

INTRODUCTION

Revelation is a book about which many are confused. This partly has to do with the nature of the book since it is written in apocalyptic style. It is also largely due to false teachers spreading error and/or promoting their pet theories from the book.

Apocalypse

The title of the book is Revelation or Apocalypse, which basically means “laying bear, making naked”[1] or “an uncovering.”[2] The idea is that God is uncovering a message for His people.

Symbolic Language

The language of Revelation is highly symbolic. Notice what John says.

“And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John” (Rev. 1:1).

“Now a great sign appeared in heaven...” (Rev. 12:1).

“And another sign appeared in heaven...” (Rev. 12:3).

“Then I saw another sign in heaven...” (Rev. 15:1).

The signs were symbolic of the real. They did not necessarily translate into a literal meaning. For instance, God is described as being like “jasper” and “sardius” (Rev. 4:3).

Numbers

Numbers are used extensively throughout the Revelation. A quick overview will help in understanding some of the symbolism in the book.

- **One** (1) stands for unity and independence like the one mind of the ten kings (Rev. 17:12, 13).
- **Two** (2) implies strength as in Revelation 11:3, 4 where it talks about two witnesses. See also Ecclesiastes 4:9-11.
- **Three** (3) is the number of completeness as it relates to divinity. Think of the Godhead or the three woes of Revelation 8:13.
- **Four** (4) is completeness with reference to earthly matters; four corners and winds of the earth (Rev. 7:1).
- **Five** (5) represents a short, definite period of time (Rev. 9:10; 1 Cor. 14:19).
- **Seven** (7) is the chief number for completeness or perfection. It appears 54 times in Revelation. The seven churches of Asia are completely representative of all churches (Rev. 1:4).
- **Ten** (10) is yet another complete number, representative of the whole. Notice the ten horns and crowns of 13:1.
- **Twelve** (12) carries the connotation of religion. Think of 12 tribes or 12 apostles (Rev. 21:12).

- **Three and a half** (3 ½) is incomplete and/or hardship. In Revelation 11:2, 3 we see 3 ½ years mentioned as a short time of misery. See also James 5:17.

When these numbers are combined or arranged in various ways they give us an idea of the meaning behind the image. For instance, 12,000 from each tribe (Rev. 7:5-8). This number derives from 10 x 10 x 12; completeness with a religious overtone; the fullness of God's people, if you will.

Basic Rules

First and foremost is what did it mean to the people who receive it (Rev. 1:4)? Did it have any application to them or was it written in their day only to have meaning 2,000 years later? Logic and reason dictate that God primarily meant for it to benefit the people who first received it.

Next, it is imperative to believe whatever is taught in the book of Revelation cannot contradict what is taught elsewhere in Scripture.

Further, John made it clear the things written in the book were to "shortly take place" (Rev. 1:1; 22:6). He said the "time is near" (Rev. 1:3). Does that mean we are still looking for fulfillment in our time or at some point still in the future? Certainly not.

Finally, we must be cautious with the signs and symbols. Knowledge of Old Testament prophetic language and signs is helpful. We cannot press an interpretation too forcefully. Also, we should not get too caught up in details. Not every facet and aspect of the symbols have significance.

Message and Theme

During persecution and oppression under Roman rule, Christians were wondering if Christ and His religion would survive.

The term "war" appears ten times in the book (Rev. 12:7). It gives us the picture of a battle between good and evil, right and wrong. In the end, good triumphs over evil; the Savior and His forces defeat the devil and his minions (Rev. 17:14).

The letter encourages Christians in their struggle. "Overcome" is used eight times in reference to them (Rev. 2:7). It is hard for us to imagine the challenge they faced and all the trying circumstances in which they found themselves. But we can know one thing, if the Lord was there for them and gave them the strength to overcome what they went through, then He will be there for us and provide us the strength to triumph as well (Heb. 13:5, 6).