

TEN KEYS FOR INTERPRETING THE BOOK OF REVELATION

**The Book of Revelation comprises
some of the most important—yet difficult—
reading in the Bible.**

The Book of Revelation is at once one of the most important books of the Bible for many Christians, yet one of the most difficult books to understand. It holds a unique place in biblical interpretation.

Ten keys should aid the interpreter of Revelation in coming to terms with its unique nature: (1) the genre of the book; (2) the purpose of the book; (3) the structure of the book; (4) the roots of Revelation in Old Testament theology and prophecy; (5) the essential unity of the book; (6) the ethical

dualism of the book, especially in the Great Controversy theme; (7) the important theological themes; (8) the book's sanctuary emphasis; (9) the distinctions between the symbolic and the literal, with particular attention to numerology; and (10) the message of Christ, as opposed to a schematization of history.

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To say Revelation is a prophecy, however, is to tell only part of the story. It is a very special kind of prophecy. Not only is it the only book of the New Testament that deals almost exclusively with the future, but it is also the most thoroughgoing example of biblical apocalyptic prophecy. It is the book from which the genre “apocalypse” takes its name.

1. The Genre of Revelation

Revelation claims to be a prophecy. In its prologue, a blessing is pronounced upon the one who takes to heart the words of “this prophecy” (1:3). Again, in the epilogue, a similar saying is pronounced by Jesus Himself: “Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book” (22:7). An angel tells John in 22:10, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book.” This same angel apparently regards John as among the prophets, because he speaks in verse 9 of “your brothers the prophets.” And Revelation is called a prophecy twice more in 22:18, 19.

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its name. Though it was not the first apocalyptic work, it is the most characteristic and well known of all. The very first word of the book is *apokalypsis*, meaning an unveiling, uncovering, or revealing of something previously hidden. From this word we get the name *Revelation*. Many things that were previously hidden regarding the future are now revealed in this book.

Revelation also has elements of an epistle. Following the preamble in 1:1-3, there is a typical introduction in verses 4 and 5, following a style similar to that of the Pauline epistles. First, the name of the writer is given, followed by the identification of the addressees. Finally, there is a salutation, wishing grace and peace to the recipients from the triune Deity. In the subsequent vision of 1:9-3:22, seven letters are dictated by the glorified Christ to John, to be sent to the seven churches named in 1:11. Each of these letters, in turn, follows a slightly modified epistle form in which the recipients are

named before the author identifies Himself. Instead of a salutation at the beginning, Jesus moves directly to the point: “I know your deeds,” but ends with an individual appeal and promise to each church. The book itself also ends with a close composed of appeals and promises and a final benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen” (22:21).

The genre of Revelation, complex as it may be, nevertheless offers us some keys for its interpretation in harmony with the function of each aspect of the genre. As a prophecy, it can be expected to speak prophetically, bringing a message direct from God. This is the substance of the first three verses of the book, assuring us that the message is from God, sent via His own appointed channels of revelation, and that there is a blessing in properly receiving it.

John designates it as “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ” (1:2), signifying that it carries the twofold witness that ensures its authority and veracity. We cannot afford to neglect it. Many today prefer not to consider its claims to prophetic authenticity as valid. Yet it has stood the test of time, and we ignore its claims to our own detriment. We will never be able to interpret the book correctly if we begin by denying the claims it makes to speak prophetically.

Second, the nature of its prophetic

character is explicitly oriented toward the future. It represents that aspect of prophecy that reveals things to come. If Revelation is not accepted as actually foretelling the future, one will see only a feeble attempt at prophecy after the fact, which makes it a book of history that has little relevance for later generations.

Third, because Revelation is apocalyptic prophecy, we need to recognize that it differs in a number of significant ways from classical prophecy. Its primary purpose is not to deal with local, contemporary issues, but with the sovereignty of God in history and His broad, historical plan for the redemption of His covenant people and final judgment on their enemies. Apocalyptic is known for its cosmic sweep and emphasis on end time, among other things. This means we should not look for a narrow, local fulfillment of its visions, but should see the broad outlines of history from the time of John until the return of Christ to render judgment on sin and sinners, gather His covenant people, and establish His eternal kingdom. All history is moving toward this end and should be seen from this perspective. The great controversy between Christ and Satan is a major theme of Revelation, and a striking ethical dualism is apparent. The symbolism is extensive and composite, challenging us to understand it at a figurative level, but one

consistent with established biblical criteria and practice.

Finally, the epistolary aspects of the genre remind us that, as with other New Testament epistles, there is both a theological and a hortative purpose to the book. The theological elements serve as a foundation for the hortative elements. The appeal is very personal.

2. The Purpose of Revelation

The Book of Revelation has both an explicit and an implicit purpose. The explicit purpose is clearly stated in the very first verse of the book: “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.”¹ According to this verse, God gave to Jesus a revelation to pass along to His servants to show them what must soon take place. This explicit purpose makes plain the future orientation of the prophetic contents of this book. At the same time, it conveys a sense of the imminence of coming events, for it states that these events “must soon take place.” Verse three adds that those who take to heart the words of this prophecy are blessed “because the time is near.” This clause, “the time is near,” is expressed again in 22:10.

In 4:1, at the beginning of the section of the book often considered historical in focus, John is invited by Christ, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after

this.” Again the future is a key aspect of the prophecies of the book. The sense of imminence is also conveyed explicitly and repeatedly, keeping expectation alive in readers’ minds. At the end of the book, the recipients are told three times by Jesus Himself, “I am coming soon!” (22:7, 12, 20).

Besides this explicit purpose of revealing the future as imminent expectation, an implicit purpose seems to coincide in the repeated calls for endurance and faithfulness on the part of the readers and hearers. Apocalyptic prophecy is given to meet the needs of those facing adversity. The precise nature of the adversity faced by the readers of Revelation has been debated by scholars, but there is little question that the book seems to have been written especially for those facing difficult times, including persecution. Jesus appeals to believers to hold fast till He comes, even unto death, so they will not lose their crown of life (2:10, 25; 3:11). There are further calls for patience and faithfulness on the part of the saints who face the persecuting beast in 13:10; 14:12. Many promises are made to those who overcome, despite obstacles, by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony. This suggests the hortative purpose of the book, to encourage those facing trials and persecutions to be faithful until the end, in light of God’s sovereignty, the victory of the Lamb, and the promises of coming

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vindication and reward for the saints and judgment on their enemies.

3. The Structure of Revelation

Though there is little scholarly consensus on the overall structure of Revelation, most agree on a few key structural elements for any careful study of the book.

Probably the most important structural element is the division of the book into two main parts, one emphasizing primarily salvation-historical events and the other emphasizing primarily eschatological events. Most scholars divide the book between chapters 11 and 12. However, a number of Seventh-day Adventist scholars follow Kenneth Strand’s chiasmic structure, which places the division between chapters 14 and 15.² In reality, chapters 12-14 constitute a unit containing a mix of both historical and eschatological events, making it difficult to assign it exclusively to either section. Chapters 12-14 could be called the Great Controversy vision, which points all the

way back to the beginning of rebellion in heaven and points forward to the glorified redeemed standing victorious with the Lamb on Mt. Zion. In any case, chapters 1-11 fall in the historical section and chapters 15-22 fall in the eschatological section. Contents of these sections must be interpreted accordingly. The visions of chapters 1-11 deal primarily with events that would occur between John’s day and the Second Coming, while the visions of chapters 15-22 deal primarily with events that take place at the end time and beyond. Since the historical visions generally cover events up to the end time, obviously there will be eschatological events found at the end of those visions in particular. It is hazardous for the interpreter to stray from this structural guideline.

A second important structural element is the explicit use of groups of seven throughout the book: seven letters, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. Some authors have attempted to structure the whole

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book according to groups of seven, but this may be going beyond the self-evident, although evidence for some others has been frequently cited. The explicit groups of seven form literary units that should be held together. Each of these literary units has an introduction that, except the first, reveals events taking place in the heavenly sanctuary while the events of the respective groups of seven are taking place on earth. These introductions cover the whole period represented by the respective groups, not just its beginning. Taken together with their introductions, they cover most of the Book of Revelation, leaving only the prologue, chapters 12-14, chapters 17-22, and the epilogue unaccounted for. If chapters 12-14 constitute a unit, as noted above, then only chapters 17-22 remain to be structured. Various proposals have been made, none of which is decisive. But we can know that they deal with final events and the judgment on God's enemies and the final reward of the saints.

Other important structural features include the prologue and epilogue, which include an epistolary introduction and conclusion and manifest remarkable similarities; recurring parallel themes and symbols that tie the book together as a unit; possible chiasms; and recapitulation of the historical visions, each covering the period from John's day to the Second Coming, in different ways, for different purposes.

4. The Relation of Revelation to the Old Testament

No other book of the New Testament draws on the Old Testament as heavily as does the Book of Revelation. Unless one appreciates this fact, one cannot fully grasp the meaning of the book. John is heavily indebted to the Old Testament for much of the theology, vocabulary, and symbolism of Revelation, although it is always Christologically informed. This is not to suggest that John did not receive his messages in visions, as he claims. Rather he saw things

remarkably similar to those shown to Old Testament prophets and found it convenient to describe them by utilizing familiar Old Testament language and thought forms brought forcibly back to mind by his own visions. The extent of this indebtedness has been shown well in the significant work by Hans K. LaRondelle, *How to Understand the End-Time Prophecies of the Bible*.³

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Interestingly, there are no direct quotations, or even citations, of the Old Testament in Revelation, only backgrounds to which John seems to allude indirectly. These Old Testament backgrounds can be evaluated fairly objectively following a methodology established by Jon Paulien. Based on verbal, thematic, and structural parallels, he suggests ways of evaluating the certainty with which texts may be deemed to function as allusive backgrounds in Revelation.⁴

5. The Unity of Revelation

In the early 20th century, a few proposals disputed the unity of the

Book of Revelation. Most scholars today, however, agree on its unity. The complexity of the structure, interconnected as it is, is one of the compelling arguments for its unity.

One portion of the Book of Revelation is frequently interpretable by recourse to another, simply by cross-referencing the imagery or language. For example, the mention of the beast that comes up from the abyss in 11:7 and the great city spiritually called Sodom and Egypt in verse 8 may seem somewhat obscure in that context until one compares the language with chapter 17, where the great city and the beast that comes up from the abyss are more fully described and explained. Many similar examples exist throughout the book. Thus, the unity of Revelation permits it to interpret itself in many areas, supplemented, of course, by Old Testament allusive backgrounds, guided by verbal, thematic, and structural parallels to various Old Testament texts and contexts.

6. The Ethical Dualism of Revelation

One of the prominent characteristics of Johannine literature is its ethical dualism. This is no less characteristic of Revelation than it is of John's Gospel or his Epistles.

Ethical dualism refers to the clear and essential contrast between good and evil, no matter in what ways it is manifest or characterized. In Revela-

tion this dualism appears in the Great Controversy motif, centered in chapter 12. It begins with the war in heaven between Michael and the dragon, and continues in the struggle on earth between the dragon-beast, including his heads and horns (earthly civil powers that accomplish his purposes), and the pure woman and her offspring, first the male Child (the messianic Lamb Himself), then the rest of her offspring. The pure woman is also shown in contrast to a great harlot, a religio-political power reigning over the kings of the earth and responsible for the blood of the saints and prophets. The symbol of the pure woman, in the end time age, is transformed into the bride of the Lamb by whose blood her children have overcome the dragon. The two women are also depicted as two cities in Revelation: The harlot is the great city variously characterized as Sodom, Egypt, and Babylon; while the bride is the Holy City, the new Jerusalem. The dragon, the beast (from the sea), and the false prophet (the beast from the earth) seem to form a triumvirate on earth (16:13) that constitutes a counterpart of the heavenly Trinity.

This ethical dualism is far-reaching in Revelation. There is little room for any middle ground. Most things belong to either one camp or the other. Any rational being, at least, cannot be neutral. One may be temporarily identified with the wrong

camp (e.g., 2:2, 9, 13, 20; 3:9; 18:4), but one belongs innately to one or the other. The reader or hearer of the book can quickly identify which is the right side to be on and what needs to be done to be on that side. Once the two sides are clearly identified, it remains for the reader to choose which side to be identified with and to be faithful to that decision until the end.

7. Important Theological Themes in Revelation

The Book of Revelation is primarily concerned with a few theological issues: (1) God's sovereignty, (2) God's justice, (3) the process of salvation, (4) the role of Christ in salvation history, (5) the role of the church in God's salvific plan, (6) the role of revelation and prophecy in communicating what is essential for salvation, (7) the role of personal decision in preparation for the judgment. These issues are closely intertwined in the book.

One cannot truly understand the issue of God's justice independently of His sovereignty. He is sovereign because He is Creator of all things (4:11). He is before all else, greater and more powerful than all else, wiser than all else, and holier than all else (1:8; 4:8; 6:10; 15:3, 4). No one can question the infinite wisdom of His judgments, because He sees the end from the beginning and judges righteously. When He has completed

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His judgments, He is declared just and true in light of the equity with which He judges. Then He sets up His eternal kingdom, free from all unrighteousness.

Another reason for the proclamation of His justice, or righteousness, is that He has provided salvation as a free gift to the believer through the blood of Christ, the Lamb. The process of salvation is described at several points in the book, beginning in 1:5, 6. It is clear that it centers on the figure of the Lamb, making it Christologically oriented. The Christology of Revelation is extensive, particularly in the variety of titles and functions given to Christ in the book. Besides His function as sacrificial Lamb, Christ also functions as the promised Child of the woman (12:4, 5), as Lord of the church (1:10–3:22), as Intercessor in the heavenly sanctuary and the One who effects the covenant (5:6–11:19), as Judge of the nations (6:16, 17; 14:10; 19:11–15), as returning Son of man (14:14–16; 22:7, 12, 20)

and conquering King of kings and Lord of lords (17:14; 19:16), and finally, as Shepherd of His redeemed people (7:17) and the One who shares with God the worship of the redeemed hosts on the throne of the universe (22:3), among other things.

The people of God, or the church, also play a significant role in salvation history. This becomes evident from the very beginning, where the glorified Son of man is revealed to John as walking in the midst of seven golden candlesticks, which represent the churches, and as holding in His right hand seven stars, which represent the angels, or spiritual leaders, of the churches. The messages that Christ delivers to the churches make their role abundantly clear. The churches, and the spiritual leaders of the churches, are the designated recipients of the message of Christ to His people. It is within the churches that Christ and His Spirit work for the salvation of His elect. That the whole book is addressed to God's people in the context of the

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church becomes self-evident in 1:4 and 22:16. The pure woman at the heart of the book represents the corporate people of God in both the old and new dispensations. She is Christ's beloved, who is transformed into the bride of Christ, represented by the holy city, New Jerusalem, in 19–22. The church militant becomes finally the church triumphant.

The whole book is designated a revelation and a book of prophecy, as well as the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (1:1-3). This is not merely a designation of genre, but a theological assertion regarding the essential connection between communication of objective truth from God and the process of salvation. The expression, "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus," which reappears throughout the book, is rooted in the legal concept of the twofold witness as essential for establishing truth. This is made more graphic in the case of God's two witnesses in chapter 11, who prophesy for 1260 prophetic days and are martyred for their wit-

ness in the Great City. The two witnesses represent the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, or the witness of the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles in the Old and New Testaments. All revelation is in harmony. Jesus Himself initiates the prophetic witness to the churches in Revelation. And He is called the Faithful and True Witness (3:14), as well as the Word of God (19:13). The revelation itself is in fact the revelation of Jesus Christ (1:1). At the same time, Christ speaks to His churches by His Spirit (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22), and 5:6 shows the intimate relation that exists between Christ and the Spirit, so that it would be a mistake to overlook the important role of the Holy Spirit in the prophetic revelation of God to His people. The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (19:10).

As readers of the book respond to the prophetic witness calling them to salvation and steadfast faithfulness, they become prepared for the coming judgment. Everything in Revelation is to be understood in light of this

impending judgment. The sense of imminence and urgency is everywhere communicated, from the very first verses (1:2, 3) to the very last verses (22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20). Appeals to respond are also found repeatedly in the book, from 1:3 to 22:17. Blessings and promises are offered as incentives to accept the messages of the book and prepare for an eternal dwelling with God in a re-created heaven and earth, where sin, pain, sorrow, and death are no more. The path may be strewn with hardships, suffering, even death, but the one who overcomes and endures to the end will receive the crown of life. This inheritance is worth every sacrifice. The redeemed will dwell with God and He with them.

8. The Sanctuary in Revelation

Another of the important keys to understanding the Book of Revelation is a realization of the extent to which the sanctuary functions as a framework for the work of Christ in our salvation. On one level, John repeatedly mentions the temple as well as various articles of sanctuary furnishings, like seven lamps burning before the throne (4:5), golden bowls full of incense (5:8) and golden censers full of incense (8:3-5), unidentified altars (6:9; 11:1; 16:7), the golden altar before the throne (8:3, 5; 9:13), and the ark of the covenant (11:19). There are also individuals who are designated as priests, and

some who seem to be dressed and function like priests. On a second level, John refers to the performance of some of the sanctuary rituals (8:3-6). The repeated reference to the Lamb and the blood of the Lamb is itself explicit sanctuary imagery. On a third level, careful research has shown that the Book of Revelation seems to follow the cycle of annual feasts associated with the Hebrew cultus.

The extent of these references and the interconnections among them make it unreasonable to consider interpreting the Book apart from the centrality of the sanctuary theme, particularly the work of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary from the Cross to the Second Coming. Much more attention needs to be given to this aspect of the theology of the book than has generally been done.

9. Symbolism and Numerology in Revelation

The Book of Revelation is replete with symbolism and numerology. Extensive symbolism is one of the characteristics of apocalyptic. Numerology is also frequently used in apocalyptic, because numbers may have symbolic value. The symbolic value of a number does not necessarily mean it has no literal value. Some numbers are purely symbolic, while others seem to have a literal value, though perhaps also carrying some symbolic value. The key is to know when something is to be taken

literally and when symbolically. This is no easy task.

Richard Davidson has suggested what may be a valuable insight into solving this problem in the Book of Revelation, at least with reference to sanctuary imagery, which comprises a significant part of the book. It has to do with the eschatological substructure of New Testament typology. He notes that “in the time of the church the earthly antitypes in the spiritual kingdom of grace find a spiritual (nonliteral), partial (nonfinal), and universal (nongeographical/ethnic) fulfillment, since they are spiritually (but not literally) related to Christ in the heavenlies. Thus, we should expect that when sanctuary/temple imagery in Revelation is applied to an earthly setting in the time of the church, there will be a spiritual and not literal interpretation, since the temple is a spiritual one here on earth.”⁵

Conversely, he observes that “during the time of the church, the earthly spiritual kingdom is overarched by the literal rule of Christ in the heavenlies. Consistent with this New Testament perspective, the sanctuary typology of Revelation, when focused upon the heavenly sanctuary, partakes of the same modality as the presence of Christ, that is, a literal antitypical fulfillment.”⁶

If this system of interpretation is consistently followed, many problems seem to be resolved in deciding

what should be taken literally and what symbolically. Nonetheless, numbers still may have symbolic value, even in heavenly scenes that would be otherwise literally interpreted according to the above method. To determine what various numbers stand for requires careful cross-referencing of Scripture.

Traditionally, three has often been considered the number of God, or unity, while four has been considered the number of earth, or creation, but this is largely without biblical precedent. The numbers three and four have no clear symbolic meaning in Scripture, though some would suggest that symbolic meanings may be inferred from the emphasis given in various texts. John Davis argues that seven is the only number that can be clearly shown to have a symbolic use in Scripture.⁷ Seven, the sum of three plus four, represents completeness or perfection throughout Scripture, and is the most important number in Revelation. Ten is a number used primarily as a factor in multiplication, to create large round numbers. It appears as a unit in Revelation only in the 10 horns, with respect to which the number may have more literal than symbolic value. If it has any symbolic value, it is probably as a whole or round number, representing a basic mathematical unit of general nature. Twelve, incidentally the product of three and four, is widely understood to be the kingdom num-

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ber, though this is inferential only, used as it is for the people of God who make up the kingdom, represented by the 12 tribes in the time of Israel and the 12 apostles in the time of the church. The numbers one thousand, ten thousand, and multiples thereof are generally used in Revelation to signify very large numbers, not exact figures.

The primary basis for interpreting either symbolism or numerology in Revelation is from within Scripture. Doing a concordance study is very useful, but one should focus particularly on those passages in which the image or number seems to have a symbolic value in the context. One may also learn what certain symbols or numbers represented in extrabiblical literature, but should exercise caution in allowing such information to outweigh or contravene the biblical evidence. Kenneth Strand has made some very practical suggestions for interpreting the symbolism within Revelation, to which the student of

Revelation is referred.

10. The Message of Christ in Revelation

Reserved for last is probably the most important key to interpreting Revelation. One needs to begin from the right assumptions. What is it that the book is trying to communicate? Some readers of Revelation believe John was writing about events taking place in his own day, as well as events in the very near future. These interpreters ignore John's own claims about what he is recording and why. They fail to accept John's claim that he received visionary revelations from God that pertain exclusively to the future, especially to the time pertaining to the end-time judgment and the setting up of Christ's eternal kingdom. They see only the beginning of Christian history, but not the middle or the end. Nor do they see the message of Christ to His people in every age.

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writing only about the final events of history and the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. They fail to see that John includes much historical activity before he gets to the end: seven churches, six seals, six trumpets, during which events continue on Earth. It is only in the days when the seventh trumpet sounds that the mystery of God is finished (10:7). These futurist interpreters see the end of Christian salvation history, but not its beginning or its struggle through the long ages that intervene before the end. Nor do they see the message of Christ for His people in every period.

Still other readers believe John is writing primarily about history, setting forth a detailed scheme of history by which we can reconstruct the past and predict yet future events if we will but decode the symbols correctly. The results are a vast diversity of opinions about the meaning of the many symbols and the resulting reconstructions of history past, present, and future. These historicist interpreters may be correct in seeing a rough outline of

history afforded by the prophecies of Revelation, but they are often overzealous in attempting to define every detail of the symbolism in their scheme of history, resulting in speculative confusion and a tendency to keep changing the interpretation as extended time makes old interpretations invalid. Such a focus on history draws away the reader's attention from the main message of the text, which would have been of spiritual benefit and blessing if applied as intended.

Even those idealist readers who, wrongly, believe Revelation is not about history—either past, present, or future—risk missing the true message of Christ to the reader by losing the perspective of the message, which is rooted in and tied to the progress of Christian salvation history.

Only a balanced approach to the interpretation of the book, keeping in mind the true object of the revelation, will yield satisfactory results. The revelation was given not only for John or for the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, but for God's ser-

vants (1:1), who would live in the interim before the final judgment, to prepare them for the coming events. It was not preserved in the canon of Scripture as a history textbook, but as a message from Christ to His people, with the object of preparing them spiritually for what would lie ahead. Unless one reads the book with the intention of discerning this message from Christ, he or she has missed the most important content of the book. What happened in the past serves only as a witness to the trustworthiness of the revelations concerning the future. What will happen in the future is only a promise, dimly understood, of what we may expect, depending on the choices we make in the present. It is to our present choices that the book constantly appeals.

The most meaningful part of the book for our experience is the letters of Christ to the seven churches. Here Christ speaks personally to every individual in every age. The seven churches represent the complete cross-section of the church in every age, as well as the various experiences that any individual Christian may have at any given time. That this is true may be seen from the injunction, repeated seven times: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22 NRSV). The appeal is individual, and the message to each church is applied to all churches.

If one takes a similar approach to each of the visions of Revelation, seeking for the personal message from Christ to the reader, understood within the historical context to which the vision pertains and in light of the development of events described in the vision, with a view to personal application and present decision making, the blessing of 1:3 and 22:7 will accrue to the reader. That should be the goal of the study of the Book of Revelation. That alone will prepare the reader for what yet lies ahead. □

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