

### #3 INTERPRETING REVELATION

It is no secret that interpreting Revelation has been a contentious task for a long time. Even early Christians struggled interpreting Revelation. This should move us to humility. If every generation has struggled to interpret Revelation, we will too. Quick answers will often fail to solve large interpretive challenges and disagreements. In reality, people often approach Revelation in different ways for good reason: they are seeing something others don't — whether large or small.

However, the challenge of interpreting Revelation should not lead us to despair. Revelation is intended to unveil reality from a divine perspective, not veil it. John was told to bear witness to the churches about what he saw. The church is intended to witness Revelation's perspective to the world. God intended Revelation to be widely understood and proclaimed.

Fortunately, our place in history allows us to look at past interpretations of Revelation and learn. Gorman offers the conclusions of Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland — who are “scholars of the history of Revelation's interpretation and impact” — to help us see the various ways Revelation has been interpreted. While there is a wide spectrum, Kovacs and Rowland suggest that every view of Revelation differs in two ways: interpretive strategy and time focus.

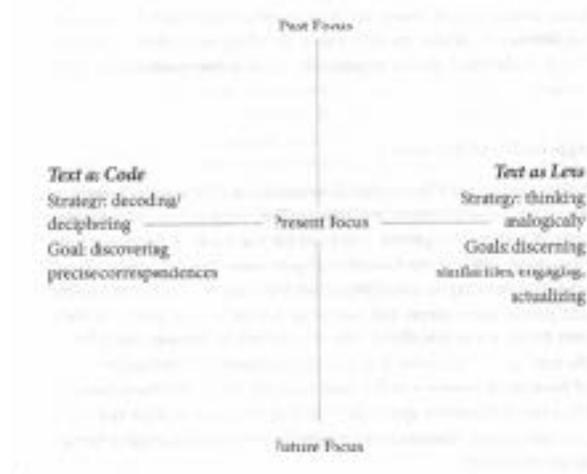
With **interpretive strategies**, one extreme *decodes* Revelation looking for direct correspondences, while the other extreme *actualizes* Revelation by seeing analogies. Gorman summarizes, “Decoding interpreters focus on details, looking for correlations between the text and specific events and people... while actualizing interpreters seek to ‘convey the spirit of the text’ and to ‘perform’ it in new circumstances.”<sup>22</sup>

With **time focus**, Gorman says some read Revelation “as an ancient document for the ancient church, some see it as a text that speaks above all to us today (that is, to any age, because its message is timeless), and some see it fundamentally as a set of predictions about the future.”

Gorman puts these two variables on a graph to help us visualize where interpreters fall (see below).<sup>23</sup> Popular *futurist* (or predictive) views will fall on the bottom left corner of the graph — reading Revelation as a prediction of specific events yet to come. Most *preterist* views lie on the top left — reading Revelation as a document that *was* prediction of specific events that have already taken place (more or less).

But is Revelation intended to be decoded so the reader can merely uncover specific future (or past) correspondences? Is John offering merely symbolic history written in advance? This is where it is important to remember that

Revelation is a *prophecy*. While biblical prophets do *foretell* the future, their intent is to *forthtell* — proclaim messages from the Lord. Even when God sends his prophets to foretell, the impact was more timeless and completely unlike crystal ball predictions. This is why God's messages to past generations — whether foretelling or forthtelling — were at times carried forward and reapplied to Jesus (or, as in Revelation, applied God's judgment of “Babylon.”). As Bauckham puts it, “God's purposes in history were understood to be consistent, and therefore his great acts of salvation and judgment in the past



<sup>22</sup> Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 63, summarizing and quoting Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> The graph is from Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 64

could be understood as models for what he would do in the future. ... Prophecies which had been fulfilled could be reinterpreted and reapplied to new situations.”<sup>24</sup>

One result of both popular futurist and preterist views is they *can* tend to cause Revelation to lose its timeless application (or to make application very challenging). Attempting to correlate specific symbols with specific events *can* also become a mere guessing game — which does not fall well into any biblical genre. There isn’t much of a difference between decoding the locusts of Revelation 9 as Apache helicopters of the future or as Roman weapons of the past. Both of these approaches *can* be similar in that most of Revelation’s meaning cannot be concretely known except in hindsight (e.g., “Oh, the *spirits like frogs* were x-y-z, not a-b-c!”)

However, these views have their merits. Futurists do well to insist that the scale of what Revelation portrays is yet to come (at least in some places). Preterists do well to insist that Revelation has first century relevance, context, and fulfillments. While recognizing these merits, this class will *lean* more toward seeing Revelation as a *lens* by which *all generations* can see and live properly in their situation until the end. We will respect that Revelation was not written *to* us but *for* us. In fact, Revelation’s intention to speak to a wide variety of situations should be evident from the letters to seven different churches (which *can* symbolically be representative of all churches).<sup>25</sup> Gorman’s summary of his mixed approach is helpful.

Without ignoring the past or the future (in a general sense), the focus of this book is on Revelation as a word to the church in the present... We will do so by grounding our contemporary interpretation of Revelation in its message for the first-century church, looking for contemporary analogies to the first-century realities..., while always keeping an eye on the promises for the future of God’s creation contained especially in Revelation 21-22... Although the meaning of Revelation should not be limited to its significance in its original context, understanding and building on that first, or most literal, sense is critical to responsible interpretation.<sup>26</sup>

This must not result in Revelation meaning anything to any generation. As one scholar instructs, Revelation is **not** forming “a freewheeling imagination, but a disciplined imagination.”<sup>27</sup>

One may push back by pointing out the specific correspondences in Daniel’s visions between beasts and nations. Isn’t Revelation similar to Daniel? Yes, but I would offer two responses.<sup>28</sup> **First**, if all we glean from Daniel is history written in advance, we are missing the point. There is a reason kingdoms are portrayed as an image (to be worshipped) and as violent beasts (to be overcome by “one like a son of man”). **Second**, most recognize that the first century referent for the beast of Revelation 13 is the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire is also depicted in Daniel 7 as the fourth beast. But it may be telling that John *does not see Daniel’s fourth beast* (though their actions are similar). Rather, John sees an amalgam of all four beasts of Daniel 7 — part lion (Daniel’s 1st), part bear (2nd), part leopard (3rd), with ten horns (4th), and seven heads (like the dragon). John could have described the beast in other ways — even specifically as the fourth beast in Daniel (other apocalyptic literature does!) — but the fact that he doesn’t may be a clue that John sees something more than *only* a symbolic representation of the Roman Empire: he sees a symbolic representation of all oppressive empires that draw others to pledge worship to it.

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<sup>24</sup> Bauckham, *Theology*, 153-154.

<sup>25</sup> See Bauckham, *Theology*, 12-17.

<sup>26</sup> Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 68. Gorman does not see his approach as merely what has been called the “idealist” or “spiritual” view, but as a mixture of other approaches as well.

<sup>27</sup> Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 11, quoted in Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> I am responding in this paragraph to my own previous objection.

We must seek to understand how the images would have spoken to the seven churches in their world if we want to responsibly apply Revelation's vision in our day. But when we limit Revelation's *images* to narrow one-to-one correspondences and literal predictions without authoritative basis, we may be missing the function of images. Bauckham explains:

This fails to take the images seriously as images. John depicts the future in images in order to be able to do more and less than a literal prediction could. Less, because Revelation does not offer a literal outline of the course of future events — as though prophecy were merely history written in advance. But more, because what it does provide is insight into the nature of God's purpose for the future, and does so in a way that shapes the readers' attitudes to the future and invites their active participation in the divine purpose.<sup>29</sup>

John speaks of a prostitute more than a city and of Babylon, not Rome, because he wants to draw upon an image and a type to help people see Rome and other cities like it as they are. If the glove (Revelation's description) fits, the city must wear it. As Bauckham explains:

The city which wears the prophetic cap must wear it. Such a principle allows prophetic oracles to transcend their original reference, without supposing that somehow when Jeremiah referred to Babylon he really meant Rome. The same principle validates the way in which Revelation has inspired prophetic critiques of later systems of political and economic oppression throughout the church's history and still does today.<sup>30</sup>

There is nothing novel about reading Scripture like this. We should always ground interpretations of Scripture in the original situation without limiting its application to the original hearers (*cf.* 1 Cor. 10:6). Abraham's test in Genesis 22 was not recorded to encourage wilderness Israelites to sacrifice their own children. This is more and less than Genesis intends to do. We are all to walk in the footsteps of Abraham's faith. Watching Abraham bring down the knife on the son of promise prepares all readers to face any test of faith in their day (even if it threatens the lives of their children, because God raises the dead). On this, Bauckham captures how we need to avoid both overemphasizing and ignoring the original context.

"Biblical prophecy always *both* addressed the prophet's contemporaries about their own present and the future immediately impending for them *and* raised hopes which proved able to transcend their immediate relevance to the prophet's contemporaries and to continue to direct later readers to God's purpose for their future. Historizing modern scholarship has sometimes stressed the former to the total exclusion of the latter, forgetting that most biblical prophecy was only preserved in the canon of Scripture because its relevance was not exhausted by its reference to its original context. Conversely, fundamentalist interpretation, which finds in biblical prophecy coded predictions of specific events many centuries later than the prophet misunderstands prophecy's continuing relevance by neglecting to ask what it meant to its first century hearers. It is important as we have done in this book, to understand how John's prophecy addressed his contemporaries, since they are the only readers it explicitly addresses. This does not prevent us from appreciating but helps us to understand how it may also transcend its original context and speak to us."<sup>31</sup>

In one sense, we should read Revelation like we read all Scripture. All Scripture was breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching today (2 Tim. 3:16); however, we must ensure we are good workers, rightly handling the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15).

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<sup>29</sup> Bauckham, *Theology*, 93

<sup>30</sup> Bauckham, *Theology*, 153-154.

<sup>31</sup> Bauckham, *Theology*, 152-153