

Seven Keys

Chapter One

As We Begin

THE FIRST eight verses of the book of Revelation serve as its introduction; in them the author, the apostle John, tells us how we are to interpret this prophetic book. I can think of no better starting point for us when we're considering how we should understand the book today. So, let's start at the beginning, Revelation 1:1–8:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to Him to show to His servants what must happen soon. And He signified it, sending it through His angel to His servant John, who testified concerning the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, which he saw. Blessed is the one who reads and those which hear the words of this prophecy, and keep the things which are written in it, for the time is near.

John, to the seven churches which are in Asia:

Seven Keys

Grace to you and peace from the One who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits which are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the Ruler of the kings of the earth. To the One who loves us, and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made us a kingdom, priests before God, even His Father—to Him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.

Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, including those who pierced Him, and all tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. Yes, amen. “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “the One who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

What can we learn from the author’s introduction? First, look at verse 4: “John, to the seven churches, which are in Asia.” Right here at the beginning, John tells us plainly that when he wrote the book of Revelation, he was addressing seven specific churches in Asia.

Asia was a Roman province in the western part of what is the country of Turkey today. In the first century, there were several Christian churches in Roman Asia, and it was to these churches that John was writing. While

we are often tempted to read the book of Revelation as if it were written solely to us, this text tells us that in actuality, it was written two thousand years ago to real people who lived in a real place. In fact, this is stated not only in the introduction of the book, but also in the last chapter (verse 16). So, we can conclude that the entire book was sent to those churches.

Because the entire book was written to a specific context in the ancient world, many scholars promote a theory called *preterism*. This interpretive approach says that Revelation isn't a prophecy of events that would take place long after it was written. Rather, the book's meaning is limited to the people of its time and place—the Christians who lived in Asia Minor two thousand years ago.

There's an element of truth in this. The book of Revelation was definitely written to people of its time and place. It definitely meant something to them, and the more we can learn about what they understood it to mean, the better our understanding of the book will be. But preterism calls us to read the book in too limited a way. God's intention for Revelation wasn't limited to the time and place of the seven churches of Roman Asia. It was bigger than that.

John's introduction to the book points to this larger

Seven Keys

purpose. Verse 7 of the first chapter says, “Behold He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, including those who pierced Him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. Yes, amen.” So, the book of Revelation addresses the very end of time and events related to that time, such as the second coming of Jesus.

Of course, many people search Revelation for references to current events. Is September 11 in there? Does it say anything about the war on terror—or even Barack Obama?

Since it is clear that parts of the book of Revelation focus on the end times, on *our* future, some people have come up with an approach to interpreting the book called *futurism*. They attempt to read Revelation as if the whole book speaks directly to the end of time and to no other time in history.

Again, there is an element of truth here. The book of Revelation *does* speak to the end of time. It *does* speak to our future, and we need to take those parts of Revelation seriously. But we have already seen that it speaks to ancient times as well. So the futurist approach by itself is no more adequate than is the preterist approach.

There is a third way of understanding the book of Revelation. John’s introduction to his book points toward this one, too, in verse 3 of that opening passage. It says,

“Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy.”

In *Koine* Greek, the language in which John wrote Revelation, the word translated “hearing” has a special grammatical function. It can mean hearing *with* understanding or hearing *without* understanding, depending on the grammatical case of the object. The case used in verse 3 indicates that John expects that those who hear someone read the book of Revelation will hear it *with understanding*. In other words, he expects that whoever reads this book and whoever hears someone read it aloud will understand it. John didn’t write Revelation just for people living in the first century, and he didn’t write it just for those living at the time of the end of the world. Rather, it was meant to be understood *throughout* history. God intended that anyone at any time who picks up this book and reads it will understand the basic message it contains.

From observations like this, some readers of Revelation have developed the idea that anybody at any time can benefit from the book, and there is certainly truth in that. But some people have taken this notion a bit further and have come up with an idea called *idealism*. They say, “The book of Revelation isn’t really written to the first century, and it’s not really a prophecy of things at the

Seven Keys

end of time either. It's a symbolic way of presenting broad, general principles for Christians to live by." In other words, anybody can read this book and draw from it general principles for life.

Again, there is an element of truth here: blessed is everyone who reads and everyone who hears the words of the book. But the suggestion that Revelation contains only general principles for living doesn't adequately take into account the full realities of the book.

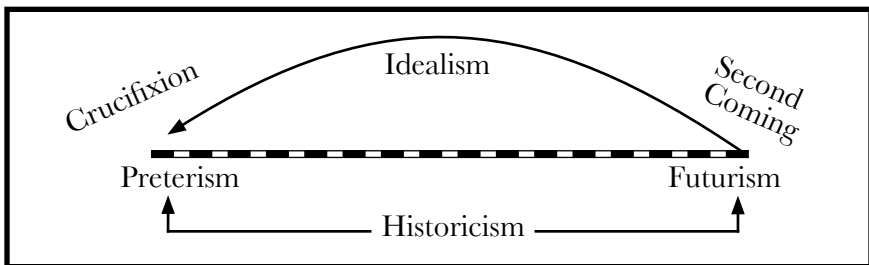
Summing up what we've considered so far: There are three popular approaches to the book of Revelation. There's preterism, which is particularly popular with secular scholars of the book. It says Revelation spoke only about first-century events. There's futurism, which says the book speaks only about the end of time. And third, there is idealism, which says Revelation presents only broad, general principles of Christian living.

Another way

I believe, however, that if you take the entire introduction of Revelation seriously, there's an even better method for studying the book. It's called *historicism*. It takes the first-century standpoint of preterism, the future standpoint of futurism, and the general interests of idealism as

As We Begin

aspects of the book's purpose, but it doesn't limit our understanding to any of those approaches. Instead, it takes all the evidence of Revelation seriously. It says that readers should realize that some aspects of the book speak to the beginning of the Christian era. For instance, the introductory passage, in verses 1–8, sets the stage in the first century. But this method also notes that other aspects of Revelation focus on the end of time, and that still others are of general value in every time and place. Historicism, rightly understood, is the best method because it allows each text to locate itself in time; it doesn't limit the meaning in an arbitrary way as the other approaches do. It tells us that the book applies to the beginning of the Christian era, to the end of the Christian era, and to all the time between those two points.



How then should historicism be applied in practice? John gives us a hint right in the first verse. He tells us there exactly how historicism works. In verse 1, he speaks of the things that “must happen soon.” One of the things

Seven Keys

we'll discover about the book of Revelation is that John often points the reader to earlier literature, particularly the Old Testament. He uses a word or a phrase that points to an earlier text. For instance, the phrase we just noted in verse 1 is pretty rare in the Bible. In fact, it occurs in only three places in the Bible. It appears here in verse 1 but also in Daniel 2:28 (in the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint), which tells us that Daniel showed King Nebuchadnezzar what “*must happen* in the last days” (emphasis added).

Perhaps you remember the story. In chapter 2, the prophet Daniel interprets for King Nebuchadnezzar his famous dream. The king had dreamed of a statue made of four metals: gold, silver, bronze, and iron. The statue represents a sequence of nations in the course of history, each nation symbolized by a different metal. The text (verse 45) says that the dream has shown to the king what will be in the last days.

In essence, Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar, “You are the head of gold. Another nation is going to come after you; that nation will be inferior to you just as silver is inferior to gold. Next, a third nation, represented by the bronze portion of the statue, will dominate; then a fourth nation, iron; and finally, at the end of time, the kingdom of God will come.”

So, the prophecy in chapter 2 pictures a sequence of events running from Daniel's day all the way to the end of time. Scholars call the literature containing prophecies like this *apocalyptic*. Apocalyptic literature commonly uses a sequence of symbols to portray sequences of historical events.

How does Daniel 2 help us understand Revelation? Here's where it becomes interesting. Right at the beginning of the first verse of Revelation, John alludes to Daniel 2 when he says that in what follows, he's going to describe things that "must happen soon." The words "must happen" recall the "must happen" in Daniel 2. Revelation follows that phrase with the word "soon." What follows that phrase in Daniel? The words "in the last days."

- Revelation 1:1—"must happen *soon*"
- Daniel 2:45—"must happen *in the last days*"

Daniel wrote about six hundred years before the time of John. Daniel was looking at the whole sequence of events that leads up to the end of time. By picking up Daniel's language, John is saying something to this effect: "Revelation is going to be unpacking the book of Daniel as well as other Old Testament books. It will follow the

Seven Keys

same approach that God used when He spoke to Daniel. In the book of Revelation, you are going to find sequences of symbols that point to sequences of events that haven't happened yet."

(Relax! We won't be getting into a lot of that history. We're simply trying to understand the basics of Revelation—how it is composed, what we should expect.)

In other words, the book of Revelation is a lot like Daniel 2. In Revelation, just as in the book of Daniel, we find prophecies of sequential events. As in Daniel, these historical sequences run from the prophet's day all the way to the end of time—in Revelation, then, from John's day, the first century after Christ, all the way to the Second Coming and even beyond. And in both books there is a consistent symbolism—except Revelation doesn't have a statue made up of various metals. Instead, Revelation pictures a sequence of animals—some really strange animals, kinds you won't see in a zoo.

Before we get into that, though, we need to find some specific answers to the question, How do we interpret Revelation? As the title of this book suggests, we're going to use seven keys to unlock the prophecies of Revelation. Many of these keys can also be found in Revelation's introduction, chapter 1, verses 1–8. We will discover others by noting the characteristics of the entire book.