So we’ve talked a little bit about the literary nature of Revelation as far as belonging to three types of literary genres: an apocalypse, a prophecy and a letter. Now we want to consider how that affects the way we interpret the book. E.D. Hirsch reminded us meaning is genre bound, that is genre communicates meaning, genre makes a difference in the way that a piece of literature communicates meaning. So how does Revelation mean? How does it communicate meaning, in light of the literary types? What we’re going to do now is ask: What principles should guide us in the way we read and interpret the book?

Literary Genres Support Symbolic Interpretation

First of all, and I’ll at times correlate these principles with specific literary genres, not always but sometimes I will. Hopefully, most of the time they will be evident from our discussion of the literary type. First of all is we must interpret Revelation symbolically and not literally. Again this comes out of its nature as an apocalypse. We said part of the literary genre of apocalypse is John saw his vision in symbolic form and then writes, using symbols and images that, as closely as possible, resemble what it was he saw. So we need to interpret Revelation symbolically and not literally.

When I was growing up, in the church context in which I was raised, I was taught, not so much from my parents, but from the church context and tradition I was raised in, which had a profound enthusiasm for and a profound interest, if not an obsession in the book of Revelation, I was taught that you must read Revelation literally. Interpret it literally unless there is really good reason not to: unless there is good reason to interpret it symbolically. I would suggest we need to turn that principle on its head and say we need to interpret Revelation symbolically unless there is good reason in the text to interpret in any other way, for example, literally. There are literal features of Revelation sometimes, in chapter 4 through 22 is kind of the visionary or apocalyptic heart of John’s work. In
the visionary segment of it, you often find references to nations and people that obviously, I think, should be taken literally, but unless there is good reason not to, I think we should interpret John’s symbols seriously and interpret them symbolically, not literally. We’ve seen that in interpreting Revelation, the symbols refer to actual persons and places and events. Like a political cartoon, it describes those events in a highly imaginative, highly symbolic, highly metaphorical way, not literally. It describes it in that way so that you get the point.

Rev 13: Beast and Symbolic Meaning

So to take one example, to kind of jump ahead a little bit, we’ll talk in more detail about some of the things that I’ll refer to briefly, in the next hour or so. For example, when you read Revelation chapter 13, the very first several verses you are introduced to a beast. A seven-headed beast, and he’s described as the color red. He’s described in rather hideous and strange-looking imagery and we said an apocalypse often does that. It sometimes combines language in ways that are strange and sometimes bizarre, at least to us. In chapter 13 you’re introduced to this seven-headed beast with crowns on his heads. It is a rather strange looking character indeed. If I’m a first century reader, what most likely am I going to associate that with? I’m convinced that the first readers would have associated that beast with Rome, with the Roman Empire, or perhaps even the emperor himself would have been represented by that beast or symbolized by that beast. So the point is not that John expects or has seen a beast that literally looks like this, and that’s why I find it problematic, even those that claim to interpret Revelation literally stumble in a text like chapter 13. They don’t think there’s actually going to be a beast that looks like that, they think it represents a human being. Even if they think it’s a future antichrist or something like that, they still expect a human figure, not a literal, actual beast.

In the same way that when I read a political cartoon and I see, as an American citizen, I read a political cartoon and I see an elephant or a donkey, I don’t expect to go to the nation’s capital in Washington DC and see a literal donkey or a literal elephant walking around Congress. I understand those are images or symbols of political parties. In the same way, I’m convinced, the readers would have associated the beast with the
Roman Empire or perhaps the emperor himself.

Rev 1:20 as Model

Revelation chapter 1 verse 20, I think, actually provides us the key, and I don’t know if John intentionally did this but when you look at it, it provides the key of how we’re to read the rest of the book and how we’re to read the rest of the images. In chapter 1 which we’ll look at later on, John has an inaugural vision of the Son of Man starting in verse 9 describes in some detail starting in verse 12. In chapter 1 verse 12 John says, “I turned around to see the voice,” so John hears a voice speaking to him in the first few verses and then in verse 12 he says “I turned around to see this voice. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands.” So keep that in mind. Then he says, “and among the lampstands was someone that looked like the son of man. He was dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and had a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, his eyes were blazing with fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.” Now listen to this: “In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp, two-edged to a sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.” And then John says, in verse 17, “When I saw him, I fell down at his feet as though dead,” which interestingly was a common response to an apocalyptic vision that the seer would become weak, almost sick. Here John falls down on his face, again demonstrating John’s connection with apocalyptic visions. But what I want you to look at in verses 19 and 20, especially 20, we’ll focus on verse 20 the last verse of chapter 1. John hears a voice, which this is probably Jesus Christ, now the risen Lord that he’s just described speaking to him and notice what happens in verse 20: “The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” So do you see what this voice has done or do you see what John has done in verse 20? He’s demonstrated that these lampstands and the stars were actually symbolic of something else. I take that that’s the way we should read the rest of Revelation, to ask what are these things symbolizing. We’ll talk a little but more about that in a moment.
But I also want to back up and just notice a description of Christ again. John sees this vision of a son of man in verses 12 through 17 and he describes him as wearing a robe. He has hair on his head that’s white like snow, his eyes like blazing fire, his feet like glowing bronze, and his voice sounds like thunderous rushing water. In his right hand are seven stars, out of his mouth comes a sharp, two-edged sword. That’s not the Jesus I want to see and not the Jesus you read about in the Gospels. The point is John is not literally describing Jesus. He’s using images and symbols to say something about Jesus. Later on we’ll see that the sword coming out of his mouth most likely is a symbol of Jesus’ judgment. He simply speaks and by his word he judges nations and people and wicked humanity and even his church when they refused to obey him and give him exclusive allegiance. So that first chapter, provides a context in how we’re to read the rest of John’s apocalypse and the rest of his vision, by taking the symbols and images seriously, not literally, but as symbols and metaphorical depictions of certain places and events. We’ll talk a little bit more about that.

But the difficulty is John doesn’t do this for us anywhere else. There is one other place in chapter 17 where some of the symbols get interpreted, but it doesn’t help us a whole lot. We’ll see that when we get to chapter 17. But, in Revelation chapter 1, John gives us a clue as to how to interpret a couple of the symbols that provide a model for interpreting the rest of them, but the problem is John doesn’t do this elsewhere.

So how can we figure out the meaning of these symbols? And how can we figure out what they actually might refer to what persons, places, and events? The first thing is to come to grips with the historical background and circumstances of Revelation, which is why we spent some time at the very beginning, talking a little bit about the Roman Empire, and the emperor, and the challenges that created for Christians, that can help us to understand, again perhaps why the beast most likely represents Rome or the Roman Empire for first century Christians reading this thing.

Old Testament Backgrounds

Elsewhere in Revelation, I think most of our help will come from realizing where John gets these images. Most of them, as we’ve already said, come right out of the Old
Testament as is very well known and at times we’ll spend a little bit of time doing this at
other times we can only go rather quickly. As is very well known, John never quotes the
Old Testament, like you find, for example, in Matthew “as it is written,” or “thus says the
prophet” or “just as was written or predicted in the prophet Isaiah” or something like that.
Instead, John takes language and images from the Old Testament and weaves them into
his own discourse. So by going back and understanding the Old Testament background
and source of these images, we’re often able better to understand their meaning and also
sometimes exactly what they might be referring to.

Greco-Roman Imagery

But the other source is, I’m convinced also that a lot of John’s images would have
resonated with the Greco-Roman background, that is, some of the literature, some of the
language, some of the images that would have been familiar to the readers and the Greco-
Roman world and from Greco-Roman literature. John may use those images to describe
what he saw as well. In fact, I’m convinced a lot of times, and we’ll see this, John may
use images because they’re evocative of more than one background. He may choose to
use an image to describe what he saw or a symbol because not only does it come out the
Old Testament and resonates with the Old Testament Jewish background, but it also has
parallels with, and resonates with the Greco-Roman background as well. So for readers
who are probably familiar with the Old Testament who were well ensconced in the
Roman Empire and Greco-Roman society would have been able to draw connections
perhaps both ways. So I wonder if at times John did not deliberately choose some of his
symbols and images because they were evocative of more than 1 background.

Good Commentaries

One of the keys, and I think this is inescapable, is to understand and unpack some
of John’s symbols and images is here, if ever, you just need to use good commentaries, I
would recommend the commentaries by Greg Beale and David Aune and Grant Osborne
and even an older one by George Caird and some of the work by Richard Bauckham, all
provide highly reliable guides for unpacking the background of some of the images and
their meaning and also what they refer to. That last one is the most difficult. Sometimes
it’s very difficult to determine exactly who or what the images and symbols are referring to. I wonder if sometimes that is because we need to focus more on the meaning of the symbols rather than on exactly what they’re referring to or exactly what they’re depicting. Whether we can be confident that it refers to Rome or the Roman Empire or we’re not sure which, at the same time we can still understand the meaning of the beast. The image of a beast as we’ll see actually had a fairly long history going all the way back to the Old Testament. In the Old Testament text you find this in the Psalms, you find this in the prophetic literature where a beast or dragon type figure or serpent type figure was often used not only in Genesis 3 to depict Satan but throughout the history of God’s people was often used to depict oppressive godless idolatrous foreign nations or rulers. So John has used an image that actually has a long history of meaning that it brings with it. John doesn’t just pull it out of thin air, but John uses an image that has a long history of describing wicked godless rulers and oppressive nations. So at the very least when we read this we should understand that the beast represents a nation, a ruler, a kingdom that is violent and oppressive and godless and idolatrous and opposed to God and his people.

But again I think with the historical background perhaps we can fill out in a little more detail and understand most likely, given the context in which Revelation was written, it’s hard for me to think that the first readers would not have read Revelation 13 and the beast as representing or referring to the Roman empire or the Emperor himself. Especially since it has a history in the Old Testament referring to nations and rulers, as well, being opposed to God’s people. But other than that sometimes I think we need to focus more in the meaning and theological significance of those images rather than getting too caught up with exactly what they refer to and exactly what person or event or what precisely those are pointing to and referring to and sometimes that’s the tricky one.

Log Cabin and Political Cartoons Analogy

I remember one time, I like to tell this story to describe, at least as a partial analogy to describing the struggle that we face when we interpret Revelation’s images and symbols. One time when I was living in Montana, a rancher called me one day and asked if I would help him dismantle a log cabin. It was a log cabin that had been built in
the 1930’s or so, and some of the logs, it had been abandoned for years, but some of the 
logs were still very good and in good shape, and the rancher wanted to keep those to 
built his own cabin. So with the help of a couple implements or machines and our bare 
hands, we were going to dismantle this cabin and keep the good logs. As we were doing 
that I began to notice that between the logs, probably stuffed in there to fill holes and 
conks to keep out the cold Montana winds, I found newspapers and I pulled a couple out 
and I looked at them. They were dated from the 40’s and 50’s quite early, and one of the 
things that caught my attention was the political cartoons. I looked at a couple of them 
and I began to realize that I had no idea what they were talking about. Number one, 
although some of the symbols I recognized, there were some symbols I simply wasn’t 
familiar with. Second, my 1940’s or 1950’s political and historical knowledge escaped 
me at that point. I wasn’t sure exactly what was going on in the United States and in the 
world that these images and symbols in this political cartoon were probably referring to. 
That’s kind of what we’re up against when we’re reading the book of Revelation. 
Number one, some of the images and symbols are unfamiliar to us that would have been 
familiar to John and his first readers. Second, we’re not entirely certain as to what exactly 
all the things that were going on and exactly the events and persons and things that John 
was predicting or talking about or referring to or describing. So that’s why I say I think 
we need to rely on some of the better commentaries and pay attention to the Old 
Testament, and know as much as we can about the Greco Roman world, to try to come up 
with as best as possible what most likely did these images and symbols mean? 
Theologically, what meaning were they trying to convey? Then again, what might they 
refer to, persons, places, events in the modern day of the readers but also in the future as 
well. So that is the first principle in interpreting Revelation, we must interpret it 
symbolically, not literally. 

I like to say Revelation is more like walking through an art gallery and seeing 
different artistic depictions, sometimes of the same event and situation. It’s more like that 
than watching a CNN news flash or documentary that we’re to read as a more literal, 
straight forward historical description. Revelation is more artistic. Yes, it refers to actual
events and persons and places but it describes them more artistically in the language of symbol and metaphor. To take Revelation seriously, not literally, we must take seriously its symbols and images.

The second principle in interpreting Revelation is to realize that Revelation, as an apocalypse, as a prophecy, and as a letter, is probably going to be about both the present and the future and even at times, perhaps the past. I would say primarily at least I would say of the greatest importance would be the present element. That is, Revelation is trying to help, the readers make sense of the present situation. As an apocalypse, it’s trying to unveil reality so they can see behind the empirical world in which they live, there’s a whole new reality that lies behind it and somehow influences it. That will help the readers make more sense of their situation. So I would say much of Revelation is probably an apocalyptic description and prophetic description and critique and evaluation of the reader’s first century situation living under the Roman Empire. This is another reason we spent some time trying to unpack the historical situation behind Revelation. But much of Revelation probably describes present persons and events of the first century, even though we can’t always be sure of exactly what those are. Sometimes we’re the ones in the dark about that. Revelation seems, to most importantly, help its first readers come to grips with and understand how they should respond in light of their present situation.

But clearly, Revelation does include future events. Especially when you get to chapters 19 and 22, you’re clearly in the future, at what theologians call the second coming of Christ. There we find history coming to its conclusion with Christ arriving, or breaking into history and arriving on the scene of history to now set up his kingdom. Revelation as a prophet, as a prophecy, and as an apocalypse, it is and does project the present onto the broader screen of God’s intention for all of world history. It does depict future judgment and future salvation just as Old Testament prophets did. So there are clear references to the future throughout Revelation, but usually Revelation does that by placing its present circumstances against the screen or against the backdrop of the broader screen of God’s intention to bring history to its conclusion. Again that’s part of helping the readers make better sense of their present situation.
Rev 12:1-8 as Symbolic

But there is at least one, example of Revelation especially in chapter 4 through 22, the prophetic apocalyptic proper section we might say of Revelation. In chapter 12:1-8 let me read this: “A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.” If you doubt Revelation’s symbolic, where have you ever seen a woman like that with twelve stars and the moon under her feet and clothed with the sun clearly drawn as this is whatever he’s referring to he’s describing it in highly symbolic language. Verse 2: She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. Again, clearly we’re in the realm of symbolic visionary material. “His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter,” an allusion to Psalm chapter 2. “And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.”

It’s almost impossible not to read this without thinking of and seeing this as a reference to the birth of Christ. And almost every commentary I’ve read reads it that way. So, here, at least, even if he were writing in the 60’s, if he is writing in the mid-90’s AD, John is referring to an event that occurred almost 90 years earlier. He is referring to the birth of Christ itself. Clearly, it is a past event from the perspective of John writing much later. So at least in chapter 12 we find a reference to an event not in the future but in the past. So Revelation probably should be read as a combination of events and persons and places that in depicting events that take place in the present, but also in the future and perhaps occasionally events that have already transpired in the past.

Now what this means, too, is an important feature of Revelation we are still talking about the principle number two Revelation is about the present and the future and also, at times, perhaps the past.
Cyclical Aspect of Revelation

In regard to that, an important principle for understanding Revelation is Revelation, although there is a logic to it and kind of a literarily at least, a linear progression, it does appear that Revelation temporally seems to cycle. It seems to act more like a cycle, that is, over and over again Revelation will begin by describing events I think in the first century during the days of the reader and their contemporary situation help make sense of it. Then it will end by referring to the end of history, to the future, or again what theologians call the second coming of Christ. Then we’ll back right up and do it again. We’ll describe the present and that will lead right into the future salvation and judgment, then the author will back up again. So it kind of goes cyclically as far as the time period refers to, so that once again it will start by describing the present, and then place that against the backdrop of God’s intention to bring history to its conclusion.

So for example, in chapter 6, I’ll just use a couple of examples, at the very end of chapter 6 we read this: starting on verse 12 this records the seven seals that get broken and as each seal is unsealed. Something happens and this is where you have the four horsemen. We’ll talk more about that, but the very last seal in chapter 6 it’s described. Seal number 6 [Rev 6:12]: John says, “I watched as he opens the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree.” Again, principle number 1, authors using highly symbolic language we’ll talk about this later “like a fig tree when shaken by the strong wind.” The sky we see like a scroll rolling up “and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who could stand?”

We’ll see later on that John actually draws on Old Testament text for all this language of stars falling, and moons like blood red and mountains falling and people hiding in caves. This comes out of the Old Testament but clearly John is referring to to
the final judgment at this point. This is the second coming of Christ. This is the end of
history. So chapter 6 has already brought us to the end, but as you realize, we still have
16 chapters more to go in Revelation, and so we’re not done.

Chapter 7, again I will read this, but chapter 7 ends with God’s people standing
before the throne of God and celebrating their final salvation, their eschatological
salvation yet again we still have 15 more chapters to go. Or chapter 11, which also ends
with this, verse 15: “The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, [this is at the end of the
series of trumpets now after the seals, the seventh angel sounded his trumpet] and there
were loud voices in heaven which said: “The kingdom of the world has become the
kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.’ And the
twenty-four elders, who were seated on the thrones before God, fell on their faces and
worshipped God,” etc. etc. Clearly again we are at the end where the kingdom has now
become God’s kingdom and he will now reign for ever and ever. Clearly we are at the
end of history again yet we still have, what, 11 more chapters to go in Revelation.
Chapter 14 gives images of both final salvation and final judgment, yet we still have
several more chapters to go before we get to the end of the book. So Revelation over and
over again brings you up to the brink, to the end, only to start over and give you another
one to bring you to the end and to start over. So you have this pattern of John cycling,
where again, he’ll describe using images and symbols he’ll describe what’s going on in
the situation of his readers, what’s going on in the first century, only then to move to the
end of history to show how those events relate to, or how the future relates to those
events. Then he’ll back up and do it again and he’ll back up and do it again. It’s as if he’s
exploring the meaning of the reader’s situation by using different images and different
symbols to help them again come to grips with what it is they are experiencing. These
different perspective are meant to help them get the picture and again this has another
effect, the fact that the author brings you to the end only to back up again. It’s as if he’s
wetting your appetite you get to the end of chapter 6 and that description of the end is sort
of vague and kind of cryptic. It doesn’t tell you a lot, and over and over again the author
brings you to the end only to start over again and go back to the first century and describe
the events going on in his readers’ day. It’s as if the author’s wetting your appetite for a fuller disclosure of the future of judgment and salvation and the reader is not disappointed.

When you get to chapters 19 and 22 the writer pulls out all the stops and gives you a full, what you’ve been waiting for, a full disclosure, a full description of the second coming of Christ, the grand finale of what will happen when Christ does return to set up his kingdom and to inaugurate a new creation, to reward his people with salvation and to bring judgment at his coming on evil, wicked humanity.

So first of all treat Revelation symbolically, interpret it symbolically, not literally, take it seriously but not literally as it refers to actual persons and events and places but it describes them in highly symbolic and metaphorical language. Second is, understand that Revelation is about most importantly probably the present trying to help the readers make sense of the present situation but about the future as well and sometimes the past.

Must Be Relevant and Understood by the First Century Author and Readers

Then a third principle is, and I think this is very important, interpretations of Revelation must be something that John could have intended and his first century readers could have understood. Let me say that again. Interpretations of Revelation must be consistent with what John could have intended and his first century readers could have understood. If not, I think any interpretation that John couldn’t have possibly intended and his first century readers living in a pre-technological age living in a political situation very different from our own, any interpretation they could not have possibly understood should be rejected, in my opinion.

I was raised in an environment, also in a church environment that understood Revelation, going back to our very first, the very beginning of our discussion of Revelation where church history has often had an obsession with the book of Revelation. I was raised in an environment similar to the Left Behind series where basically the assumption seemed to be, though it wasn’t clearly stated, that nobody really understood Revelation until today, until the 20th or 21st century. Now we have the key, now we can look around and see all these events being fulfilled and taking place. Now we have the
key to interpreting Revelation and so at least the corollary to that would seem to be and no one else has understood it. First century readers had no idea what was going on, church history from the second to 20th century had no idea what was going on. Now all of the sudden, in the environment that I was taught to read Revelation, we have the key to interpreting Revelation. We can look around and see all these things taking place and we can read them and now we can actually see what John was referring to and predicting and trying to make sense of.

Obviously, that kind of reading depends on, misunderstanding what an apocalypse is and what a prophecy was. They were meant to speak to the first century, not just predict the future. But this type of reading depends almost solely on Revelation as a future prediction. Not just a few years into the future but centuries, far, far past what the first readers and what John could have ever conceived of. But again I think that needs to be turned on its head. The principle was apparently that we now have the key to reading Revelation. It was a complete mystery to the first century readers. That should be flipped on its head. I think the first century readers understood very well what was going on and we’re the ones that are in the dark. We’re the ones that need to do the hard work and try to figure out what was John intending to communicate to these readers and what, most likely, they would have understood. Again, recall that John, one of the interesting features of all the literary types of Revelation, apocalypse, a prophecy, a letter, they were all meant to communicate something to the contemporaries of the author. They were meant to say something about the present situation of the readers—not to predict some events far, far into the future. They were meant at least, yes they did refer to future events, but at the same time, they were meant to describe and to explain, and to provide a perspective on the present situation of the readers. So we should read Revelation then as addressing the specific issues and specific problems of the first century readers, not some shot-in-the-dark, way down centuries later down the historical tunnel from the perspective of the readers.

For example, beyond the fact that John chose to write in three literary genres that addressed the readers’ own situation, it’s interesting, number one, we already said a
letter, as a letter, John was trying to communicate information that would actually address the needs of the first century readers like any of Paul’s letters. So, presumably then, as a letter Revelation is communicating information that was meant to be understood by the first readers, not something that was incomprehensible and only taking place way, way far beyond in the future, far beyond the horizons of the first century readers.

Furthermore, it’s interesting to know how John ends his book. One of the references that I read earlier to the book of Revelation as a prophecy, in chapter 22 in verse 10, John, hearing the voice again clearly of an angel was addressing him from back up in verses 6 and following of chapter 22.

Revelation and Daniel Contrasted: Sealing Up?

Now in verse 10 here’s what the angel says to him: “Then he [the angel] told me ‘Do not seal up the words of this prophecy of this book because the time is near.’” It’s interesting that this is the direct opposite strategy of what you find in the book of Daniel. In the book of Daniel, Daniel is told to seal up the prophecy because it’s for a later time. Now John, and I think some other apocalypses also use this theme of sealing up the book, now John is told just the opposite. Don’t seal it up. Why? Because it’s not for some future time, the time of fulfillment is already here. This is for you, this is speaking to your own situation. This is not information for a distant future, this is not referring to events that will take place in the 20th or 21st century or however long history goes on. Do not seal up the words of this prophecy because it’s not for a later time and generation. Do not seal them up because it’s directly relevant to the life of the first century readers. So therefore, again any interpretation, whether it’s one that we come up with or one that we read, any interpretation that John could not have intended, or his first readers living in a pre-technological age, living in the first century, a specific political and religious and economic situation, anything they could not have intended or understood should probably be rejected, and any interpretation must be consistent with what John could have intended and what his readers would have grasped.

Again it’s interesting, that’s not a new principle when we think in terms of other
New Testament books. We’re taught to read Paul’s letters in light of what most likely was the situation Paul was addressing and what was he saying to his readers. We should read Revelation in the same way. I’m not saying it only refers to first century events and it’s only relevant to the first century, we’ll see later on that many of its images and symbols have the power and ability to even transcend the first century situation and continue to speak to God’s people throughout the century leading up to whenever Christ brings history to a close. But, at the end of the day, we must begin with what John probably intended for his first century readers and what they most likely would have understood and picked up on.

Exhorting and Encouraging God’s People

A fourth principle is we must read Revelation as intended to encourage and exhort God’s people. It provided encouragement to a suffering, persecuted church, but even more so it provided exhortation to a compromising and complacent church. Any interpretation of Revelation that does not focus or read primarily as intended to persuade its readers to a certain course of action, to provide comfort for those who are suffering because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ, but exhorts and warns those who are compromising their faithfulness to Christ or who are so complacent to their surroundings that they are buying into what Rome was doing, any reading of Revelation that just sees it as a prediction of the future, or just uses it to feel enthusiasm about what’s happening in the political situation in the 21st century or the nearness of Christ’s return has completely missed the point of Revelation. It’s not primarily about prediction of the future, yes it does have future elements in it, but it’s not primarily about the prediction of the future, it’s primarily a book of the encouragement and exhortation.

Main Message of Revelation

It’s to get us to wake up and see what is really at stake. It’s to get God’s people to worship God and the Lamb no matter what the consequences. It’s to remind us that nothing, no one, no entity, no nation, no person, no other thing is worthy of the exclusive worship that belongs only to God and Jesus Christ. In the words of John, it’s trying to get us “to follow the Lamb wherever he goes” no matter what consequences that entails.
That’s what Revelation is about. It is not primarily about predicting the future. It is not meant to satisfy our curiosity as to what’s going to happen next and where we are situated in relationship to the end, to help us plot our existence on some chart as far as how close we are to the end. Anyone who reads Revelation and is not motivated to exclusive obedience to Christ, is not motivated to further holiness, is not motivated to worship God and the lamb no matter what the consequences has not yet heard Revelation accurately and clearly.

Humility as an Interpretive Principle

Finally, and I think perhaps one of the most important principles is interpreting Revelation requires a good dose of humility. We must be willing to admit at times that we could be wrong or we’re not sure. We must be willing to at least consider and listen to other ways of reading the book of Revelation. Revelation is not the place for dogmatic certainty on time events or how things are going to be fulfilled, or what exactly things are going to look like when Christ comes to consummate his purposes for history. Dogmatic assertions are simply out of place in reading a book like Revelation. Instead, not that we should not be certain about the meaning of the book at any time, not that we should not decide on how we interpret texts and hold to those, and even provide reasons why we hold to those interpretations, but at the end of the day we must approach the book in extreme humility, recognizing some of the difficulties that attend to trying to interpret and read the book, and recognizing the church has largely, throughout history, disagreed on many points of interpretation. Here, if ever, again I would repeat, here if ever we need to rely, I think, on some of the better commentaries to help us to read Revelation. Those who have thought about the book, those who have done the research and the work to try to make sense of the book and that can function as our teachers and our guides through a difficult book like Revelation.

Summary of the Five Principles for Interpreting Revelation

So keep those five principles in mind as you read and interpret Revelation, and as we move through the book. We will refer back to these principles at times and even if we don’t explicitly do so, hopefully you’ll be able to draw the connection at times. Again
number one: Revelation is to be interpreted symbolically and not literally, yes it does refer to actual persons, places, and events, in the present, in the future, but it refers to those symbolically so we must take Revelation’s images and symbols seriously, though not literally. Second, it’s about the present and the future most likely, and at times the past. Third, any interpretation of Revelation must be something John could have intended, and his first century readers could have grasped and made sense of. Fourth, Revelation must be read primarily as an encouragement and warning to the people of God. It must be read as an encouragement to those who are suffering but as a warning and a wake-up call to those who are compromising their faith in Jesus Christ. And finally, our interpretations and our reading of Revelation must always be tempered with a good dose of humility.

Numbers in Revelation

One other feature of Revelation that I want to just describe very briefly relates to number one and is kind of an excursus that goes back to principle number one that we need to interpret the book symbolically and not literally is the fact that among other images and symbols, and we’ll deal with those throughout the book of Revelation, but one of the interesting things that you find in Revelation is a book full of numbers. There are all sorts of different numbers and multiples of numbers or fractions that we find throughout the book. There are references to different time periods, different numerical values found throughout the book of Revelation and obviously the number 7 is probably the one that jumps to your mind immediately. You’re actually confronted with the significant of numbers at the very beginning of the book when in chapter 1 in verse 12 in John’s vision of the son of man he sees the son of man holding 7 golden lamp stands and 7 stars. So already the number 7 plays a key role in the first chapter of Revelation and the 7 churches in chapters 2 and 3, which actually were mentioned already in chapter 1. The number 7 playing a key role in the 7 seals the 7 bowls, or the 7 trumpets the 7 bowls and the number 7 occurring a couple other times, the 7 spirits of God in chapter 1 and also in chapter 5 verses 4 and 5. So the number 7 is the most obvious example that plays a key role.
One of the questions is how should we deal with the numbers in Revelation. Interestingly, I find sometimes that interpreters of Revelation who are quite willing to interpret it symbolically elsewhere still insist on taking the numbers with an unusual strict literalism. That the numbers mean exactly what they say. If the author talks about 7, there must be exactly 7 or something like that. Sometimes they recognize yes, there is some symbolic value to it but still it must be taken as the literal numerical value of that number. So the number 7, it may have symbolic connotations, but we should still take it as referring to a literal number 7 of whatever it’s referring to. I would suggest to you though that our interpretive principle number one, interpret it symbolically, not literally applies to the number as well. The numbers are not in Revelation for their literal value, or their literal numerical value, but the numbers are there because of what they symbolically connote, and what they suggest on the symbolic level.

So what I want to do is just discuss very briefly some of the primary numbers that one finds about Revelation and what their symbolic values should be. So, for example, let’s start with the number 3 ½, that literally in Revelation is times, time, and half a time, which basically is understood as 3 ½ years. Probably the number 3 ½ or 3 ½ years that you find in chapter 11 and 12, 13, kind of in the center of the book of Revelation, you’ll find references to 3 ½ years, again some of your translations might have times, time, and half a time, 3 ½ years should probably be understood as simply half of 7. 7 being the number of perfection and completion that we’ll see in just a moment, 7 being the number of perfection and completion, 3 ½ falls short of that. So probably when the author talks about a period of time that characterized as 3 ½ years, he’s not talking about 3 1/2 years of 360 days, he’s using 3 ½ symbolically, it’s only half of 7. It falls short of 7. I take it the 3 ½ means a rather intense period of time that gets cut short. It falls far short of the perfect number 7. It’s only half of that. So again 3 ½ is not there for its literal numerical or temporal value, the significance of 3 ½ is not how long the period of time lasts, the significance is what it symbolizes, what it says about that, that it’s however intense that period of time may be. It simply won’t last, it falls short of 7.

Another number is 4, the number 4 probably symbolizes the entire earth, similar to
what we might say the four corners of the earth. For example, the 4 living creatures in Revelation 4 and 5, the 4 is not significant for there’s literally 4 of them, but symbolically the number 4 symbolizes the entire earth. The entire globe is now under consideration.

The number 6 probably signifies again, imperfection, it falls one short of the number 7. The number 7 we’ve already seen symbolizes perfection and completion, so again the significance is not a literal number 7 times or 7 things that take place, but 7 symbolically probably goes back to Genesis 1 and 2, and the 7 days of creation, the number 7 is important for symbolizing completion or perfection.

The number 10 and its multiples, so we are not only talking about these numbers in and of themselves, but their multiples. The number 10 signifies completion or wholeness, it’s a large round number that signifies the wholeness of 10 and its multiples.

Number 12, another significant number, the number 12 and its multiples like 144 or 144,000, or just the number 12 or even 24, adding 12 and 12. The number 12 signifies or symbolizes the people of God modeled after the 12 tribes of Israel in the Old Testament. The 12 apostles in the New Testament, so when you see 12 or its multiples, again the significance is not the literal number of 12, but what 12 symbolizes. 12 symbolizes the people of God.

We also find a number of fractions in Revelation whether ¼ or ½ or ⅓, again the fractions are not there for their precise mathematical value, but the fractions symbolize a fragment or what is partial or what is limited. So we’ll see, for example, when God pours out the seal judgments and the trumpet judgments often a third of the earth gets harmed or only ¼ of the earth or ⅛ of the population. Again it’s not meant so that we figure how many people are alive now then we siphon off a fourth as those subject to judgment, again the point is the symbolic value of these numbers. The fractions represent something that is fragmented or something that is only partial or something that is limited in its scope. That’s the significance of the fragment. So I would suggest then that we interpret the numbers in Revelation not for their literal value, not for their literal mathematical value, or not for their literal temporal value, but we also interpret the numbers for their symbolic value and meaning.
Preview of Next Session

So, having talked a little bit about the hermeneutical principles that will guide us in the interpretation, in the next section we are going to begin with Revelation chapter 1. We’ll begin to work through each section of John’s apocalypse, his prophecy, his letter, and be alert to the symbols and images, and be alert to the type of literature that we’re reading and how that makes a difference in the way we actually interpret the text.

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