

# Do Not Be Afraid: Six Guidelines for Reading the Book of Revelation

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It is a generally known fact that the founder of the Wesleyan tradition, John Wesley, was as confounded by the book of Revelation as many of us are today. In his notes on Revelation, for instance, which are included among his annotations on all the books of the Bible, Wesley wrote of “utterly despairing” of ever trying to understand it. If it were not, he explained, for the excellent commentary he discovered by one of his contemporaries, a Lutheran clergyman named Johann Bengel, Wesley would not have been able to offer the little help he gave in his notes on the book:

It is scarce possible for any [who] either love or fear God not to feel their hearts extremely affected in seriously reading Revelation...I by no means pretend to understand or explain all that is contained in this mysterious book. I only offer what help I can.

Despite Wesley’s (and other important Protestant figures like Martin Luther’s and John Calvin’s) reticence to speak definitively about the apocalypse, I would like to encourage you, first, to not be afraid of this book – as Jesus says to the church of Smyrna, “Do not be afraid!” (2:10) – and, second, to consider studying the book for yourself and, perhaps, even teaching or preaching from it. Although I certainly do not claim mastery of the book of Revelation, I have been teaching it for several years and would like to offer six guidelines to reading the book.

First, and most important, don’t ignore the main message of the book, which is that we should worship Jesus! Jesus is the “revelation” of the book (1:1). He is the guide to the whole thing. It is alarming how many interpreters miss this, since they are so focused on the minutiae. It’s not that the minutia is unimportant; but it is certainly less significant than the reality of it: Jesus. As long as you maintain focus on Jesus, the story coheres. Indeed, the book is about praising him as our Lord. Revelation, in fact, is the most Christ-centered book in the Bible, offering multiple hymns that are ascribed to Jesus alongside God (5:9-14; 7:15-17; 11:15; 12:10-12; 19; 22:12-13, 20).

Second, don’t read the book like it’s a newspaper. Revelation is what is called “apocalyptic” literature. This was a very common type of literature from about 200 BC to AD 200 among Jews and Jewish Christians, and we have several examples of this type of literature today from antiquity that helps us understand it better. Specifically, it was the most appropriate type of literature to offer hope to an oppressed people – when it came to announcing that God is still in control of the world, and that he will vindicate his people at the right time.

## Features of Apocalyptic Literature

1. Secret things of God, which are normally hidden from humankind, are given to a certain person in a vision and/or by way of an angel.
2. The author usually writes in a more famous person’s name.
3. There is a battle between good and evil.
4. The good are always being oppressed (religiously, socially, politically) and there is concern that God does not care about them.

5. The evil are in power and oppress the good, until God steps in to punish the wicked and vindicate the good.
6. There are bizarre symbols that refer to historical events / persons, but they are not always easy to identify.

Third, don't necessarily try to visualize everything in the book. To paraphrase what biblical commentator Bruce Metzger once wrote in his commentary on the book, "the descriptions don't mean what they say; they mean what they mean" (*Breaking the Code*, 27). Revelation contains a barrage of images that should be dwelt upon collectively rather than individually. This is because the book uses symbolism, which is by nature not supposed to be visualized; instead of picturing the images, try letting them blow over you like the wind. The total effect of the images – and not one in particular – indicates the meaning. The notion of a sword coming out of Jesus' mouth in Revelation 1, for instance, is not meant to be taken literally or to be pictured as if Jesus had a dagger for teeth! No, the symbol stands for judgment. What do swords do? They destroy and judge.

Fourth, don't study the book alone and in pieces. The focus of the book should be the whole story, not isolated verses and images. The book is to be read aloud (1:3; 13:9; 22:18-19). The meaning of the book emerges after hearing it in one setting, and it becomes increasingly more confusing when studied in individual units. This is because when you get overly focused on the details, you lose sight of Christ, who is the real content of the book.

Fifth, don't overlook how important a part the Old Testament plays in the book. Apocalyptic literature fashions itself after biblical language in order to lend authority to its message and to remind Israel of God's promises. Revelation makes frequent use of metaphors, themes, and structural concepts from the Old Testament (especially Daniel and Ezekiel). The most appropriate way to prepare for Revelation, therefore, is to read specific parts of the Old Testament.

Fifth, don't apply the events of the book too quickly to yourself. Rather, think historically and globally. The original recipients of the book suffered physical and social persecution as well economic hardships. Those who often teach about Revelation in North America are privileged, middle-class, comfortable, and educated. The original audience, by contrast, was oppressed and poor and powerless.

Finally, don't forget that Revelation is a very practical book. Revelation teaches several important truths. The Christian life involves spiritual warfare. There is a good and bad side, and we have to decide which side we are on. What's more, the theme of counterfeiting looms large: (i) the secular world tries to counterfeit God's world, while (ii) Satan tries to counterfeit God. The good news, which is wholly practical, is that God is in control of the cosmos, even though personal experiences and life often suggest otherwise. The current world that we live in should not be the aim of our hope. Our hope should rather be in the God who made the world and who will one day redeem it. This encourages us to live holy lives and be mindful that our home is not on earth but in the God who made heaven and earth.

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