

Interpreting the Book of Revelation

In this workshop, we will study fundamental principles and convictions that inform a balanced study of the book of Revelation, and we will discuss in particular the beginning of the end times according to the early church, the signs of the end as taught by Jesus, and the judgments in the book of Revelation. We will treat the symbolism of John's visions, and questions of timing.

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1. Fundamental principles and convictions

1.1 The primary text is what Jesus, Peter, Paul, and John say about the “the last days”.

1.2 Jesus asserted repeatedly that nobody knows the date or the time of his return.

1.3 The early Christians believed that the end times have begun with the coming of Jesus.

1.4 The early Christians believed that Jesus might return during their lifetime.

1.5 The same principles of interpretation must be followed when we study texts about the end times that we use when we study other parts of Scripture. Particularly relevant is the fact that the book of Revelation is a mixed genre:

(i) It is an apocalypse (Rev. 1:1), that means it is a book about the end times using many traditional images and symbols.

(ii) It is a prophecy (Rev. 1:3), that is a text in which a prophet conveys to his contemporaries new revelation that God has granted him in visions and auditions, with the purpose of encouraging and exhorting his readers, which means that John's readers in the churches of Asia Minor understood the meaning of the visions.

(iii) It is a letter (Rev. 1:4-5; cf. 22:21), which reinforces the truth that John wrote for his contemporaries, expecting the believers in the first century churches not only to hear but to understand and to take to heart what he wrote (Rev. 1:3).

2. The beginning of the end times, the signs of the end, and the judgments in Revelation

2.1 The beginning of the end times

The apostles were convinced that they live in the last days. In the Old Testament, the expression “the last days” refers to the future time of God’s final intervention in Israel’s history and in the history of the world (Isa. 2:2; Jer. 23:20; Ezek. 38:16; Dan. 11:20; Hos. 3:5; Mic. 4:1). The earliest Christians dated the beginning of the end times to the coming of Jesus, particularly his death and resurrection and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit, a complex of events that constitutes the fulfillment of God’s promises of Israel’s restoration and humanity’s salvation.

The End Times have Begun with Jesus’ Coming: Acts 2:16-21

The Hour to Wake Up: Romans 13:11-12

The End Times and the Last Days: Hebrews 1:1-2; 9:26; James 5:7-9; 1 Peter 1:20; 2 Peter 3:3; Jude 18; 1 John 2:18

2.2 The signs of the End (Matthew 24)

Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ question about the destruction of Jerusalem and the signs signalling the end of the age is a prophecy of ten signs, followed with a description of his return. The time between Jesus’ present (in the first century) and Jesus’ return in glory is characterized by the activities of messianic pretenders and false prophets, by wars and rumors of war, by famines and earthquakes, by persecution of Christians and lack of love among believers, and the worldwide proclamation of the gospel. The destruction of Jerusalem represents a series of climactic events (Sign 9) which, however, do not constitute the End. Jesus’ return will be public and universal (intimated in Sign 10), as the cosmic events illustrate.

2.3 When will the signs of the End take place?

The time of Jesus’ return and of the end of the age is unknown. Only God knows the date. The consequences of this fact are obvious: Christians must be ready for Jesus’ return, which will happen suddenly and unexpectedly. It can happen any time, after the signs that Jesus described in Matt. 24:4-28 can be observed. This means that since one specific event that Jesus prophesied—the sieged and destruction of Jerusalem (Matt. 24:15-22)—took place in A.D. 70, Jesus can return within a very brief period of time.

Because the day of Jesus’ return and of the end of the age is and will remain unknown to his followers, speculations are not only fruitless and irrelevant but positively rebellious. The biggest mistake of some end time “specialists” is the production of (ever new) prophecies of the date of Jesus’ return. Followers of Jesus who acknowledge the divinely ordained ignorance regarding the time of Jesus’ return are ready for that day if and when they live and work for Jesus.

2.4 The seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments (Revelation 6–16)

John describes the judgment that God will bring upon the earth in three series of seven judgments each. God's judgment falls on the earth as well as on humankind, i.e. the entire fallen creation is impacted by the destructive wrath of God. The description of God's judgments emphasizes the evil nature of the forces opposed to God, and it underlines the sovereignty of the almighty God whose power nothing and nobody can withstand. The description of God's judgment is accompanied by God's assurance for his people who are safe as they belong to him, and by God's commission to witness to the truth of the gospel even in the midst of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom.

The meaning of the details of the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments can be understood only if they are connected with the three interludes. The following emphases are central.

1. God punishes the earth and humankind in specific acts of judgments, often by simply allowing evil to run its course with its intended and unintended consequences.
2. God's people are protected from these judgments, safe under divine spiritual protection (Rev. 3:10; 7:1-8; 9:4; 16:2) in the midst of persecution, during which some may die as martyrs.
3. God's sovereignty is never in doubt; even the demonic forces cannot operate without divine authorization (note the expression "it was given" in 6:2, 4, 8; 8:2, 3; 9:1, 3, 5; 13:5, 7, 14, 15).
4. The depravity of humanity becomes evident in the refusal of the people to repent and to worship the Lamb and in their preference to worship the very demonic forces that bring about their downfall (Rev. 9:20-21; 16:1, 11).
5. The mission of God's people continues to be the task of missionary witness in the world despite being hated and suffering martyrdom (Rev. 11:1-13).
6. God's judgments provide a final chance to repent, as God demonstrates the powerlessness of the gods and the (false) prophets that the earth-dwellers worship and follow (Rev. 9:20; 14:6-7; 16:9, 11).
7. At the End God will dismantle his first creation (Rev. 6:12-14) in order to bring in the perfection of a new creation (Rev. 20:11; 21:1).

2.5 The symbolism of John's visions

An entirely symbolical interpretation is impossible: it would reduce God's judgment over sinners at the End to a mere symbol. Since the descriptions of judgment serve as warnings to Jesus' followers to be unswerving and consistent in their loyalty to Jesus even if this means suffering and martyrdom, the judgments that are depicted must have some form of historical reality—mere symbols neither destroy nor hurt.

On the other hand, since many individual judgments of the three series would end civilization as John's readers knew it, in particular the bowl judgments (e.g., the destruction of the sea in the second bowl judgment is tantamount to the destruction of Mediterranean society

whose trade depended on maritime commerce, and the pollution of the rivers and springs makes human life impossible), John describes the content of the visions that he received with a certain amount of symbolism and hyperbole. He uses both Old Testament language and allusions to contemporary political, social, and military realities in the first century. And we need to remember that John wrote a prophecy (Rev. 1:3) that he was asked not to seal (Rev. 22:10), send as letter (see Rev. 1:4-6) that was to be read and understood by Christian readers in the first century.

Numerical Symbolism

The presence of symbolism in John's series of seven judgments needs to be taken seriously. It undermines the efforts of end time "specialists" to use the progression from one to seven in the three series of seven judgments, or other numbers in the Apocalypse, to more precisely calculate the nearness of the End.

The most important numbers in the Apocalypse are four, three, seven, and twelve (in some passages multiples of these numbers). The symbolism of at least some of these numbers in at least some of the passages in the Apocalypse is generally acknowledged. For example, it is well known that there were more churches in the province of Asia at the end of the first century than the seven churches that John singles out (Rev. 1:4, 11; 2-3): in Troas, Hierapolis, Colossae, Miletus, and in Tralles. Whatever the particular reason for the selection of the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamon, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea may have been, they are intended to describe typical local congregations with regard to their histories and spiritual states.

The details of the first four judgments of the seal series indicates that John is not describing new developments: wars of conquest (Seal 1) took place in the late first, second and third centuries, and ever since; the same holds true for international unrest (Seal 2), famine and hunger (Seal 3), and the effects of warfare (sword), famine, and plagues, all of which kill people (Seal 4).

Literal events that resemble the judgments depicted in the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments are not impossible to imagine—not only because of God's sovereign power, but also because of humankind's seemingly endless capacity for devising, producing, and deploying technologies and weapons that affect large parts of the globe.

At the same time, John's concern is not to provide his readers in the first century with a detailed time-table of future events which allows them to establish how close the End is. Even taken literally, many of the judgments described in the three series have been a reality since the first century (and before, for example during Israel's exodus from Egypt), in varying degrees and in different regions of the earth. The symbolism of most if not all of the numbers in the Apocalypse suggest that John's focus is not on historical events for their own sake but on the meaning of God's judgment both for the world (as a call to repentance) and for the church (as a call to faithful perseverance and courageous witness).

2.6 When will the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments take place?

A comparison of the three series of judgments shows that each series recapitulates the same period of history and takes the reader to the End. The three series of seven judgments are explicitly numbered. And the three series have a comparable structure of 4 + 3 judgments: the first four bring judgment on the earth, the last three on the people. The judgments of Seals 1–4 are introduced with a closely similar wording, and they are connected in each case with a horse and its rider. The judgments of Trumpets 1–4 form an obvious group, but John places a stronger emphasis on Trumpets 5–7 as a group, each of which is linked with the vision of an eagle proclaiming a threefold “Woe” on the inhabitants of the earth. The judgments of Trumpets 1–4 and of Bowls 1–4 affect the earth, the seas, the inland waters, and the heavens, paralleling the Egyptian plagues.

The content of the sixth and seventh element in each of the three series confirms that John takes his readers three times to the End. In the sixth seal (Rev. 6:12-14), the sun turns black: universal darkness quickly would end life on earth. The stars falling to earth also would immediately end life on earth: the impact of only several large meteorites, let alone one star (or planet), on earth would end life on earth: the dust cloud would block out incoming solar radiation for months, temperatures would drop throughout the world, creating global winter like conditions, leading to mass extinction. The graphic description of sky that is rolled up like a scroll indicates the disappearance of the sky and thus the end of the world.

The seventh trumpet (Rev. 11:15-19) announces that the Lord God and his Messiah have taken over the kingdom of the world, that God’s eternal reign has begun, that the time for the judgment of the dead and for rewarding God’s servants has come. These announcements relate to events connected with the end of human history in the first, fallen creation that has rebelled against God. The final announcement of the seventh trumpet is the opening of God’s temple in heaven, an event that also announced the end of the history of the fallen world—God is about to leave his heavenly temple and become present among his people.

The seventh bowl (Rev. 16:17) begins with the proclamation “It is done!” which announces that God’s judgment has taken place and that the end of human history in fallen creation has arrived. The latter is indicated with the announcement that the cities of the nations collapse, that Babylon is finally judged and that the islands and the mountains vanish (Rev. 16:19, 20). The proclamation “It is done!” is repeated in Revelation 21:6 in the vision of the new heaven and the new earth, when the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God, God will make his home among the mortals, when death is abolished, and when everything is made new (Rev. 21:2, 3, 4, 5). The reference to the eschatological earthquake in the seventh elements of each series, in the Seal series the sixth element, also indicates that the End has come (see Question 5). John’s three series of seven judgments take his readers from the present (in the first century) to the End and the new Beginning of God’s new world (in a century whose number is unknown).

A comparison of the signs of the End in Jesus’ prophecy with the judgments of the seven seals reveals a very close connection. This is especially obvious if we compare Mark’s version of Jesus’ discourse about the end times in Mark 13 with the seal judgments in Revelation 6:11–8:5 (the additional material in Matt. 24 is indicated in the chart in brackets). Through John’s vision in Revelation 6, the risen Jesus (Rev. 1:1) describes the same time period about which he had prophesied on the Mount of Olives (Mark 13) during his earthly ministry. The obvious

conclusion is that if Jesus prophesied events between his first and second coming in Mark 13 (and Matthew 25–25; Luke 21), John’s vision describe the same reality, albeit in different terms.

3. The Beast, the Antichrist, and the Great Harlot

3.1 Who is the Beast in John’s prophecy?

3.2 Who is the Antichrist?

3.3 What is the meaning of the number 666?

3.4 What is the “mark of the beast”?

3.5 Who is the “great harlot” of Babylon?