

#6 SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

Revelation helps readers see and experience what John saw and experienced.⁴³ In any sort of visual experience, it is vital to see what one is intended to see. If one were to return from observing a Chinese parade excitedly talking about the number of buttons on the coats of those in the parade, we would say they missed the parade. If someone returned from visiting Yellowstone talking with amazement about the beetles on the trees, they missed Yellowstone.⁴⁴ Similarly, when reading Revelation, we must see the big picture, otherwise we may get lost in the details.

In his survey of apocalyptic literature, note how Mark Roberts uses an example from the *Apocalypse of Abraham* to make this point.

Instead of getting out an electron microscope to minutely look at every detail or multiply every number, what Revelation really calls for is the reader to stand back for a panoramic view. Apocalyptic is not, as often supposed, a highly detailed diagram with crucial information hidden in the fine print. In fact, apocalyptic literature is not a diagram or doctrinal treatise at all. Instead, it is much more akin to a huge mural. For example, in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* we read of a strong angel who is described like this, “the appearance of his body was like sapphire, and the look of his countenance like chrysolite, and the hair of his head like snow, and the turban on his head like the appearance of the rainbow, and the clothing of his garments like purple, and a golden scepter was in his right hand” (11:8). No effort is made by the author to do anything with these colors. ... Instead of dissecting the appearance of the angel, the text focuses on what this character is saying. The colors simply serve to appropriately costume this dramatic figure so that the reader knows this character is important and will listen to what he says. ... This is a consistent pattern in apocalyptic literature.⁴⁵

Certain details will be significant (John hears of Jesus as a conquering lion but sees him as a slain lamb; John sees the false prophet with horns like a lamb, but he hears a dragon, etc.), but wisdom will help us identify window-dressing so we don't miss the big picture. We need to avoid over-interpreting and over-explaining details that aren't meant to be focused on.

Political cartoons can work in similarly. “The Devilfish in Egyptian Waters”⁴⁶ offers a critical portrayal of England's imperialism in 1882. Great Britain is personified by John Bull (like Uncle Sam personifies the U.S.) who is portrayed as an octopus with his tentacle-like hands in too many places (England was frequently portrayed as an octopus in cartoons of the day). He already has his hands in too many places, but now he is reaching for Egypt. Once we see it, the message is clear. It would be fruitless to count hands or comment on the color of



⁴³ I am alluding to Reddish, *Revelation*, 29, quoted in Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 16-17.

⁴⁴ I am using illustrations from a conversation with my dad, Berry Kercheville.

⁴⁵ Roberts, *Understanding Apocalyptic Literature*, 62-63; his quote is supplied by Adam Jerome, “The Apocalypse of Abraham,” October 26, 2010, <http://www.pseudepigrapha.com/pseudepigrapha/Apocalypse_of_Abraham.html>

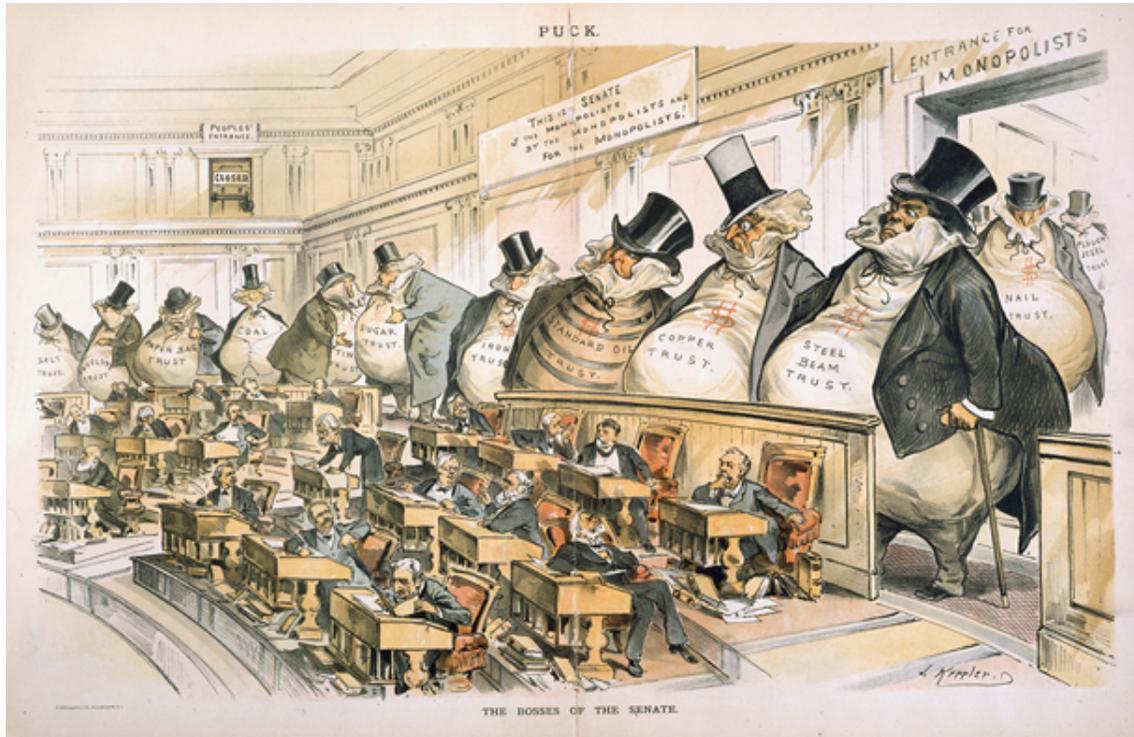
⁴⁶ Anonymous, 1882, “The Devilfish in Egyptian Waters”, <http://lh3.ggpht.com/_hUnR-n-yM7o/S-I-ZIZINjI/AAAAAAAAABJg/1W0ibzj2IAk/s800/1.png>

Bull's hat. The cartoonist is not saying that England is an octopus who has changed Earth's geography to place England at the center. Once this cartoon is grounded in its original context, the image and point about England's imperialism, greed, and territorial expansion is made clear.

Some cartoons comment on such a specific situation that they have little meaning beyond their day. Once understood, "The Devilfish in Egyptian Waters" clearly has relevance beyond its own day — even in modern questions about how the United States, Russia, and China use their power. This demonstrates a truth about Scripture: while it may be written *to* one group, it was never written only *for* one group. "All Scripture... is profitable for teaching..." (2 Tim. 3:16).

Before leaving political cartoons, consider the power of the images in both political cartoons and in John's vision.⁴⁷ Images have the power to transform how we see the world. Consider how much "data" our minds process every day. Many things are constantly happening in our world, nation, state, city, church, work, neighborhood, and family. Our subconscious is in a constant state of processing this data — tossing out what we perceive to be irrelevant and keeping what we perceive to be relevant. Processing this data requires that we put it together in a sort of cohesive narrative - even if it is a bit messy. This helps us survive (mental health issues arise when we are unable to tell ourselves a cohesive story about reality). But this coping mechanism can also become a problem. We develop well worn paths in our minds (literally!) by which we process reality. Our story about reality can be flawed and incomplete. More data often fails to get us out of these ruts — we keep integrating it into our same vision of how things are. But *images offer us the opportunity to see the world in a totally new way*. This is the power of John's visionary narrative — by combining images and narrative, Revelation can mold how we perceive and process reality.

However, Gorman's balancing reminder is helpful here: Revelation's use of symbols "does not make the realities to which they point any less real."⁴⁸ The symbolic narrative world and the objective world are one. Enjoy "The Bosses of the Senate"⁴⁹ as you prepare to see the world aright.



⁴⁷ This paragraph is loosely inspired by thoughts from BibleProject Podcast episodes 194 and 195, cited on page 6.

⁴⁸ Gorman, 21.

⁴⁹ Joseph Keppler, 1889, "The Bosses of the Senate," <https://www.cop.senate.gov/art-artifacts/historical-images/political-cartoons-caricatures/38_00392.htm>

#6 STRUCTURE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

In his course on Revelation, Dr. Robert Mulholland compares outlines of Revelation to a picture of a juggler.⁵⁰ The picture only gives you one point of view at one moment in time, but it doesn't give you a full sense of the juggling act. All books of the Bible are pieces of carefully crafted literature, and this must especially be respected as we read Revelation. Outlining Revelation so we can see its structure is quite helpful, but we must remember Revelation is not so much a pie intended to be cut up and consumed portion by portion, but rather a whole living being that loses its very life when chopped up. We ought to look at how the body works together, but it is vital to keep the whole intact. With that said, below is an outline from G.K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd's introduction to the New Testament⁵¹ as one way to look at Revelation's structure.

- I. Prologue (1:1-20)
 - A. Introduction and Salutation (1:1-8)
 - B. John's Commission (1:9-20)
- II. The Letter's to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)
- III. God and Christ Glorified through Christ's Resurrection (4:1-5:14)
 - A. God Glorified as Sovereign Judge (4:1-11)
 - B. God and the Lamb are Glorified through Christ's death and Resurrection (5:1-14)
- IV. The Seven Seals (6:1-8:5)
 - A. Seals 1-6 (6:1-17)
 - B. The Interlude of 144,000 (7:1-17)
 - C. Seal 7 (8:1-5)
- V. The Seven Trumpets (8:6-11:19)
 - A. The six trumpets (8:6-9:21)
 - B. The recommissioning of John's Prophetic Call (10:1-11)
 - C. The Prophetic Witness of the Church (11:1-13)
 - D. The Seventh Trumpet (11:15-19)
- VI. The Seven Visions of Deeper Conflict (12:1-15:4)
 - A. Divine Protection from the Devil's Attack (12:1-17)
 - B. The Devil's Alliance with Political and Economic Powers (13:1-18)
 - C. The Vindication of the Righteous and the Punishment of the Unrighteous (14:1-15:4)
- VII. The Seven Bowl Judgments (15:5-16:21)
 - A. The Introduction to the Seven Bowl Judgments (15:5-8)
 - B. The First Five Bowl Judgments (16:1-11)
 - C. The Sixth and Seventh Bowl Judgments (16:12-21)
- VIII. Final Judgment of Babylon and the Beast (17:1-19:21)
- IX. The Millennium (20:1-15)
 - A. The Inauguration of the Millennial Kingdom (20:1-6)
 - B. The Unsuccessful Assault on the Church (20:7-10)
 - C. Final Judgment (20:11-15)
- X. The New Heavens and Earth (21:1-22:5)
 - A. Dwelling in the Midst of God (21:1-8)
 - B. The Perfected Church in the New Creation (21:9-22:5)
- XI. Epilogue (22:6-21)

⁵⁰ Dr. Robert Mulholland, "NT666: Revelation Session 3," *Book of Revelation - NT666*, 26 Mar. 2012, <<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/nt666-revelation-session-3-audio-version/id438666442?i=1000112319240>>

⁵¹ Beale and Gladd, *The Story Retold: A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament*, 468.

Paying attention to structure is key to interpretation. The very form a book takes allows the book to say more than it explicitly states with words. For example, it is likely no accident that chapter 11 is at the heart of John's vision as it contains many of the book's key themes — the witness of the saints, persecution by the beast and the great city, vindication of the saints, the opportunity for repentance, final judgment, and the final victory of God's kingdom are all wrapped together in the center of Revelation. We will note the significance of structure throughout our study, but a couple of big picture points are helpful at the outset.

First, there are two main ways people believe the various parts of Revelation relate to one another. The *chronologically linear futurist position* reads the chronological order of Revelation's visions represents the precise order of how events will play out. The *recapitulation position* sees that many judgments throughout the book are parallel to one another. Rather than precise descriptions of singular events, they offer various looks at God's judgment and salvation. However, the 6th seal, 7th trumpet, and 7th bowl appear to be accompanied by depictions of final judgment which, in contrast to other judgments in Revelation, are not partial. Near these final judgments are visions of the securing of the saints. Taking this view is not a statement that the structure and order of Revelation's visions is meaningless; rather, the meaning of order is not necessarily chronology. Beale puts it well, "The order in which he saw things is not necessarily the historical chronological order in which those things will happen."⁵² We will lean towards the *recapitulation position* in this class.

Second, it helps to pay careful attention to themes introduced in the letters to the seven churches because they will often be expanded upon throughout the rest of the book. This will be seen in various ways. What Jesus commends the churches for are directly related to what the rest of Revelation will demand of the churches. Jesus' criticisms relate to failures to meet these demands and even to the sins of the rest of the world in relation to the beasts and the prostitute. The hope of those who are conquering in the churches is also expanded upon later in Revelation — especially in chapters 21-22.

⁵² G.K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, 24.

#6 THE SITUATION OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

To give some context to what churches were enduring when they received Revelation, the following is an excerpt from Grant Osborne's shorter commentary on Revelation.⁵³ Read this as generally characteristic of the environment Christians lived in when they received this letter, regardless of its dating. (Osborne prefers a late date, but this is disputed by some)

"The seven churches were in the province of Asia (the western third of modern-day Turkey), which was well-known for its pro-Roman stance. They were governed partly by the "Asiarchs" who oversaw civic and religious life and demanded that the populace participate in emperor worship (see below). No one in that time and place could conduct the affairs of everyday existence, even commerce, without recognizing the gods. When Christians refused to participate, the effects were considerable. Persecution may not have been official, but it was widespread at the local level. Social ostracism, slanderous rumors, and loss of jobs were the natural result. It is likely that the social situation behind this book included both internal pressure from prosperity and secularization as well as external opposition and persecution.

A key ingredient in God's decision to send the visions to John around AD 95 may have been the growing influence and power of the imperial cult in the province of Asia. This refers to the worship of the emperor as a god. For many years before this, Romans had refused to allow their leader to be regarded as a god. They even disliked dictatorships and hereditary rulerships. In the first 700 years of the Roman republic, the nation was led by consuls, who governed a year at a time and were chosen by popular vote. That all changed when Octavius was victorious over Mark Antony, established the Roman Empire, and named himself Augustus. He declared his uncle, Julius Caesar, a god. Most emperors refused to allow themselves to be called gods until after they died (such as Tiberius and Claudius), but this began to be relaxed in the time of Domitian. Also, cities began to compete to be allowed by Rome to build temples to the emperors and be labeled neokoros, or a "temple warden" city (the first was erected in Pergamum in AD 29). Of the cities addressed in Revelation, at least Ephesus, Pergamum, and Smyrna had this so-called honor.

This cult intensified under Domitian, who was especially popular in the provinces. The province of Asia in particular was at the epicenter of pro-Roman feelings and therefore was also among the wealthiest of the provinces. Domitian was called "lord and god"; a bath and gymnasium in Ephesus were erected and dedicated to him as "Zeus Olympios." Coins of that period even label Domitian's wife as "mother of the divine Caesar." In addition, frequent banquets held by the guilds (trade associations that controlled the activities of artisans in a city) were always dedicated to the patron gods—to refuse to attend often meant one would be prohibited from working in the city. This led to tremendous pressure on Christians to participate in emperor worship. Every aspect of civic and even private life was affected by the imperial cult, so believers were under severe oppression.

We can see that the book of Revelation is responding to pressures inside and outside the church. As seen especially in the letters to Sardis and Laodicea, the church to some extent participated in the wealth of the province of Asia. These churches were struggling with the very real issue of the impossibility of serving both God and money (Luke 16:13). False teachers like the Nicolaitans (Rev 2:2, 6, 14, 20) convinced many that assimilation to the practices of the pagan world was acceptable, and as a result the church was being acculturated and spiritually endangered. But the battle between good and evil—between serving God and surrendering to the world—calls Christians to reject compromise and avoid complacency.

First-century Christians also experienced external economic and social pressure to participate in Roman life, and those in the church who refused to do so faced the antipathy of the rest of the populace. They were ostracized and persecuted, with punishments including imprisonment and death (2:9, 10; 13:10). In response to these pressures, the book of Revelation presents a vision of reality in which God reigns and rewards the faithful who persevere in the midst of crisis. This is a counter-reality, a transcendent realm in which God's people are faithful to him and live in a Christian counterculture. Moreover, God's children, the saints, are willing to endure suffering, for they realize that that this new realm is actually the real world and the pagan world is simply an illusion doomed for destruction. It is not just an ephemeral hope, but a new citizenship that means believers are "aliens and strangers" in this world (1 Pet 1:1, 17; 2:11; compare Phil 3:20). This calls for endurance and faithfulness to God, leading the faithful to become victors over these pressures."

⁵³ Osborne, *Revelation Verse by Verse*, Kindle location 231-261 under "Historical Background."