

Hermeneutics
Session 16
NT REVELATION

Hermeneutics Outline

1. Introduction: What is hermeneutics and why should we care?
2. What is the Bible and how did we get it?
3. Why so many translations? And which is best?
4. What is the history of Hermeneutics?
5. What are the different hermeneutical approaches, and which is best?
6. What are the key principles of good hermeneutics?
7. NT Genres: Epistles
8. NT Genres: Gospels
9. NT Genres: Parables
10. OT Genres: Hebrew Historical Narrative
11. NT Genres: Acts
12. OT Genres: Law
13. OT Genres: Prophets
14. OT Genres: Psalms
15. OT Genres: Wisdom
16. NT Genres: Revelation
17. What are the tools we have available to us today to study the Bible?
18. Practicing Hermeneutics: Big Idea Study

Summary: Hermeneutics & Revelation

The book of Revelation was written by the apostle John while he was in exile (for the cause of Christ) on the island of Patmos. Revelation was written about 90AD.

Revelation is hermeneutically challenging for several reasons. First, it is a mix of three genres: apocalypse, prophecy, and epistle; so in order to understand Revelation correctly, knowledge of these three genres is quite important. Additionally:

- Revelation is full of symbols of different types (some difficult to interpret).
- It speaks some of future events.
- There are numerous Old Testament references (and many modern readers are not as familiar with the Old Testament).
- There are five major schools of interpretation.

When reading Revelation, it is important to do exegesis first, seeking to understand the author's intent. Knowledge of historical context and literary context will help with this task. Revelation should be understood as a whole, recognizing that each vision plays a part in the greater theme of the book, which is God's sovereignty and certain victory over evil, meant as an encouragement by John to his brothers and sisters in Christ as they suffer for the Gospel.

Genres: NT REVELATION

How do we properly understand and apply OT Wisdom Literature?

Opening Questions:

1. What do you think about when you think of the book of Revelation?
2. What do you already know about Revelation?
 - Who wrote Revelation?
 - When?
 - Why?
 - To whom did he write it?
 - What was the historical context in which he wrote?

Genres: NT Revelation

How do we properly understand and apply NT Revelation?

Outline:

- **What is Revelation?**
- **What are the hermeneutical challenges to Revelation?**
- **What are some important hermeneutical rules for Revelation?**
- **Summary**

What is Revelation?

It is three types of literature - Type 1: Apocalypse

What is Apocalyptic Literature?

1. Based off of OT prophetic literature, especially Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and Isaiah
 1. Comes out of persecution or oppression
 2. Concerned mostly with the end of history when good triumphs over evil
2. Literary works, with a particular structure etc.
3. Presented in the form of visions and dreams, with lots of symbolism, and has lots of hidden meanings
 1. Literary devices were used to make it appear very old
 2. Pseudonymity, for example, given the appearance of being written by some ancient recognizable author (Enoch, etc.)
4. Images are that of fantasy (not reality)
 1. Jesus used images like: salt, sheep, weeds, etc.
 2. Apocalypse uses images like: beast with seven heads, woman clothed with the sun, etc.
5. As literary works, they were formally stylized
 1. Neatly organized into sets, etc.
 2. Symbolic use of numbers (see next slide)

Question:

1. What stands out to you about Apocalypse as a genre?
2. Do we have anything remotely like it today? Why/why not?
3. From these characteristics of Apocalypse, why could Revelation be a hermeneutical challenge to modern readers?
4. Notice that one of the literary devices used for apocalyptic literature was pseudonymity. Why do you think this is the case?
5. Why is this NOT the case for Revelation? (John clearly identifies himself as the author.)

SYMBOLISM OF NUMBERS¹

In Revelation numbers have a symbolic significance which is consistent with the symbolic language used to describe a picture which in turn must be interpreted for the intended meaning. Thus the numbers do not necessarily have a numerical value, but rather suggest a concept or spiritual truth. For this study, consider the following numbers and their symbolic significance:

- *One*—represents unity;
- *Two*—represents strength as two witnesses, or disciples sent out two by two;
- *Three*—a Divine number as in the Godhead;
- *Four*—a world number as the four corners of the earth;
- *Six*—a human number, incomplete or imperfect, less than seven;
- *Seven*—a complete or perfect number as seven days in a week;
- *Ten*—represents complete power as ten horns or diadems;
- *Twelve*—a religious number as twelve tribes or twelve apostles.

Apocalyptic writings encouraged God's people in times of severe persecution and prepared them for possible future trials. There are three Old Testament apocalyptic books: Ezekiel and Daniel who wrote in the days of Babylonian exile, 605-539 B. C., and Zechariah who prophesied during the Persian era after the return from Babylonian captivity, 520 B. C. to an indefinite date. The only apocalyptic book in the New Testament is Revelation which was written by the apostle John during the first century A. D. In the four gospel accounts, Acts, and the inspired letters, truth is imparted by words to the mind. In apocalyptic writings, words paint a picture. The picture is not the message; rather the interpretation of the picture is the message.

What is Revelation?

It is three types of literature - Type 2: Prophecy

1. John wrote Revelation knowing that the 'End' had already begun (with Jesus)!
2. Wrote 'in the spirit' (1:10-11)
3. He refers to his book as prophecy (1:3; 22:18-19)
4. John clearly intends his apocalypse to be a prophetic word to the church

Question:

1. What is prophecy as a Biblical genre? What characterizes it? What was its purpose?
2. How is Revelation prophecy?

What is Revelation?

It is three types of literature - Type 3: Epistle

1. Revelation is both apocalypse and prophecy written in the form of a letter
2. All the characteristics of letter are present (structure of opening, etc.)

Question:

1. What is epistle as a Biblical genre? What characterizes it?
2. What do you remember about our hermeneutics session on epistles?
3. How would these hermeneutical rules be important in understanding Revelation?

What are the hermeneutical challenges to the Revelation?

- Symbols
- Future events
- Old Testament references (we are not so familiar as they were)
- There are five major schools of interpretation, and within those three are big differences of understanding.

METHODS OF INTERPRETATION OF REVELATION

Various schools of interpretation of Revelation have evolved throughout the Christian era. Five different methods of interpretation are classified below.

- *Futurist*. The book describes events which immediately precede the second coming of Christ.
- *Continuous Historical*. The book foretells events from John's writing to the end of time.
- *Philosophy of History*. The symbols and pictures described represent forces rather than real events and peoples.
- *Preterist*. The book was written and fulfilled in John's day.
- *Historical Background*. The book was written for people in John's day with principles applicable to the end of time.

<https://www.padfield.com/acrobat/nt/revelation.pdf>

Question:

1. Why would each of these above present a hermeneutical challenge?

What are some important hermeneutical rules for Revelation?

Start with Exegesis (5 suggestions from Fee and Stuart):

1. Seek Author's original intent:

1. "The primary meaning of Revelation is what John intended it to mean, which in turn must also have been something his readers could have understood it to mean."

1. They understood better than we do their own historical context

2. They understood better than we do apocalyptic forms and images

3. They understood better than we do OT references

2. Yet it is also prophetic:

1. "One must be open to the possibility of a secondary meaning, inspired by the Holy Spirit but not fully seen by the author or his readers. However, such a second meaning lies beyond exegesis in the broader area of hermeneutics. Therefore, the task of exegesis here is to understand what John was intending his original readers to hear and understand."

Question:

1. Do you agree that 'the prophetic' is beyond exegesis? Explain.

2. What are some things we can do to get at the author's intent?

What are some important hermeneutical rules for Revelation?

Start with Exegesis (5 suggestions from Fee and Stuart):

2. Be careful not to overuse the “analogy of Scripture”

1. Don't make other Scriptures the ‘hermeneutical keys to unlock’ Revelation.
2. Any ‘keys’ to understanding Revelation must have been in Revelation itself, or easily accessible to the original audience.

Question:

1. What do you think Fee and Stuart mean by number 1 above? Do you agree? Explain.

What are some important hermeneutical rules for Revelation?

Start with Exegesis (5 suggestions from Fee and Stuart):

3. Its apocalyptic and prophetic nature makes exegesis especially challenging: (imagery for example). Suggestions:

1. Understand as much as possible the historical and literary background: Old Testament, apocalyptic literature, ancient mythology
2. Keep in mind there are different types of imagery:
 1. Constant/obvious meanings: beast out of the sea = world empire (not individual)
 2. Fluid meanings: “Lion” turns out to be “lamb” (Revelation 5:5-6)
 3. Clearly explained images: Seven lamp stands (Revelation 1:12-20)
 4. General image: four horsemen (Revelation 6)
3. Images interpreted by John are starting point for understanding other images
4. See visions as ‘wholes’ and not look for meanings in all details (like allegories)

Question:

1. How can we modern readers find out which kind of imagery we are reading about? What are some tools we could use?

What are some important hermeneutical rules for Revelation?

Start with Exegesis (5 suggestions from Fee and Stuart):

4. John uses the Old Testament extensively.

1. Revelation 1:5b-6 = Exodus 19:6
2. Revelation 1:7 = Daniel 7:13, Zechariah 12:10
3. Revelation 1:12-16 = Daniel 10:6, 7:9, 13; Isaiah 49:2; Ezekiel 1:24

Question:

1. Why do you think John used so much OT imagery?
2. Why is it so important that we 'get' the OT connections?
3. How can we make sure we don't miss these OT connections?

What are some important hermeneutical rules for Revelation?

Start with Exegesis (5 suggestions from Fee and Stuart):

5. Apocalypses (and Revelation as well) are not concerned with detailed chronological accounts of the future.

1. What it IS concerned with: God is sovereign over history, and even though the church suffers and believers even are martyred, Christ will triumph in the end.

Question:

1. How does this effect the way we understand Revelation?

What are some important hermeneutical rules for Revelation?

Understand the historical context:

1. Key verse: Revelation 1:9

2. Other verses:

1. 2:3, 8-9, 13

2. 3:10

3. 6:9-11

4. 7:14, 16

5. 12:11, 17

Question:

1. Why would you say the historical context of suffering is so important to understanding Revelation?

2. In light of the reality of suffering, what would you say is John's goal in writing Revelation?

What are some important hermeneutical rules for Revelation?

Understand the literal context:

John's Theme:

1. The church will continue to experience persecution
2. It will get worse
3. But God is in control
4. And God wins in the end
5. And the church triumphs over death (12:11)

Keys to reading Revelation:

1. Read the book as a whole
2. "Think paragraphs"
3. Consider each part (each vision for example) as its relation to the whole.

Question:

1. From what we've talked about already, why would you say that literary context is so important in understanding Revelation?

THE THEME

The theme of the book is the victory of Christ. “These will make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings; and those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful” (Rev. 17:14). There pictured is a spiritual war between Good and Evil, between Christ and his saints and Satan and his allies. In the end, Christ and the righteous are victorious, while Satan and his followers are utterly defeated and cast into the lake of fire and brimstone to be tormented day and night. See Chart No. 3, *The Victory of Christ*.

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The End