

Rules for reading: Revelation

When reading most texts there are rules; way of reading that are understood by both the writer and the audience. Those rules provide a scaffold for understanding the text. When it comes to the book of Revelation, some of the rules break down.

Apocalyptic literature is the obvious starting place, and in fact Revelation gives its name to that style of literature¹, but there are problems.



La Bête de la Mer (from the *Tapisserie de l'Apocalypse* in Angers, France). A medieval tapestry, this detail of which shows John, the Dragon, and the Beast of the Sea.

Similarities to apocalyptic literature²

The end of a world. (Zombie movies, Generalised A.I., Dinosaurs, Shoah, Cancer)

Socio/political, representing the voice of the oppressed

Supernatural themes (Clearly angelic message givers)

Symbols (Dragon/ Beast/ Harlot etc)

Differences from apocalyptic literature³

Not anonymous (John of Patmos) Vs: Pseudonymous (Moses, Enoch etc.)

Claims a contemporary audience Vs: Ancient Audience

Actually forward looking (short term) Vs: Pretending to look forward, from the past, into the present time.

Rules for the apocalypse

Understand that the symbols are speaking to a present (to the Author) reality, in this case

- The Roman Empire which had a huge influence in Asia Minor.
- There was conflict within the churches as to how to practice their faith (Nicolaitans/ Overcome)
- Reflected a liturgical structure (Heaven and Earth are in relationship)

Revelation 1.3-5

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.

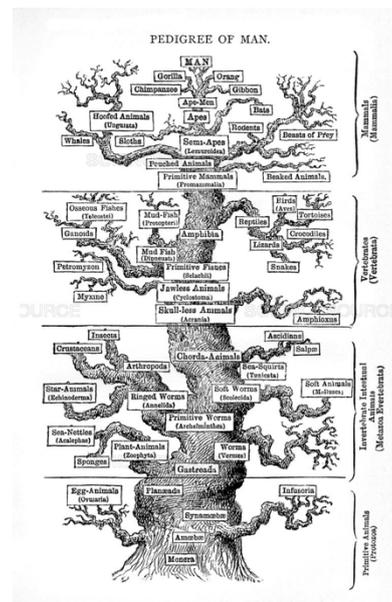
John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

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 the kings of the earth.

The entire book is constructed as a **circular letter** which is addressed to 7 churches in the region of Asia Minor.

Things letter readers should keep in mind

- Although a letter, it was also 'performed', and so was written as a proclamation.
- The addressed churches are the intended audience, in their particular circumstances, as with other letters in scripture modern audiences are not the intended audience and may have to do work to understand the concerns in the letter.
- The letter ends with a positive promise and identifies God/ heaven as the active agent in coming to that promise.⁴



¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stonehenge>

² https://global.oup.com/obso/focus/focus_on_revelation/

³ <https://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2016/05/03/the-book-of-revelation-a-different-kind-of-apocalyptic-text/>

⁴ Haeckel's Tree of Life, Evolution of Man, 1879

Revelation 22.18-19

I warn everyone who hears the words of the **prophecy** of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this **prophecy**, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

John clearly understands himself as proclaiming **prophecy**, in the same way as Isaiah, Jeremiah and others where.

Unlike the Old Testament prophets John is directed to write as opposed to speak. This indicates both a shift in culture and a particularly religious context for the letter.

When it comes to reading revelation it is worth recalling that in Ancient Israel (The Old Testament) Prophecy was primarily focused on speaking a warning from the perspective of God. Future telling was always of limited value, and was primarily an indicator of authenticity. It also demonstrates a break from the Jewish culture of the time of the writing, as apocalyptic literature (attributed to an ancient author) had replaced prophetic speech. In the context of the letter it seems that the warning was the choice facing early Christians was one in which believers would have only two alternatives: to maintain their faith and die for it, or to commit apostasy.

Know how it has been read:⁵

1) Preterism: This approach sees most of the Book of Revelation as being about the present context of the author and understands that the events described have been fulfilled. It offers an optimistic future, but one which is separated by an age from the experience of the intended recipients.

2) Historicism: This view looks to the events of the current time/ or recent past and attempts to draw links between events described in revelation, and the present day. This is the view that was being accepted when some people drew a link between 'a mountain of fire being thrown into the sea' and the burning of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in 2010. There are many other examples, including various popes and Luther as being described as the Anti-Christ.⁶

3) Idealism: Idealism reads the narrative of Revelations as describing a pattern of life, that will see disasters and renewal for the church/ Christians, rather than specific events.

4) Futurism: The Futurist interprets the book of Revelation as literally as possible. This view leaves little room for symbolism. In fact, symbolism is only considered when something cannot be understood in a strictly literal fashion. Therefore, for the Futurist, the vast majority of Revelation has yet to take place.



The Second Trumpet depicted in the 14th c. *Clémentine Apocalypse*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



The Deepwater Horizon Oil Rig on April 21, 2010, the oil becomes the "blood" killing living creatures (Rev. 8:9).

⁵ <https://africa.thegospelcoalition.org/article/4-ways-to-read-the-book-of-revelation/>

⁶ https://global.oup.com/obso/focus/focus_on_revelation/