

*Revelation is Too Hard to Understand**David Mathewson, PhD**Experience: Associate Professor of  
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When it comes to reading Revelation, I often hear, “Revelation is just too hard for me to understand.” And often we leave Revelation in the hands of the experts or somebody else, and we retreat to the safer ground of Paul’s letters or the Gospels or something like that. Revelation is just too hard to understand. And there’s some truth to that. Revelation is a unique book. It’s full of locusts with human heads and beasts with seven heads. And it contains rather strange things like images of sulfur and fire and brimstone. We read those descriptions and we’re befuddled. We’re bewildered as to what in the world is going on. Did John even understand what he was seeing? Did his readers? What sense would they have made of this book and of some of these images? Is Revelation too hard to understand?

So, yes, there is some truth to that. It is a difficult book; and I don’t want to sit here and say it’s an easy book to understand. It’s not. One of the issues is we don’t have anything comparable to this book in our modern day, as far as this kind of literature. We have parallels to the Gospels. We have novels. We have biographies and historical books. We write and send letters, or, more accurately, emails in the form of letters or letters in the form of emails. But when’s the last time you sat down and read or wrote an apocalypse—or something like the book of Revelation? That’s part of the issue. We don’t have anything like this. And so, there is some truth to the fact that it’s difficult to understand, but I would not go so far as to say it’s too hard to understand, and we should give up.

Let me just say a couple of things. First of all, remember that Revelation is an apocalypse. And I say that because the book begins, “A revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1). And how we need to understand that is it’s not a revelation about Jesus Christ and who He is, although you do find that in the book. It’s a revelation that comes from Jesus Christ. He’s the one who’s revealing it. Verse 1 goes on to say it was given to Him to show to His servants.

It's a revelation that comes from Jesus Christ. Jesus is revealing something. So, as a revelation, it's not hiding. It's not meant to hide. It's not meant to conceal. Revelation is not meant to be a mystery, some code that only a few elite can crack if they have the right code and the right means to do it.

Instead, as an apocalypse, it's a revelation. It's an unveiling. It's unveiling something about reality. It's unveiling something about the world of John and his first readers, about heaven, and about the future; and, by application, it's revealing something about our world. So, Revelation at its heart is something that's meant to be understood. It's revealing, not hiding and concealing. It's not mysterious. It's something God is revealing to His people that they should be able to understand and grasp.

But I would also say the book of Revelation was meant, first and foremost, to be understood by John and his readers. And part of the issue is that two thousand years later, we are the ones trying to make sense of it. And two thousand years later in a different culture, a different language, a different age, a different environment, we're trying to read this document and make sense of what I think John and his first readers living in those seven churches in Asia Minor would have understood. I take very seriously that the messages to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 provide the backdrop for how we're supposed to understand the book of Revelation. In fact, I think chapters 4–22 (the rest of the book) are simply a commentary on what's going on in chapters 2 and 3. It's saying the same thing, covering the same ground, referring to the same time period and events that you read about in chapters 2 and 3. But now it's in the form of an apocalyptic-type vision, so that his readers will be able to see their situation in a new light.

But this vision, as strange and odd as it seems to us today, was meant to be understood. Again, it's a revelation, it's an unveiling, an uncovering. But second, it was meant to be understood by John and his readers. Let me demonstrate why I think that's the case. One of the reasons I've already stated is because it's a letter. Revelation is in the form of a letter, and a letter was meant to communicate information that the readers would be able to make sense of so that it would address their situation. This revelation is meant to help these seven churches living under the shadow of the Roman Empire to come to grips with that and understand it in a different way. The first evidence of that is found in Revelation 1:3, where John says, "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy." That's how these first readers would

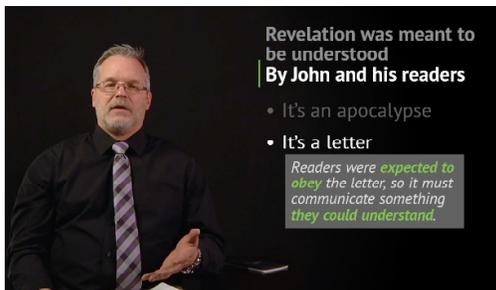


have encountered the book of Revelation. It would have been read to them. “And blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.” John pronounces a blessing on his readers who keep the book. To keep something meant to obey it. In fact, the NIV says, “Blessed is the one who hears and who takes it to heart.” That’s not quite enough. The idea of keeping it is actually obeying it and putting it into practice. So, the book of Revelation is something that the readers were supposed to obey and supposed to keep.

Now, my question is, How could readers obey a book if they had no idea what it was about? If the book of Revelation was something they could not understand—if it was mysterious and hidden and secret, and they had no idea what it was about—then how in the world could John, or Jesus speaking through John, expect them to obey it? The fact that they’re called upon to obey it means that they must be able to understand what it’s about. Otherwise, Revelation would be deceptive at worst. But Jesus through John expects that His readers will obey it, which means that it must communicate something they could understand.

The second thing is—if you go to the very end of the book to Revelation 22, starting around verse 6—we find additional explanations and instructions as to how the book is to be received and treated. And at verse 10, John is dialoguing with an angel after he’s seen his vision. The angel instructs John about what to do with the book and how to respond to it. And he says, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this scroll, because the time is near.”

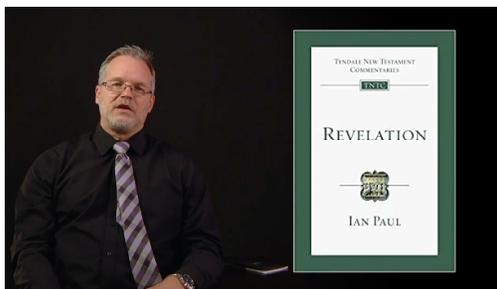
Now, in the first century during this time, to seal up a book meant to hide its contents for a later time. In fact, that’s exactly what Daniel is told in Daniel 12:4: to seal up the book for the end times. But John’s told the opposite. Don’t seal it up. To seal up a book was to hide its contents, to keep it hidden until a later time when it’s revealed. But John is told, “Do not seal it up.” That is because it has a message for right now. The time is near. These things are already beginning to be fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. This letter, this apocalypse, this prophecy, is directly relevant to them. It has a message for them, so John is told not to seal it up for some later date. In other words, the book of Revelation was meant to be understood by John and his readers.



So, you see, Revelation is not some strange, weird, mysterious book. It was meant to uncover. It was meant to unveil. It was meant to reveal the truth of who God is, of who Jesus is, of what it means to be His people, of what it means to maintain your faithful witness in the face of a hostile (for the first-century readers, Roman) empire. And Revelation does the same for us today. Revelation unveils who God is. It teaches us about who Jesus Christ is. It teaches us about the people of God, and what it means to be followers of Christ, what it means to be a faithful witness.



So is Revelation too hard to understand? I don't think it is, first of all, as long as we don't lose the forest for the trees. When we look at the forest, the broad message is it's calling us to faithful witness. Instead of getting preoccupied with all the little details, let's focus on the broader message. But second, I would suggest using some good commentaries. There are a number of good commentaries. One you might consider is a commentary by Craig Koester. It's called *Revelation and the End of All Things*, an excellent, easy read that introduces you to the book of Revelation. Another one is by a New Testament professor named Michael Gorman. It's called *Reading Revelation Responsibly*. It will help you understand the book in a more profound way, I think, and deal with some of these issues. There's a wonderful practical book by Eugene Peterson, the author of *The Message*. It's called *Reversed Thunder*, a practical application of the book that I think you'll find helpful.



And then, finally, if you're familiar with the Tyndale New Testament commentaries, they've been around for a long, long time. Some of them are being revised. And the most recent one was on Revelation by a friend of mine named Ian Paul. He wrote the Revelation commentary. These commentaries are very accessible and very readable. But all or any of those will be reliable guides and help you with some of the more perplexing features. Look at commentaries as your teachers and your guides, and you won't go astray. And hopefully, they'll help to take a little bit of the mystery out of Revelation and to make it less frightening for you and more readable.