open. He sees the seals broken one by one, and as each seal is broken he sees the resulting dramatic events. The final vision in this part begins with the prayers of the saints. Those prayers are followed by the blowing of seven trumpets which sound one after another. When the seventh trumpet sounds, the reign of Christ on earth becomes a reality. That is the first part of Revelation. It involves churches, seals, and trumpets. A little later we shall think about their significance.

The second part – God Redeems the World – is rather more difficult to divide into neat sections, but it begins with a description of a pregnant woman who is about to give birth and a great red dragon who stands by to devour the child as soon as it is born. In striking contrast to this vision of childbirth, is the next vision which involves beasts who arise from both sea and land. It turns out that they represent political powers who stand in opposition to the followers of the man-child – who is, of course, Christ. At this point John sees these followers represented as a group of 144,000 standing with Christ on Mount Zion. It is a vision which is immediately followed by one describing the return of the son of man descending on clouds. Having returned, Christ then initiates the reaping of the harvest, and the destruction of evil pictured as the operation of the winepress of the wrath of God.

Following this, John is shown the consequences of the outpouring of the wrath of God in terms of judgement on a symbolic Babylon. It's a dramatic vision which is followed by some detail about the establishment of the millennial age, and the role of the bride of Christ, the new Jerusalem. Such is the general picture.

The Meaning of the Symbols

Let us now think about the meanings of the symbols. We have seen that the first part of Revelation includes visions of the seven lampstands, the seven seal openings, and the seven trumpet soundings. We suggest that these sets of seven represent God dealing with three distinct groups of people.

The *lampstands* are the churches and their members. They provide a ‘warts and all’ view of real Christian communities here on earth; they include individuals who are truly ‘in the Lord’ and those who are not. Christ in his letters interacts with them to offer both positive and negative comment.

The *seal* visions provide a heavenly view of the process by which the members of the true spiritual church, are ‘sealed by God’. From now on we shall refer to these individuals as the ‘redeemed’.

The *trumpets*, on the other hand, represent God’s dealings with the Old Testament ‘church’ – the Jews. These are people who have so far rejected Christ but who will, by the grace of God, turn to him as their Messiah prior to his return.

So, the first part of Revelation¹ deals with three groups: church members (on earth), the ‘redeemed’ (in ‘heaven’), and the Jews. All are God’s people, and John’s Revelation is a message from Jesus to them all.

The second part of Revelation begins with the triumph of Christ over the power of evil in the form of the great red dragon. Christ is the man-child and the woman to whom the child is born is the nation of Israel. Christ, the man-child, is the one who will rule the nations with a rod of iron – who will eventually take universal political power. The birth of Christ and his victory over evil is, of course, the event on which everything else in God’s purposes depends – even the salvation of members of the seven churches and the ‘redeemed’ sealed in the sealing process.

In a sense, the victory of Christ would have made an appropriate opening to the whole of Revelation. John, however, has been guided to place this account of Christ’s victory at the beginning of the second part, because it is a key political event on the world stage. In this part of Revelation we are being introduced explicitly to the victory of Christ and his people over the political powers in this world.

In this part of Revelation, the political powers are represented as wild beasts. The spiritual opposition to these beasts is the 144,000 who are revealed to John as being with Christ on Mt. Zion. It is a clash of images which implies an ongoing spiritual battle in the world between good and evil.

It’s a battle which will end only when Christ returns.

¹ chapters 1-11

A key element in the later stages of this struggle is a series of seven *bowls of wrath*. These are judgements which will be poured out on rebellious world powers – probably after Christ has returned. Finally, the whole world becomes God’s kingdom when a new heavens and a new earth has been established and the Bride – the new Jerusalem – is revealed.

Action Symbols

Having briefly looked at the way the prophecy is structured, I want now to focus on the significance of the four key symbols we have just highlighted: lampstands, seals, trumpets, and bowls of wrath. I want to encourage you to think of these as ‘action’ symbols. We begin by defining what an ‘action’ symbol is.

When God wanted to show Jeremiah that he was in control of Israel’s destiny, he directed him to go to the potter’s house, and to watch the potter make a vessel on the wheel. As he watched, something went wrong and the vessel was spoiled under the potter’s hand. But while the clay was still malleable, the potter could re-work the vessel into a form which was acceptable. This was an illustration to Jeremiah of God’s ability to remold Israel, provided they remained sufficiently pliable. The potter’s vessel was an ‘action’ symbol, because it spoke of the sometimes complex and sometimes unpleasant processes which were involved in God’s molding of Israel.

Revelation’s four key symbols – lampstands, seals, trumpets and bowls – are also ‘action’ symbols. These four symbols represent *actions* by God. They are symbols of God *at work*. Moreover, in the text of Revelation they occur at the beginning of specific sections of the prophecy in a way which suggests that they are deliberately intended to call attention to the divine processes involved.

Let’s take a closer look.

The symbol of a *lampstand* to represent a church is well known. The seven-branched candlestick with its lamps feature in Israel’s Tabernacle and Temple. It represents the light of God’s presence in the nation. The lampstand carried oil lamps which would need regular maintenance; the oil would have to be topped up and the wicks trimmed if the lamps were to shine reliably.

John, of course, does not see a seven-branched lampstand, he sees seven separate lampstands representing the seven churches of Asia. But they are lampstands nevertheless,

designed to carry lamps which will also need attention if they are to shine effectively. The lampstands are ‘action’ symbols. The letters John is instructed to send to the lampstands of Asia represent Jesus’ *interaction* with these churches.

Now think about the *seals*. A document seal is a means of making sure a document is securely closed. It has a two-fold significance: it is a mark of ownership and a mark of protection. In the past, a substance like clay or wax would be used to seal the open edges of a scroll and the owner would stamp his name into the wax using a signet ring. These days we have little use for sealing in this form.

The seal on a document is an ‘active’ symbol. It ensures that the information sealed in the document has a recognised owner and is protected. What information, then, is the book of Revelation likely to be referring to? What requires such secure treatment? It seems to me that the only ‘set of data’ which really ‘fits the bill’ is the personal identities of the ‘redeemed’. The people ‘sealed’ are those chosen by God as his people; we do not know who they are, but they *belong* to God and are *protected* by him.

Of course, seals are temporary devices – there’s no point in sealing something if the seal can never be opened. In Revelation, John sees the scroll in the right hand of God sealed with seven seals, and as he watches, he sees the seals opened one by one. But the scroll is securely sealed – that’s the point of the seven seals – and it seems reasonable to assume that in order for the scroll to be opened, all seven seals have to be broken.

The act of breaking an individual seal, therefore, does *not* imply the revealing a part of what is written in the scroll. Rather, it represents a specific feature of the divine sealing process – the process by which God is bringing individuals into the sealed community.

This is not the right opportunity to give a full account of the seals as described by John. Suffice it for the moment to say that when the first four seals are broken John sees four horsemen emerge against the background of the divine invitation: “*Come!*” We take it that this invitation is the same as that expressed by ‘the spirit and the bride’ at the end of the book. It is an invitation to come and take the water of life freely – in other words, to become a follower of Christ.

Strikingly, however, it is an invitation offered in the face of the potentially dramatic, real-life circumstances represented by the colour of the horses – white, red, black, and pale. For those responding to this invitation, the outcome is positive – even if superficially it doesn’t seem like it. It is an outcome subsequently described variously as ‘souls under the altar’, as the 144,000 of

‘spiritual’ Israel, and as a part of the great unnumbered group who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb.²

Next we will consider the *trumpet*. The trumpet is an obvious ‘action’ symbol. In scripture the trumpet is strongly associated with God’s governance of the Old Testament people of God. The sounding of a trumpet was an important part of Israel’s religious life. Of all the functions the trumpet played in Israel’s relationship to God, the dominant one was that of calling Israel back to God. Allied with this is the requirement that Israel should recognise that they are his covenant people. I am suggesting, therefore, that the sequence of seven trumpets relate to the role of Israel in God’s future purpose for the nation.

The ‘action’ element in these visions is God’s intention to *bring Israel back* to himself thereby eventually enabling them to recognise Jesus as their Messiah.

From the letters to the churches, it is clear that there were Jewish members in the churches at the time the Revelation letter was written – and there have been Jewish members in the churches ever since. When these Jewish Christians heard that the book of Revelation included the symbolic sounding of seven trumpets, they would surely have thought of Israel’s victory over Jericho under Joshua.

As the trumpet events were read out however, they would have found little encouragement to believe that they spoke of victory – especially one resulting in an enthusiastic turning of the Jewish people to Christ in the future. Most of the trumpets involve judgemental events. The final three are even labelled ‘woe’ trumpets – involving, as they do, significant conflicts with other powers. Yet, at the end of the sixth trumpet, some are inspired to give glory to God, and this reaction leads into the ‘last trump’ – the seventh trumpet – in which the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of God and of his Christ.

What, then, can we say about the *bowls of wrath*? The Greek word used in the phrase ‘bowls of wrath’ is a word used almost exclusively in the Hebrew Old Testament for the bowls used in the service of the Tabernacle or the Temple. They are bowls which are used to manipulate the blood of the sacrifices. And in the sacrifices, the life-blood, representing the forfeited life of the sinner, was poured out at the base of the altar – that is to say it was ‘devoted to destruction’.

² Revelation 7

The bowls of wrath in Revelation can therefore be thought of as ‘action’ symbols representing divine judgements which have as their objective the elimination of evil in the world together with everything that is in opposition to God’s purposes.

The Inspiring Message

So, to conclude, what purpose did Jesus have in mind in sending Revelation to the first century churches? Surely his main aim was to remind believers of God’s plans for them in terms they would understand from their knowledge of the scriptural symbols.

And this is true for us as well!

The lampstands would remind them that the Lord Jesus walks among the churches – and he still does. The seals would reassure them that they were God’s people – owned by God and protected by him – and the sealing process is still going on. The trumpets would reveal to them that God will not forget the promises he made to Israel in the past, but that at the right time he will bring them to recognise their Messiah.

In the second part of the message, Jesus reminds his readers that – in his own birth and death – evil in the world had been prospectively conquered. Then, set against the historic background of first Century Rome, he shows that God’s judgements would, in due course, be poured out on an evil world and that these judgements would pave the way for a new heaven and earth founded on divine justice and righteousness.

Revelation is, thus, a comprehensive message – and it’s a powerful one! It’s a message designed to inspire and energize those who hear it, whether they live in the first century or the twenty-first. It’s a message which reminds them that not only is God active in the world, but also that they are an essential part of the divine plan.

Looking back to our own attempts at interpreting Revelation, perhaps we have allowed the historical focus to be far too influential. Perhaps we might do better to take more seriously the ‘action’ symbols and appreciate the way in which they can guide us to a simpler understanding of the amazing message.