

What Kind of Book is Revelation?



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I'm Dave Mathewson. I teach New Testament at Denver Seminary. This series is on reading the book of Revelation, and the way I want to approach it is by asking, and responding to, a series of questions or statements that I hope will help you understand the book of Revelation a little better.

Throughout history, there have been basically two responses to Revelation. Many people run away from it in fear because it's so odd and unique. They don't know what to do with it, and so they would rather leave it in the hands of the experts.

Others go to the opposite extreme, and they become so obsessed with it that they try to figure out all the details and how it's being fulfilled in our own day and how modern events match up with Revelation.

But what I want to do is avoid both of those extremes and begin by asking, What kind of book is Revelation? That's the first question we want to ask. How we understand the kind of book Revelation is will determine how we read it and what we expect from it. Most misunderstandings of the book come from a misunderstanding of the kind of book it is.

Actually, Revelation resembles three types of literature that would have been familiar to John the author (the one who had the vision) and his readers living in the seven cities of first-century Asia Minor. You read about them in chapters 2 and 3.

First of all, Revelation is a prophecy. In Revelation 1:3, John tells us he's writing a prophecy; and at the very end of the book in 22:7, 10, he calls his work a prophecy. But what do we mean by that?



In the Old and New Testaments, prophecy is a little different than what we might think. We think of prophecy as simply predicting the future. There are some future predictions in Revelation, especially in the last two or three chapters where John predicts how history is going to end up when Christ comes back. But prophecy was not primarily concerned with predicting the future. Prophecy was more concerned with proclaiming a message in the present to readers.

Think about the Old Testament. When did God raise up prophets to go to His people Israel? When they were straying from the covenant God made with them and being disobedient to the law. God raised up a prophet, not just to predict what was going to happen in the future, but to call them back to covenant faithfulness, to call them back to the word of God.

And so some Old Testament scholars like to distinguish between foretelling and forthtelling. Foretelling is foretelling the future, predicting the future. Forthtelling is proclaiming a message in the present; and most agree that prophecy in the Bible is more concerned with forthtelling.

John is forthtelling or proclaiming a message to his readers, to seven churches in seven historical cities in first-century Asia Minor, who were living under the shadow of the Roman Empire. So, as a prophecy, John is forthtelling, proclaiming a message that his readers could understand and are meant to obey and respond to. So Revelation is a prophecy.

Second, Revelation is what is known as an apocalypse. An apocalypse was a type of literature that existed roughly two hundred years before Revelation was written and roughly two hundred years after it. An apocalypse was a narrative account, a record of someone's vision, a visionary experience; and the purpose of that vision was usually, again, to provide insight. The meaning of the word apocalypse is literally to unveil, to uncover, to reveal. And that's what Revelation does: it unveils, it uncovers, and it reveals the true nature of reality.

When the readers of an apocalypse looked out at the world, they usually saw a foreign empire dominating, oppressing, persecuting, and causing all kinds of problems for God's people. And what an apocalypse does is to lift the veil. It uncovers and reveals so God's



people can see things in a new light from a different perspective. The world isn't as it appears. The Roman Empire is not as mighty and powerful as it appears to be.

Instead, an apocalypse records a vision that uncovers and unveils the true nature of things. It allows the person having the vision to see into the heavenly world, to understand that there's more than just the world they see out their back door. They now see a heavenly world. It allows them to see their situation in a new light, and it allows them to see the future, where history is headed, so that they'll be able to see their present circumstances from a new perspective.

So that's basically what an apocalypse is. It's a vision that uncovers and unveils things. It gives them a glimpse into the heavenly world. It gives them a glimpse into the future. It gives them a glimpse into their own present circumstances so that they can respond appropriately by seeing things in a new light.

One of the hallmarks of an apocalypse is that it communicates in symbols or metaphors instead of literally. So John sees visions of beasts and dragons and fire and sulfur and locusts with human heads—all kinds of rather strange things—a throne encircled by a rainbow, and a slain lamb, standing. All of those things are meant to symbolize certain realities in John's world.

The point is that these symbols and images refer to real things. They refer to real places and persons and events in the present day of the first-century readers, but also in the future. But it doesn't describe them literally. It describes them symbolically.

I'm convinced that when John and his readers would have read about the beast in John's vision in chapter 13, they would have equated that with the Roman Empire, with Rome in their day. And think about it, what is more effective for John to say, "Look, you need to beware of Rome. Rome is out to get you. Rome is not all it's cracked up to be. It's evil, idolatrous, and godless. It means you harm."

Or is it more effective for John to say, "I saw a seven-headed beast coming from out of the sea." The beast would have carried connotations of evil and chaos and oppression, just the way John wants his readers to see Rome.

So again, it's important to understand that, as an apocalypse,



Revelation is trying to help readers to make sense of their world in the present and their heavenly world in the future. But he describes that world through this vision, not literally, but through symbols and images, so that they'll get the point, so that it will have a more powerful impact on them, and so that they'll respond in the way God calls them to as His people.

The third type of literature Revelation resembles is a letter. In Revelation 1:4–8, the book begins just like a letter. In 22:21, it ends just like a letter. We often overlook this. We get so fascinated with Revelation being a prophecy or an apocalypse that we forget it's also a letter.

And what was important about a letter is that letters were meant to address a crisis or issue or circumstance or problem in the life of the first-century readers, in the same way Paul wrote letters to the churches he addressed.

Now John, having this vision, writes it down in the form of a letter; and by writing a letter, John is attempting to communicate something that will meet the situation and address the needs of his readers who are living under the shadow of the Roman Empire. A letter then communicates something that his readers will understand. It will help them understand their situation and address the problem and crisis they're facing as they struggle under the powerful hand of Rome.

One of the most important principles you need to keep in mind when interpreting Revelation is that any interpretation of Revelation John could not have intended, and his first-century readers couldn't have understood, is probably incorrect.

Like any other book in the New Testament, we need to understand why Revelation was written. We need to understand it in light of its first-century historical context. What was the author intending, and what was the situation of the readers? How would they have understood this, and how would it have addressed their needs?

In the next segment, we'll look at the question, What was the purpose of Revelation? What was John trying to accomplish through writing down this vision?

