

## Hints for reading Revelation

### Summary of these hints:

- Pray for guidance.
- Read the book carefully, not quickly.
- Use a concordance or word search tool to find earlier references.
- Remember the context.
- Recognise symbolism and understand some of its purposes.
- Various more specific suggestions.

- **Pray for guidance from the Author.** God authored these words – principle of 1 Corinthians 2:11,14 – who knows the mind of God but the Spirit of God? These things cannot be naturally discerned. The Bible is like a sundial – it can be understood to a degree by just looking at it, but its full purpose is revealed when the sun is shining on it. Pray for help from God’s Holy Spirit to enlighten our understanding.
- **Reading and studying this book.** It may give us a sense of satisfaction to finish reading 22 chapters in one sitting, but without some contemplation along the way, there may be little actual benefit. Like poetry, these passages require more considered reading and meditating, so don’t speed-read the book of Revelation. Set aside plenty of time to read smaller portions at a time and try to understand what you can by using some of the suggestions below.

**(1) Familiarise yourself with the general structure of the book** (see chart showing main sections). This will help to keep each passage in some kind of context. It will also avoid a sense that the visions and events are random, unconnected and out of sequence.

**(2) Read a portion through without stopping.** This portion may be a paragraph or a chapter. Try to get a general feel for what is happening or being described. At this point many details may still be unclear.

**(3) Read that portion in a different Bible version.** This may help to unravel a complicated phrase. It sometimes also highlights a translation or textual issue.

**(4) Go back and make sure you understand what each word means** in that portion. Sometimes this is as simple as consulting a dictionary.

**(5) Go through the passage more thoroughly** and attempt to understand each phrase. This may mean using a search tool to find a key word elsewhere. If your search finds a large number of occurrences in the Bible, narrow your search to just Revelation, or the New Testament. Seeing how a word or phrase is used elsewhere may give you clues as to what the meaning is the passage you are reading.

**(6) Read what other people think.** After you feel you've done as much as you can, consult a commentary, or several commentaries. They may or may not be right about certain interpretations, but they may enhance some aspect you have already studied, or help you to look at a passage from a different angle. Pray for discernment here – there will be lots of differing ideas from all kinds of sources.

My best recommendations are:

Introductory booklet:

“Apocalypse – an introduction to Revelation” by Brian Sherring

Detailed commentaries:

“Revelation: The Most Tremendous Book in the World” by William Campbell

“This Prophecy” by Charles Welch

“Revelation Series” by Charles Ozanne (published in Search Magazine, issues 51 to 77)

Other useful publications:

“Commentary on Revelation” by E. W. Bullinger

“The Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ” by William Campbell

➤ **Keep in mind the book's context.**

(1) This is an Acts Period writing. As such, it reflects many of the Acts period features:

- The place of Israel at the time of writing:
  - The human writer was John, whose ministry was to the Jews (Galatians 2:9).
  - Note the many Israel-specific terms in the book (e.g. “synagogue”, “Jerusalem”, “Israel”, “Jews”, “Moses”, etc.)
  - Note the many references to the Old Testament (i.e. known as the Hebrew scriptures at the time of writing). There are somewhere between 270 - 300 references to OT verses and passages. This is the most of any book in the NT by a long way. Most OT references in Revelation are in the form of an indirect reference to some previously mentioned OT prophecy or passage (eg Rev 1:14 – hair like wool, cp Daniel 7:9; Rev 20:8 Gog and Magog, spoken of in Ezekiel 38 & 39; note

Ezekiel 38:2; Rev 13:1,2 a beast with features of lion leopard bear; cp Daniel 7:3-7... 16,17; Rev 17 & 18 (Babylon) cp. Jeremiah 51, and elsewhere; etc etc.). There are a handful of direct quotes (e.g. Rev 2:27 cp. Psalm 2:9). For Gentiles and those without any grounding in the OT, there will be little that makes sense. A handful of the OT references in Revelation are in the form of quotes. It is a time-consuming but extremely fruitful and worthwhile exercise to use a concordance or search tool to see if the vision, verse or passage in front of you appears in some way in other parts of the Bible, most notably the OT.

- The original recipients were Jewish Christians in the Acts Period. They were already undergoing persecution, trials and suffering, requiring faithfulness and endurance – themes that loom large in Revelation. The purpose of the book was to “show” certain things (1:1), not hide them. We see from a number of passages in Revelation that people will need to be aware of the calamities to come and remain faithful when they come to pass (1:3; 3:22).
- The promised return of Christ was potentially very near at the time of writing (1:1,3; 3:11; 22:7,12,20). This “nearness” was postponed when Israel was set aside at the end of the Acts Period.

(2) Consider that the visions are closely associated with the coming “Day of the Lord” (1:10), a time leading up to and including Christ’s second coming. The events we read about will be linked to that period in time. Take time to ascertain facts about the Day of the Lord more plainly expressed in such passages as Zechariah 14 and Matthew 24 and familiarise yourself with these first. They will not then be subject to change once you encounter more puzzling passages. This will also help you avoid making everything about historical events of Western Society, or news events of today.

➤ **Recognise symbolism, and understand some of its purposes**

- There are many symbols in this book. Symbolism is the use of objects and images that actually represent something different. It is a literary device that can highlight different aspects not always apparent in the prose sections. Symbolism can help to reinforce the emotional impact of the events being described, as well as show the relationship between two or more prophetic events. (e.g. compare Revelation 6:1-8 with Matthew 24:1-7).
- Much of Revelation can probably be taken literally, though much is symbolic, and it can be difficult to tell which is which in some portions. Comparing Scripture with Scripture is the first step, because several of the symbols (such as “beast”, “leopard”, “bear”, “lamb”, “lion”, “hair like wool”, “two-edged sword”, “abyss”,

etc.) also appear in earlier Bible passages. A concordance or search tool is a good friend to have with you as you read and study this book so that you can quickly find these terms elsewhere.

- Alistair Roberts suggests that the symbolism in Revelation is like a snowball that has rolled down a hill. The images have been introduced starting at Genesis; gradually each image/symbol picks up meaning along the way. By the time we get to Revelation, the “snowball” rolling down the hill has picked up lots of other things from other earlier books. The images combine so that, in Revelation, some of the symbols are multi-faceted, each with meaning, implication and information.
- Some of the symbols don’t seem to go together very well (e.g. Rev 13:2 – a beast having seven heads but ten horns). It may be that several ideas presented in previous Bible books are brought together in this book.
- Looking at a passage containing fantasy-like features and taking a guess at what it might mean or represent can lead to a range of interpretations all based on our own personal culture, experiences and biases – all of which may cloud the truth. Therefore, it is strongly suggested that you use a search tool (such as a concordance or the search feature on your electronic device) to see if such symbols are mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, and in what context. (E.g. Rev 13:2 – a beast having ten horns. Cp Daniel 7:7,24).
- Symbolism increased after the captivity of Judah c.600 BC, and most notably found in the OT books of Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah. A number of verses in Revelation share images from these OT prophecies (e.g Daniel ch.7).
- Even after careful and diligent study, it is often more prudent to simply observe the features of the passage and conclude that we may not understand its meaning at this time. In such instances, at least become familiar with what is written because it may be that you gain some further insight later.

➤ **Take care with the terms “earth”, “land” and “world”.**

- These words are sometimes translations of a single Greek word – **ge**. Various, this word can have reference to:
  - the planet earth, as opposed to heaven (Acts 2:19)
  - a region of land, such as the Middle East in general, or the geographical region of Palestine that includes modern day Israel and some of the surrounding nations and territories. (Acts 13:17,19)
  - the ground. (Acts 26:14)
  - soil or dirt. (Hebrews 6:7)

That means that a prophecy about the “earth” in Revelation may not be referring to the entire planet earth, but be limited to the “land”, or an even smaller area. Observing the context may help determine which is meant, though it is not always clear.

- Conversely, these words are sometimes translations of a different Greek word – ***oikoumene***.
  - This word means “the inhabited world”, or the “known” world (i.e. as it was known by people in the first century living around the Mediterranean). As with **ge** above, it may have a relatively narrow meaning (e.g. Luke 2:1) or a broader all-encompassing meaning (e.g. Matthew 24:14), depending on context and interpretation.

➤ **Beware of what’s NOT in there.** Terms such as “Antichrist” and “one world government” are not in the book of Revelation. A quick word search will demonstrate this easily. Approaching Revelation with preconceived ideas about such terms, especially those not even mentioned in there, will probably only hinder our understanding.

➤ **Consider applications for ourselves.** Remember that “all scripture is for us” (2 Timothy 3:16), even if it is not always directly about us. After first considering what this book meant for those who originally received it, and what it might mean for those living during “the Day of the Lord” in the future, it is appropriate that we should then consider what we may take from the book of Revelation. We may not be alive when these things come to pass, but we can take some general applications. Here are some to start with:

- Take heed of the general warnings about remaining faithful to God. (Rev 2:10)
- Be reminded of how weak and puny mankind is compared to God’s almighty power., In a world where we like to think we have a lot of control over our lives, it is a humbling thought to be reminded that even the sturdiest strongholds are subject to God’s will and can be destroyed in an instant. (Rev 18:9,10)
- Be reminded that we rely on the Lord for everything about our existence (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16,17).
- God knows the end from the beginning. He is in ultimate control no matter how much chaos surrounds us. (Rev 21:1,4,5)

➤ **Don’t be concerned if you don’t understand everything in it – nobody does!** (However, some will claim they do!) Merely reading the book is a blessing (1:3). Just becoming familiar with the content alone may help us further down the track as we continue our studies of this book and its contents.