

Reading the Revelation

Sandra was reading through the minutes of a meeting. “I don’t see why they decided this!” she exclaimed with some annoyance. Her friend stared at her. “You can’t make sense of those minutes in isolation,” she said. “The background is outlined in the previous minutes. Anyway, I’m not sure you can understand the technical terminology as you don’t work in the team – you’re not really qualified to make sense of it. The minutes are intended for those involved in the work.”

Many people are fascinated by the book of Revelation, maybe because of its reference to Armageddon. They seem captivated by its images that are very graphic and sometimes even scary. However, we must remember that it is the last book in the Bible.

The Purpose of the Book

The first three verses of the book clearly state the following:

- ❖ The message was given by God to Jesus for his servants;
- ❖ It describes events that were going to happen;
- ❖ Faithful servants are urged to obey the messages in it.

Servants and friends of Jesus are those who have responded to the gospel message and who are trying to follow him. Revelation gives these people encouragement, hope, and principles by which to live.

You are my friends if you do whatever I command you (John 15:14; see also 18:36).



Key Messages

Chapters 1 to 3 contain letters. These are messages from Jesus to seven churches in the Roman Empire in the first century AD. They describe whether these churches were faithful, and how they could improve. Then the apostle John, who penned the book, saw a number of fearful and dramatic visions, culminating in the end of the world as we know it.

While the visions may be difficult to interpret there are several absolutely clear messages that are repeated through the book. They are:

- ❖ Jesus is unique and supreme (Revelation 1:5; 17:14)
- ❖ Jesus is coming back to the earth (1:7; 16:15)
- ❖ He will set up God’s kingdom on a transformed earth (11:15; 21:3-8)
- ❖ His followers are urged to keep the faith pure and to prepare for his coming (chapters 2 and 3; 14:12)
- ❖ There are amazing blessings for the faithful (3:5; 14:3)
- ❖ Most of the world will be unbelieving (17:1-2; 18:2-3)
- ❖ There will be false systems, which seem religious but in reality are

corrupted, which would oppose, try to deceive and even persecute the faithful, trying to destroy their faith (13:7; 20:4)

- ❖ There will be a time of great trouble and judgement before the kingdom comes (15:1,7; 18:8).

The Visions

The visions start with a throne 'in heaven', a lamb, elders and creatures with wings. Thrones and the lamb feature often in this book. There is a scroll sealed with seven seals, which only the lamb can open. Events, including a lot of judgements, are associated with each of the seals as they are opened. They describe conditions that will prevail before God finally judges the world.

The seventh seal leads to seven trumpets each held by an angel, and each associated with events and judgements. The seventh trumpet leads to seven bowls with dreadful plagues — the final judgements. The book closes with a description of the end of all false systems and problems. Jesus and the faithful will live for ever in a transformed world.

Main Players

The main characters in the visions are:

- ❖ Angels
- ❖ The devil and satan
- ❖ A lamb
- ❖ Beasts and animals
- ❖ A red dragon
- ❖ A false prophet
- ❖ Babylon, shown in contrast to a new Jerusalem
- ❖ A prostitute, shown in contrast to a bride.

The book is clearly a book of symbol. For example, Jesus is represented by a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes. We cannot assume that any character is described literally.

Visions In the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, especially in Daniel, there are prophetic visions of beasts. There are many similarities between Daniel and Revelation.

When Jesus preached on earth he very often alluded back to the Old Testament. He also referred back to Daniel when prophesying about the future (see Matthew 24:15).

Here also, in his last message, he uses images from the Old Testament. The harlot, Babylon, symbolic beasts, the serpent, a sacrificial lamb, angels, false prophets and Satan are all first mentioned in the Old Testament.

Our Response

Sandra could not understand the terminology of the minutes, was unaware of their context, and so could not understand the decisions made by the committee. Similarly, it is impossible to interpret this important book of symbol without first studying the rest of the Bible, including the Old Testament.

There are momentous times coming on the earth. God has warned us and told us what to do. We do not want to incur the anger of God: we want to be faithful servants of Jesus waiting for him. The words of encouragement in Revelation are directed at such people.

We therefore ought to read the Bible and to respond to its message.

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