

Tales of the End: A Study of the Book of Revelation

Session 5: Revelation As Story, Part 2

The Symbols of Sound and Sight

- Not only is John's world multi-leveled (above and below) and the experience multi-faceted (looking to past, present, and future), but the vision itself is **multimedia** – both seen and heard.
- One source of information for the symbolism is the author's own interpretation.
- A second source of symbol interpretation is to look to other literature of the **period**, especially other apocalypses and prophetic writings.
- **White** signifies victory (not necessarily purity), black represents suffering (not evil), red stands for strife and war, and pale (a kind of yellowish grey) signals death.
- A symbol does not so much mean something as it does imply, so deciphering symbols is less a rational act than an imaginative **act**.
- It is sometimes suggested that John wrote in symbols to **hide** his meaning from the Roman authorities; this is unlikely.
- Symbols communicate on a different level than ordinary **speech**. Symbols do not simply carry information; they reach out and take hold of us, demand our attention.

The Structure and Plot

- The complexity of Revelation can be seen in the fact that there is no consensus on how we should **organize** or outline the material in the book.
- One point clearly emerges: **how** you arrange the material depends on what you are looking for.
- The Apocalypse is a complex story and no one reading will ever imagine **all** the possible connections between incidents.
- There are **three** stories happening at the same time within the book.
- Frame of **three** stories: John tells what happened to him in a vision on Patmos, on a trip into heaven, and what he saw looking into the heavenly Temple (C. 1 & 22).
- The first story details what **Jesus** would say to the seven communities in Asia
- The second story shows what is happening around the divine **throne**;
- The third story recounts how a heavenly **dragon** attacks Jesus and his communities.
- While these three stories are themselves sequences of casually connected action, there is very **little** connection between the incidents in the separate stories.
- These connections have to do with **theme** (destiny) and characters rather than with continuous sequential actions.
- Rather than one unfolding event, Revelation presents **three** interrelated tellings of the story of Jesus.

The Audience and Characters

- Characters from different worlds: **Earth** and Beyond
- **Earth** dwellers in the narrative include John, the seven churches, the reader, the hearers,
- Heaven dwellers include God, Jesus, Spirit, angels of various types, the dead.

Which Characters in Which Story?

- “Jesus” never appears as a **character** in any of the stories.
- What we actually find in the three movements is **three** separate sets of characters, which we identify with continuing persons underlying the narrative.

Aliases and Disguises

- By choosing to show Jesus, or Satan, or the community of believers as one character or another, the writer highlights one aspect of that character’s **identity**.

The Time and Place

- From within the perspective of the story, everything in Revelation happens in **one** day – the Lord’s day (1:10). This is what we will call the fictional setting of the first narrative level.
- Beginning with the vision of the heavenly woman (chapter 12), however, both the time and place within the story become very **vague**.
- It suffices to be aware of the **difference** between story time and historical time.

Making An Interpretation

- A **poem** should not mean (something other) but be (what it is). I can no more tell you the meaning of the Apocalypse than I can show you the beauty of a painting by talking about it.
- The author of the Apocalypse narrated his vision so that the **hearers** of the story might share that experience. **Hearing the Revelation was an experience meant to transform the listener.** Learn to listen.