The Revelation of Jesus Christ - Revelation, not Revelations by the way, can be a difficult book to understand. It is full of strange symbols and numbers and imagery. It can be scary and confusing.

Sometimes to try to make it simpler to understand various schemes have been invented. To make this simple generally people have approached the book with one of three assumptions. This is all about stuff that happened in the past; this is all about stuff that will happen in the future; or some kind of hybrid of the two.

The study of end times is called Eschatology. Various Eschatological Schemes exist to try to make the sense of what is in the book. Sometimes these are called Postmillennial, Amillennnial and Premillennial.

To quote the late Dr Michael Heiser, “They all cheat.”

A particular type of Eschatology called Premillennial Dispensationalism (or Dispensationalism for short) became popular in the 20th Century. We will reference it from time to time. It believes that all of the events described are to happen in the future. Probably our immediate future. But for the moment let start with what Michael Heiser goes on to say.

“Throw the eschatological systems out. Don’t worry about them. The biblical text is more important than systems.”

The problem is that often we read the text through the lens of our own preferred system. We look at the text and say “Look see! Why can’t you see that verse proves me right.” And no matter what system is adopted they all want to do that.

The difficulty is that often our eschatology was taught to us by someone we love and respect. Someone who demonstrated Jesus to us in words and actions. So unlearning and relearning is both difficult and emotional.

But this is a “matters of opinion” issue. We don’t need to fight or split over this. Sadly, that has happened far too often in church history.

That doesn’t mean that it is of no consequence. How we read and interpret this book in particular can impact all sorts of understanding we have about Jesus, the Church, history and the future of the world, and how we should live in it.

The Book of Revelation was written by John. Quite possibly John the beloved disciple of Jesus. But he is writing from the Island of Patmos. Church tradition tells us that John the beloved disciple was indeed exiled to that Island. This is his dramatic vision.

So let me tell you this is my conviction: **The book of Revelation is a 1st Century; revelation of Jesus; against the Roman Empire; to the church(es); for the purpose of worship, encouragement and hope.**

John gives us in the first few verses some insight into how it should be read:

1. **Apocalyptic** -The **revelation** from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, **2**who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

This word revelation is apocalypse. It means to unveil or reveal, hence revelation. Apocalyptic literature is a very Jewish way of writing that uses vivid imagery and symbols and numbers to give meaning and tell stories. We see examples of this type of literature in Ezekiel and Daniel but also in other Jewish writing like 4 Ezra and 1 Enoch. The symbols are meaningful but they are not code: King = Jesus, Mountain = challenge etc.

This is important **there is no secret code that when decoded can speak to us about the timing of the end of the world**. repeat

Apocalypse used in every day language means calamity; war; famine; terrible times; beyond our control. The war in Ukraine is apocalyptic in nature. That is **not** what the word means in Jewish literature.

**Apocalyptic literature describes the prophets vision or dream, telling history from the heavenly perspective so that the present can be viewed in light of history’s final outcome**. Repeat.

1. **Prophesy** **3**Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

John tells us this is a prophesy. A word from God spoken through a prophet to God’s people usually to warn and comfort them in a time of crisis. By calling this a prophesy John is saying he is standing in the tradition of the biblical prophets and bring their story to a climax.

This verse is also the first of 7 beatitudes. You remember the beatitudes in Matthew and Luke. Blessed are the poor, blessed are the peacemakers etc. In Matthew there are 8 a number often associated with Jesus. 7 in the perfect number but tied to Jesus the number 8 can become like a super perfect number.

**3**Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

Often this book has been seen as scary and confusing. Jackie was told as a new Christian not to read it until she was more mature. Someone here told me they had deliberately never read it. For me growing up the way it was explained to me induced great fear.

But that is not the promise here. Read well it should be a great encouragement.

**3**Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

1. **Letter:** This apocalyptic prophesy was sent to real people that John knew.

1:4 John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

In the passage we see the first reference to 7. 7 the perfect number will referred to over and over again.

We have 7 churches and 7 spirits. You are meant to read this as perfect, symbolic or important. And it is the 7 day sabbath cycle. For John the number 7 is really important and he ties it into every part of the book.

The next observation is that no other book uses so many images, allusions and references to the Old Testament, The Hebrew Scriptures as the book of Revelation.

7 “Look, he is coming with the clouds,” (Daniel 7:13)

and “every eye will see him,

even those who pierced him”;

and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.” (Zach 12:10)

So shall it be! Amen.

8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” (An allusion to Moses before the burning bush and God says “I am, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” What should I call you – I am).

If you want to better understand the symbols you are expected to either recognise them from the Scriptures or go look them up.

10 On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, 11 which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

12 I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man,

Now this is a motif that John will return to several times. I heard, but when I turned I saw somethings else; something clearer; something with a fuller understanding. We will come back to this later in the book.

19 “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. 20 The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

I mentioned earlier an eschatological scheme called Premillennial Dispensationalism. It was invented by a lawyer in the 19th Century named John Darby. Later another Lawer named Schofield who was s student of Darby wrote a study Bible the Schofield study bible in about 1890. It became quite popular in the 20th century.

Some people, dispensationalists mostly believe we should read this book literally, or if it says he has stars in his hands, or the moon falls from the sky then that is exactly what has happened. But John is telling us here that he is writing in symbols. We get a little insight into how to understand the vision. But he is not only giving us an interpretation of what he has just seen but also a clue to how we should read the whole book.

Why is John writing in such strange, confusing and colourful language?

A couple of obvious reasons:

1. When John receives a vision of heaven it looks nothing like the things of earth. When he tells of earthly events they are now being spoken of from a heavenly perspective. Whatever heaven is like it differs considerably from earth.
2. John is in exile on the Island of Patmos. It is almost certain that someone is reading his mail. It is being censored. If he comes right out and says “Jesus is Lord not Ceasar; Rome is an evil Empire etc.” The letter will be intercepted and destroyed.

So John writes in a form unknown to his Roman guards and overlords but entirely familiar to Jewish brethren. To the Romans this was gobbledygook. To a Jew who knew how to read and interpret the symbols this was pure delight.

John is a real 1st Century prophet, has written a letter to 7 real churches about a very real vision that he has had of the risen Jesus. John in writing a letter is addressing the situation in these 1st Century Churches are facing.

I mentioned that dispensationalist tell us to read this book literally. But then at the very beginning they change their mind and say “These seven churches represent 7 eras of the church.” They immediately read the bit that is clearly concrete as allegorical. Now maybe this is true. There are certain parallels I admit. But if it is true you cannot find any evidence of it from the text. John does not say, “And these Seven churches are seven church ages.” For John these were real people and real cities. Perhaps John Darby and Mr Schofield didn’t know that but John did and so do we.

A word about doing good Bible Study: Whatever the book or literature, what is supposed to be done is that as far as is possible we are supposed to try to work our what the original author meant, and how it would be read and understood by the original readers. Having discovered that we then find how to apply that learning to my present situation.

So this book will have much to say to readers down through history and have lessons for us to learn and apply in our day. But the books meaning must first and foremost be anchored in the historical context of John’s time, place and audience.

That is just a principle of good hermeneutics (a fancy word for biblical interpretation).

One of the dangerous things that some do with this book then is to take it out of its historical and cultural context and attempt to interpret the symbols found within using modern explanations. The bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other was the saying. That is not how you do good biblical interpretation.

So John has seen this great vision of the risen Jesus on the Island of Patmos. A vision of Jesus as King of the World. And Jesus is standing among the 7 lampstands (a Menorah) who we are told are the 7 churches in Asia Minor.

These are real first century Churches in Asia Minor. With real people. Real difficulties, successes and failures. And each one is unique.

Let us take a quick look at three of these churches. The examples and pictures given and allusions are all unique to the particular cities geography and history.

Chapters 2 and 3 address the individual churches in turn. You could spend 7 weeks just preaching about those two chapters. Let’s quickly look at each of the churches in chapter 3.

**3**“To the angel[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation%203&version=NIV#fen-NIV-30749a)] of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation%203&version=NIV#fen-NIV-30749b)] of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. **2**Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. **3**Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

What we know about the history of Sardis is that it was a fortress and the top of a cliff. It was considered impenetrable. Yet some 600 years before while the whole city slept Cyrus the Persians besieged the city. Just one brave and athletic soldier climbed the cliff, let themselves in, and then let in the invading army. Everyone in the city knew this story and repeated it. And we know this because the same mistake was made about 200 years later but never again.

Jesus is saying the church in Sardis needs to learn this lesson all over again. Just having a reputation is not enough. You actually have to be alive in Christ.

As N.T. Write writes:

It’s all or nothing: either Jesus really is the Lord, rightly asking for our absolute allegiance, or he is a sham and should be rejected outright. It simply won’t do to bumble on, looking busy but achieving little or nothing. Reputation isn’t enough.[[1]](#footnote-1)

And this

11I am coming quickly! Hold on to what you have, so that nobody takes away your crown. 12Anyone who conquers, I will make them a pillar in the temple of my God. They will never go out of it again. I will write on that person the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God, and my own new name[[2]](#footnote-2)

Philadelphia was one of those cities who a few decades had suffered a terrible earthquake. It had had to be rebuilt. The temples had all collapsed. All but the pillars.

N.T. Write again says this:

The first Christians, partly because of Jesus and partly because of the gift of the **spirit**, regarded themselves as the true Temple, the place where the living God had made his home. Sometimes the Jerusalem leaders had themselves been called ‘pillars’ (Galatians 2:9). That metaphor depends for its force on this idea of the church as the new Temple.

But now it is the ordinary Christians in Philadelphia, far away from Jerusalem, who are to be ‘pillars’—in a city notorious for danger from earthquakes! A promise to cherish[[3]](#footnote-3)

And this:

14‘Write this to the angel of the church in Laodicea. “These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation. 15I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot! 16So, because you are lukewarm, neither cold nor hot, I am going to vomit you out of my mouth. 17You say, ‘I’m rich! I’ve done well! I don’t need anything!’—but you don’t know that you are miserable, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. 18This is my advice to you: buy from me gold refined in the fire—that’ll make you rich![[4]](#footnote-4)

There are two things you need to know about Laodicea. It was the centre of numerous trade routes and it made the city very rich. While other surrounding cities received grants from Rome to rebuild from the earthquake Laodicea refused to take money from Rome. They were quite able to rebuild themselves thankyou very much.

Secondly what they did not have was good water. Some 30 miles to the north east was hot springs. Hot and full of minerals, it was good water to bathe in and was considered to have healing powers (or at least be very good for you). At Colosse to the south there were mountain springs of cold refreshing water. Said to be the best tasting water in all the world!!! So aqueducts were built from the hot water but by the time it got to Laodicea it was just lukewarm, too cold to bathe in and expensive and difficult to heat. So another aqueduct was built to bring in drinking water. But by the time it got to Laodicea it was lukewarm and no longer desirable to drink in fact when the water first arrived so disgusted were the populace that they spat or vomited back out.

The lesson couldn’t be clearer. You have been relying on your own strength and riches instead of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. You could be a healing and cleansing presence in you community or a life giving refreshing influence for the kingdom of God. But relying on your own resources and money you are useless. As Jesus said: Without me you can do nothing, no fruit without the vine.

Some of these churches were apathetic due to wealth and affluence, others were morally compromised. Some were still participating in animal sacrifices or eating the meat of those sacrifices, they were participating in pagan rituals and sexual rituals and sleeping around.

But some among the churches remained faithful to Jesus. But they are suffering harassment and persecution. And in Chapter 2:9-10 they are warned that things are about to get worse.

Depending on how you date the book this is written regarding the persecution under Nero and/or Domitian. Christians had been imprisoned, banned from buying and selling, murdered and executed during both these Emperors Reigns.

The challenge for these Christians was to either deny Christ under persecution in order to avoid, death, imprisonment and starvation or maybe in some cases just to try to fit in with Roman culture. Keep your head down and avoid notice.

The call to the churches is to Faithfulness rather than compromise so that they can overcome – literally conquer.

And to those who do remain faithful Jesus offers a reward. Each of these rewards “The right to eat from the tree of life.” “Not suffer second death” etc. are promises drawn from the final two chapters in the Book. The New Heavens and New Earth eternity with God living with His people on a new and better Earth with no more pain and all tears wiped away.

This sets up the main story line, the plot tension for the whole book and the questions that we need to ask for ourselves as we read the book.

Each of these churches face problems and challenges that have their modern equivalence. Are we relying on God? Are we compromising with Gods of power and money, even sex? In many parts of the world people are being arrested and executed for following Jesus. What does it look like for us to be faithful in the face of apathy, demonic philosophies, compromise? The challenge of these first few chapters is that Jesus is calling us to a radical discipleship, even in the face of persecution.

Will the people of God remain faithful under pressure? Will we remain faithful under pressure? Will Jesus people endure? Will they inherit the world God has in store?

Why is faithfulness to Jesus described as conquering? These are things we must explore in coming weeks.

Reflect and the questions

1. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re3.1-6&off=3719&ctx=Christian+faith+is.+~It%E2%80%99s+all+or+nothing%3a), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re3.7-13&off=870&ctx=tants+of+the+earth.+~11I+am+coming+quickl), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re3.7-13&off=3246&ctx=of+Christian+faith.+~The+first+Christians), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 33–34. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re3.14-22&off=42&ctx=+Letter+to+Laodicea%0a~14%E2%80%98Write+this+to+the), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)