

Lesson 5

How can we understand Revelation? We know from the opening verses of the book that we *can* understand Revelation.

Revelation 1:3 — *Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.*

The next question is **how** can we understand Revelation.

We must study the Old Testament. Revelation is steeped in the Old Testament, and we must be also if we are to properly understand it.

Of the sixty-six books in the Bible, perhaps Revelation above all is dependent upon the rest of the Bible for its proper interpretation — and yet many commentators try to explain Revelation without reference to the other sixty-five books of the Bible. We will not make that mistake. The marginal references in your Bible are usually much more enlightening than any commentary.

Revelation has more Old Testament allusions than any other New Testament book, although it would be difficult to point to a single direct quotation. By one count, the 404 verses in Revelation contain some five hundred allusions to the Old Testament. Apart from Ruth, Ecclesiastes, and Haggai, John alludes to every book in the Old Testament. These allusions are essential to understanding the book. Nearly every point made in the book comes in some way through an Old Testament allusion.

One thing to look for in choosing a commentary on Revelation is to check how many times the commentator refers to the Old Testament. (It's not fool-proof, but it is a good indicator.)

We must pay close attention to numbers. We need to pay particular attention to numbers and periods of time. They have special meanings that we must carefully deduce from the evidence. Here is what another has said on this topic:

The study of the numbers used in Scripture is not as dry a field as most people imagine. ... God is indeed a wonderful Numberer. There is no such thing as chance in God's world — no such thing as confusion. Everything is numbered, everything is in its place,

everything comes up in its time and season. Upon nature and upon history there is the stamp of symmetry and proportion.... The Bible informs us that our steps are numbered; that our days are numbered; that the hairs of our head are all numbered; nay, that God numbereth the drops of rain; that the righteous are numbered to life; that the wicked are numbered to the sword; that earthly kingdoms are numbered; and, in short, that there is nothing without number, save only 'His understanding,' of which the Psalmist declares 'there is no number.'

We should always try to read this book through first century eyes, and that is particularly true when it comes to the numbers in this book. Modern man is much more *quantitative* than they were in the first century. It may be difficult for us to see numbers in figurative terms, but it would have been natural for a first century reader to have done so. Graffiti from Pompeii, for example, reads "I love her whose number is 545." We're not sure what that number depicted, but apparently some one did!

Most of the symbols behind the numbers make perfect sense immediately once you see them. For example, three is the number of God, twelve is the number of God's people, ten is the number of completion, seven is the number of perfection, six is the number of imperfection, eight is the number for renewal, four is the number of the earth, two is the number of confirmation or strength, and three and a half is a broken seven. Some require a little detective work, such as 1260, 144000, and 1000. (For example, 1260 days is three and a half years at 360 days per year.)

But why seven? Why twelve? We can't say for sure, but seven and twelve both relate to the numbers three and four (seven being their sum and twelve being their product). We know the significance of three as a figurative number for God, and we can see how four is a figurative number for God's creation (four directions, four seasons, four corners). So perhaps the combining of three with four shows God at work in his creation.

Perhaps the perfect number seven, being the sum of three (the number for God) and four (the number for God's creation, man) is symbolic of what we see in Hebrews 2 — that when Jesus came he was completely God and completely man.

Hebrews 2:9-10 — *But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace*

of God should taste death for every man. For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

But how do we know all of this? Why shouldn't we just take all of the numbers in this book literally?

Let's think for a moment about Chapter 7, which is a beautiful chapter that describes the blessings of God's people. It was a message that God's people really needed to hear when this book was written and while the Roman persecution was raging. In that chapter, the number twelve occurs twelve times, and the sum of God's people is given as 144,000, which is twelve times twelve times a thousand.

What are we to think of this? Have we ever seen the number twelve used before anywhere in the Bible? Twelve tribes? Twelve apostles? Can we not see how twelve could be used to depict the people of God? Or can we really imagine God turning to the poor persecuted Christian wearing the number 144,001 on his chest and saying "Sorry, but you're a day late and a dollar short! Better luck next time ... if there was going to be a next time!" At some point, our common sense, if nothing else, should tell us that numbers are being used figuratively in this book. And if that is true of the 144,000 in Chapter 7, then wouldn't we also expect it to be true of the one thousand in Revelation 20?

Think about the beautiful description of the church we see in Revelation 21.

Revelation 21:12-17** — And had a wall great and high, and had **twelve** gates, and at the gates **twelve** angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the **twelve** tribes of the children of Israel: On the east **three** gates; on the north **three** gates; on the south **three** gates; and on the west **three** gates. And the wall of the city had **twelve** foundations, and in them the names of the **twelve** apostles of the Lamb. And he that talked with me had a golden reed to measure the city, and the gates thereof, and the wall thereof. And the city lieth **four** square, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, **twelve thousand** furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal. And he measured the wall thereof, **an hundred and forty and

four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of the angel.

“Oh, but I take every number in the book of Revelation literally!” Really? Is the church literally a giant cube fifteen hundred miles in each direction? Is heaven? Do we really think that is what the book of Revelation was building towards in the previous twenty chapters? Is that the message of hope and comfort God’s people needed to hear? “Don’t worry about Rome! There’s a giant cube in your future!” And, more importantly — do we really think that is how they would have understood this book? Again, we must try to read this book through first century eyes.

There are, however, some dangers with viewing numbers figuratively — there is a temptation to read more into them than they were intended to convey. And there is the danger that some people start looking for secret codes in the Bible, while ignoring what the Bible plainly says. And there is also the danger that if we focus just on numbers and ignore everything else, we can almost literally prove anything!

Here are two quick examples. Did you know there is a numerical “proof” that Hitler was the Antichrist? Let A = 100, B = 101, C = 102, etc. and note that 107 (H) + 108 (I) + 119 (T) + 111 (L) + 104 (E) + 117 (R) = 666! Or did you know there is a numerical “proof” that Shakespeare translated the King James version of the Bible? How old was Shakespeare in 1611 when the King James version was published? 46. The 46th word in Psalm 46 is “shake.” The 46th word from the end of Psalm 46 is “spear.” Coincidence? Certainly. Silly? Yes. More silly than most of the crazy notions people have about 666? No. People need to quit looking for secret messages in the Bible and start obeying the messages that are clear for all to understand.

We must follow the rules. Although I am calling these “rules,” a more accurate term for some of them is likely “guideline.”

Rule 1: We must pay careful attention to context and the time frame.

The surest way to go wrong with Apocalyptic language is to atomize the text by looking at one verse at a time without any regard for the verses that preceded it, the verses that followed, the reason they were written, and the history in which they were written.

The context is vital. And we must do more than just say the context is important — we must actually pay close attention to it!

And that includes historical context. Apocalyptic language always has historical significance, so we must study history in order to properly understand the images.

The time frame is also vital in understanding Revelation. No prophecy in the Bible has a time frame more clear and more often repeated than the time frame in Revelation, and yet no time frame is more often ignored by commentators.

Rule 2: We should use easily understood verses to help us understand verses that are harder to understand.

This rule always applies in Bible study. If we find some doctrinal position (such as a thousand year of reign of Christ on earth) in apocalyptic language, and if that doctrinal position is found nowhere else in the Bible and in fact contradicts very easy to understand statements found elsewhere in the Bible, then we can be certain that that doctrinal position is wrong and we have misunderstood the apocalyptic symbols.

Let's consider an example. The Bible says in Romans 10:12 that "there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek." And the Bible says in Acts 10:34 that "God is no respecter of persons." Those verses are not difficult at all to understand. In fact, it would be difficult to misunderstand them. So what then can be said for a view of Revelation that creates a difference between the Jew and the Greek? What can be said for a view of Revelation that causes God to be a respecter of persons? That view must be wrong. Any view of Revelation that suggests God has a different plan in mind for the Jews and that they will be saved or lost under a different gospel *must* be a wrong view! That is an example of Rule 1 in action!

As another example, 1 Peter 5:8 tells us that Satan walks about as a roaring lion "seeking whom he may devour." Ephesians 6:11 tells us that the reason we wear the whole armor of God is so that we can "stand against the wiles of the devil." Ephesians 2:2 describes Satan as "the prince of the power of the air" and "the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience." Revelation will have much to say about Satan, who is the evil power working behinds the scenes in Rome's attack on the church — but, and here is the key point, Revelation does not contradict what we just read about Satan in the rest of the New Testament. We need to interpret what this book says about Satan in light of the many straightforward descriptions of Satan we see elsewhere in the Bible.

Rule 3: We should interpret apocalyptic language figuratively unless we have a compelling reason to do otherwise.

This is the opposite rule from how we understand most things in the Bible. Usually we take a verse literally unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise. When might we be so compelled? How about Matthew 5:29? “And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee.”

Apocalyptic language is figurative language, and so the opposite rule applies — we understand it figuratively unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise.

As an example, Matthew 24:29, 34 tell us that the stars fell from the sky in the first century. That must be *figurative* for at least two reasons. First, the stars did not literally fall from the sky in the first century. And second, it would be impossible for the stars to ever *literally* fall from the sky.

For such language, our initial view should be that it is figurative unless something in the text compels us to view it otherwise. That exception does not apply very often, but we saw it in Daniel 8:22 where the best view of the number *four* was to have it *literally* apply to the four kingdoms that followed the death of Alexander the Great.

This rule will help us with some of the difficult verses in Revelation. Revelation 11:8, for example, will describe a “great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.” What is that great city? I think we will see that it is Rome — but what about that last phrase (“where also our Lord was crucified”) — doesn’t that mean the great city is Jerusalem? No. Here is where we need to remember our interpretive rule. That same great city is also called Sodom and Egypt in the same verse. Is the great city Sodom? Is the great city Egypt? (Egypt is not even a city!) If Sodom is being used as a symbol in Revelation 11:8, and if Egypt is being used as a symbol in Revelation 11:8, then on what basis could we conclude that Jerusalem is not being used as a symbol in Revelation 11:8? Nothing is forcing us to take it literally, and so the best path is to be consistent and treat each of those location as figures for the great city, which I believe we will see is describing Rome.

Rule 4: Similarity of speech does not imply identity of subjects. (The same image can be used to depict different subjects.)

This is common pitfall. Often in the study of Revelation you hear someone say that such and such symbol in Revelation could only apply to the end of the

world. Really? What if that same symbol is used in the Old Testament to apply to something other than the end of the world (as is very often the case)?

An example of that? In Revelation 21:1, John writes, “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth.” Is that describing the end of the world? I’ll save that question until we get to that verse, but here is a question we can answer now: *must* that language of a new heaven and a new earth be describing the end of the world? The answer to that question is no. Why? Because Isaiah used the same image to describe the establishment of the church.

Isaiah 65:17 — For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind.

Rule 5: Dissimilarity of speech does not imply distinctness of subjects. (Different images can be used to depict the same subject.)

As an example, many different symbols are used both in the Old Testament and the New Testament to describe the church. We saw many examples of that in our study of Zechariah, and we will see many in this book as well.

Rule 6: We should always carefully study how the same symbols are used elsewhere in the Bible, while keeping Rule 3 and Rule 4 in mind.

If we find the same symbol in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, that symbol may or may not have the same subject. We need to examine it carefully.

If the subject in the Old Testament was something that has already occurred, then it would be very unlikely that the New Testament subject is the same — but the subjects are likely similar, such as Babylon in the Old and Rome in the New.

Rule 7: We should not add symbols to the text.

We saw this issue when we studied Daniel, where we saw a giant image of a man. Daniel described the man’s feet and toes in Daniel 2. Now, almost certainly, the giant image had two feet and ten toes — but the number two and the number ten are never mentioned in Daniel 2. Premillennialists split the fourth kingdom of Daniel 2 into two parts — and they rely heavily on the two feet and the ten toes in making that argument. If two and ten were that important to the meaning of the vision, don’t we think they would have been mentioned?

We should not read symbols into the text. Let's stick with the symbols we already have!

Rule 8: We should pay careful attention to any explanations that are given in the text.

In this book we will sometimes see an angel explaining the meaning of certain of the symbols to John. Revelation 17, for example, begins with a vision of “the great whore that sitteth upon many waters.” What does it mean? An angel explains it to John (and to us) in the second half of Revelation 17. We should, of course, listen very carefully to that explanation! If we disagree with the the divinely inspired explanation, then we are wrong!

And what does that say about the view that everything in Revelation should be taken literally? In Revelation 17:9, the angel tell us that “the seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth.” How can the seven heads be literal heads and also be literal mountains? Don't we know with certainty that symbols are being used when the angel tells us that the heads depict mountains?

Rule 9: Sometimes a *literal* person, place, or thing is later used as a *figure* for a similar person, place, or thing.

For example, literal Babylon is used in in this book as a figure for Rome. Why? Because both were great enemies of God's people. Egypt, Assyria, and Jerusalem are sometimes used in the same way. Revelation 11:8 uses three such symbols to depict evil bloodthirsty Rome: Egypt, Sodom, and Jerusalem. Why? Egypt denotes bondage, Sodom denotes wickedness, and Jerusalem denotes hostility to Christ and the kingdom of Christ — all of which were true of Rome.

Rule 10: Sometimes a *figurative* number is also a *literal* number.

For example, the seventy years of captivity was a literal seventy years, but seventy denotes perfection and completeness, and so seventy is also used figuratively to show that the period of captivity was the perfect length of time for God to teach his people the lesson he wanted them to learn.

And, of course, this is not just a coincidence. The literal seventy year period was determined by God, and most likely it was chosen by God because he wanted to teach a lesson based, in part, on the symbolic significance of the number.

The number twelve is the number for God's people in this world, being the product of three and four. That number is used figuratively all throughout this

book, but it is also a literal number in the Bible — twelve tribes and twelve apostles. Again, that is not a coincidence — God determined how many tribes and how many apostles there would be.

Can we be certain about anything in Revelation? Is this all just a matter of opinion? Can we be dogmatic about anything in this difficult book?

First, it is possible to make *some* dogmatic assertions about what this books says. The third verse of the book says that those who read and understand this book will be blessed. Clearly, God meant for us to understand this book. Just because we can't be dogmatic about everything in the book of Revelation doesn't mean we can't be dogmatic about anything in the book of Revelation.

Second, we must have an open mind and not be overly influenced by our pre-conceptions about the book—but, as Chesterton once observed, an open mind is only good when it clamps down on something solid. We need to let the text itself tell us what this book is about.

At times, however, we will have to settle for presenting several different interpretations, each of which could be true in view of the rest of the Bible. But our inability at times to state with certainty what something means does not mean that we can't state with certainty what it does *not* mean. In fact, on occasion we may find ourselves proceeding by the process of elimination.

Some of the Old Testament prophecies had dual fulfillments — one that was immediate and one that was fulfilled later by Christ. In our study, we will seek to explain the immediate fulfillment without denying that there may be some secondary meaning. But we know that some Old Testament prophecies had secondary meanings only because the New Testament tells us that they did. Absent that inspired explanation, one should be very cautious in identifying secondary meanings. They very quickly turn into just speculation about the text.

How to Go *Wrong* in Our Study of Revelation

Despite everything we have looked at so far, let's assume that we want to get Revelation completely wrong. Let's assume that we want to come up with an explanation for the book that can't possibly be the correct explanation. What should we do if we want that as a result? Here are ten steps that would guarantee us a *wrong* understanding of this book!

Step 1: Make sure that our interpretation has no particular message for the initial readers of the book who were suffering persecution and praying to God

for deliverance. Ideally, our view of this book should create panic rather than provide comfort.

Step 2: Make sure that our own generation, and not anyone else, is the focus of this book.

Step 3: Make sure that our interpretation includes signs pointing to the end of the world. Yes, that day will come like a thief in the night, but that doesn't mean the thief won't leave a lot of big warning signs the day before!

Step 4: Make sure that we ignore the context of the book. We should study each verse as if it is the only verse in the Bible.

Step 5: Make sure that we ignore the time frame of the book, no matter how clear it is or how many times it is repeated in the book.

Step 6: Make no efforts to be consistent in our interpretation. When we get to a number, we should just flip a coin to determine whether it is figurative or literal.

Step 7: Ignore the symbols in the book. Instead, we should always and without fail just apply a rigid literalism to the text — except when we don't. Just because the text repeatedly uses the number 12, for example, doesn't mean the text is trying to tell us anything. It could just be a coincidence!

Step 8: Ignore the Old Testament.

Step 9: Ignore the rest of the New Testament.

Step 10: Treat the book of Revelation as two books — a first book with letters for the first century church, and a second unrelated book with a vision about nuclear bombs.

If we do all or any of that, we are guaranteed to go wrong! But let's work very hard not to make any of those mistakes!