

INTRODUCTION 3

KEYS TO INTERPRET

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The book of Revelation is an apocalypse, an unveiling or revelation of the message of Jesus Christ by means of visions that contain symbols and numbers. Jesus Christ himself gives us the keys to interpret the book of Revelation. He determines the rules by which it should be explained.

There are eight keys or rules for interpreting the book of Revelation:

First key The book is a prophecy: the proclamation of Jesus Christ

The Lord Jesus Christ is the Mediator of all revelation in the Bible, also of the revelation in the book of Revelation (Revelation 1:1). The Lord Jesus Christ is “the God of the spirits of the Old Testament prophets” (Revelation 22:6). The emphasis is that Jesus Christ is the God who spoke through the Old Testament prophets and the God of whom they spoke.

“For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (Revelation 19:10).”¹ ‘The testimony of Jesus’ is *whatever Jesus has said in the Old Testament* through his Spirit in the prophets and that is now written in the Old Testament (1 Peter 1:9-12). The testimony of Jesus is also *whatever Jesus said in the New Testament* through his Spirit in the apostles and that is now written in the New Testament (John 16:13-15). The Author of the Old Testament and the New Testament is no one less than the Spirit of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:9-12; 2 Timothy 3:16). The emphasis of Revelation 19:10 is that whatever Jesus Christ said in the Bible is *the genuine spirit or inner content of all biblical prophecy*. Whatever Jesus Christ said about God, about himself as the coming Messiah, about God’s Old Testament people Israel, about Israel’s continuation and extension to include believers in him from all the nations in the world (Genesis 22:18; Isaiah 56:3-8; Matthew 28:19), about the kingdom and the Church is the genuine spirit or inner content of all biblical prophecy. That is what biblical prophecy is all about!

‘To prophesy’ literally means to speak forth, to proclaim or to preach. The Old Testament warns against so-called prophets who speak visions from their own minds and not from the mouth of God (Jeremiah 23:16-32)! The New Testament warns against the many false prophets (Matthew 24:24). Real prophecy is proclaiming Jesus Christ and the contents of the New Testament. That is what Christian should proclaim! Christians should not go beyond what is written in the Bible (1 Corinthians 4:6; cf. Revelation 22:18-19)!

To put this in another way: the spiritual gift of prophecy² is to proclaim what Jesus revealed about himself, his words and works in the Bible. Biblical prophecy is therefore not making arbitrary predictions about the future of people and nations (Israel and Gentiles), but proclaiming Jesus Christ and his message! The genuine content of the Old Testament prophets is revealed in the testimony of Jesus in the New Testament! Whoever Jesus is, what he said and did is the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy (Matthew 5:17). All Jesus revealed, taught and commanded and that is now written in the New Testament is what the Old Testament prophets intended to say in their shadowy and preparatory proclamations (Matthew 5:17; Acts 3:18; Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 8:6; 10:1; 1 Peter 1:10-12).

That is why the book of Revelation must be explained (interpreted) only in the light of the Bible. And that is why the Old Testament must be interpreted only in the light of the New Testament!

¹ ἡ γὰρ μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ ἐστὶν (vίρα) τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς προφητείας

² A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich. p.730

Second key The message of the book is intended to bless every reader

The book of Revelation does not intend to drive people into fear. Jesus promises: “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy (proclamation), and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it” (Revelation 1:3; 22:7). The message of the book is about the fact that Christ is the Conqueror and that Christians are more than conquerors together with Christ (Revelation 17:14; Romans 8:37-39). The message intends to stimulate Christians to fight the good fight of the faith in their own generation. It reveals the final victory of Christ and the believers in Christ. And it reveals the establishment of the final phase of his kingdom, namely, the new earth. Therefore the message of the book is intended to bless every reader!

Third key The message of the book is intended for readers from Christ’s first coming to his second coming

At the time of speaking to the apostle John Jesus said, “The revelation ... must soon take place.” “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near.” (Revelation 1:1,3; 22:6,10). This means that what had been revealed in the visions in the book of Revelation begin to be realised immediately from Christ’s first coming. The message of the book of Revelation affects the whole present New Testament period, from Christ’s first coming to Christ’s second coming. The message of the book of Revelation is a message intended for all Christians in all generations!

Fourth key The symbols in the book represent literal realities that are much higher and greater than the literal meaning of the symbols

Jesus said that he made his message known (Revelation 1:1). The word ‘to make known’ in the original Greek language means literally to make known by means of signs or symbols or figurative language or imagery!³ That is why we find so many symbols and numbers in the book of Revelation. And that is why we must understand what each symbol refers to. For example, in Revelation 1:12-13,16 there is a symbol of a man standing among seven lampstands and holding seven stars in his right hand. In Revelation 1:20 Jesus himself explains the meaning of these symbols. The lampstands are not literal lampstands, but represent seven congregations (churches). The seven stars are also not literal stars, but represent the angels or representatives of the seven congregations. And for example, in Revelation 5:6 “the Lamb looking as if it had been slaughtered standing in the centre of the throne” is a symbol of Jesus Christ that had died on the cross and had been resurrected.

Fifth key The numbers in the book also have symbolical meaning and represent literal realities that are much higher and greater than the literal numerical value of the number

The number ‘seven’ is a sacred number. The number represents ‘divine perfection’. Genesis 2:1 says that God completed his work of creation by the seventh creation day. The number symbolises divine perfection in creation. In Revelation 5:6 “the Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth”, is a symbol of Christ’s omnipotence and omniscience through his Holy Spirit in this world. And in Revelation 2:7 the seven lampstands represent the seven historical congregations in Asia Minor, which in turn represent all the congregations in the world throughout salvation history. And in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 the seven letters to these seven congregations represent Christ’s perfect personal writings to all the congregations in the world under all circumstances in history.

Sixth key The whole book is divided into seven parallel sections and each section represents the whole New Testament period

Just as the four gospels are parallel proclamations of the life, work, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, so each of the seven sections of the book of Revelation represents the whole New Testament period from Christ’s first coming to his second coming, each depicted from a different perspective. For example: Section 1 (chapters 1 to 3) begins with the death, resurrection and enthronement of Jesus Christ at his first coming (Revelation 1:5) and ends with the realisation of the promises to those who overcome at his second coming (Revelation 2:7; 3:12). This section depicts the establishment of the Militant Church throughout the whole

³ εσημασεν > σημαινω (viaa)

New Testament period. Section 2 (chapters 4 to 7) begins with Christ's first coming when Christ received the authority to reveal and execute the great events in salvation history (Revelation 5:1-10) and ends with Christ's second coming when he comes for the final judgement (Revelation 6:12-17). This section depicts the persecution of the Church by the world throughout the whole New Testament period. Section 4 (chapters 12 to 14) begins with Christ's first coming when he is born and ascends into heaven (Revelation 12:5) and ends with Christ's second coming when he comes to harvest the righteous and unrighteous on the final judgement day (Revelation 14:14-20). This section depicts the victory of Christ and his Church over the dragon and his helpers. Note also that the one and only 'final battle' is described in section 3 (Revelation 11:7), in section 4 (Revelation 13:7), in section 5 (Revelation 16:12-16), in section 6 (Revelation 19:17-19) and in section 7 (Revelation 20:7-9).

Seventh key The seven sections of the book are arranged in an ascending, climatic order

Although the seven sections of the book of Revelation run parallel and span the entire period between Christ's first coming and Christ's second coming, there is nevertheless a progression in emphasis on those events that occur just before the second coming of Christ. For example: There is a progressive emphasis on the final judgement day. Section 1 announces the final judgement day (2:27), section 2 (6:12-17) and 3 (11:18) introduce the final judgement day, section 4 (14:14-20), 5 (16:17-21) and 6 (18:1-24) describe the final judgement in symbols and section 7 (20:11-15) describes the final judgement day by dropping most of the symbolism. There is also a progressive emphasis on the final state of the Church (3:12-13; 7:9-17; 11:15; 14:1-5; 15:2-4; 19:1-10; 21:1 to 22:5). And there is a progression of the message of each section of the book.

Eighth key Revelation 21:1 to 22:5 reveals the ideal reality of the Church on earth at the present time before Christ's second coming in the light of the perfect reality of the Church on the new earth after Christ's second coming

'The Heavenly Jerusalem' is a symbol that represents all God's people in heaven and on earth in the present time before Christ's second coming (Galatians 4:24-26; Hebrews 12:22-24). The use of the present continuous tense in some verbs in Revelation 21:1 to 22:5 means that these actions are still taking place at the present time: the New Jerusalem is coming down; Christ is making everything new and genuine; and Christians are overcoming (Revelation 21:2,5,7). 'The New Jerusalem' is therefore not only a symbol that represents the perfect reality of God's people on the new earth after Christ's second coming (Revelation 21:9-10), but also a symbol of the ideal reality of God's people on the present earth before Christ's second coming.