

“John has seen Jesus!” The room was stunned into silence. “It is true! We have received a letter from John on Patmos, and he has seen Jesus.” Tears of joy streamed down his face.

“I don’t think any of us has much strength left. I know it seems like the Romans are winning.” Rufus gazed into their still incredulous faces. “But what I have here . . .” He paused, his voice caught in his throat. He tapped the letter, unable to speak, choking back raw emotion.

The small group was drawn inexorably into his excitement as they wondered where this was leading.

Rufus’ voice was almost a whisper: “Jesus showed John the answers to so many of our questions, and he told him to write down the things he saw.”

The atmosphere was tense with expectation. Rufus looked around at the haggard faces that filled the room. He looked at Damon, knowing just how painful it must have been for the new young brother to see his beloved Antonia hauled off to the arena. Each face he looked at was lined with grief and fear. Steadying his emotions with several deep breaths, Rufus unrolled the scroll and began to read:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw – that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

Even Damon’s spirits began to lift as the words rekindled the certainties in his aching soul.

“Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last. I am the Living One;

I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death . . .”

## *2,000 years on . . .*

As I am writing this, I have just left a room of men and women who live under intense persecution for the sake of the Gospel. Because of their love for Christ, they have lost what little they had. Most have been ostracised from their families. Some have been arrested; others have faced angry mobs. They live in a region where economic survival is all but impossible, their livelihoods having been stolen by successive political regimes, each of which has plundered the nation’s natural resources.

We have just finished fifteen hours of systematic study through the book of Revelation. As our journey through Revelation proceeded, I watched the tears well in their eyes. Some said they wept all night, literally, for joy and wonder at the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the certainty of their hope, as portrayed in this book we call Revelation. The book spoke to their hearts, healed their wounds, and eased their fears.

It is a wonderful book; a book of life and joy and refreshment. Indeed, I love this book.

More than once, I have taught and studied Revelation with persecuted believers in forbidden countries and seen it change their lives, strengthening their faith for the struggle with the empires in which they live. I have taught it to people for whom imprisonment, or even death, for the cause of Christ are pressing realities, and have seen God richly bless them with its message of strength and hope. That is why it was written!

Beyond all the voyeurism of Western believers who excitedly search the world’s evil to find fulfilments of their latest prophetic theories on Revelation; beyond all the revenue generated for publishers by prophetic gurus and end-time novelists; beyond

all the fear and confusion created by the spectacular and science-fiction-like interpretations given to the pages and events in this book, I want Revelation to be a blessing to you. Like all of Scripture, I want it to change your life by the “teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness”<sup>1</sup> it offers.

In that sense, it is no different from any other book of the Bible. It is intended for the encouraging, teaching, strengthening, and correcting of God’s people. And yet it *is* unlike any other book because, more than any other, it is treated as a lucky dip of wild speculation, a hunting ground for every imaginable theory on the times in which people think they might live. Revelation has been used to make fools of believers again and again by men and women with an unhealthy fascination for evil, and who love to speculate on its embodiment in this president, this nation or that organisation.

I have seen people so afraid, that they will not even dial a phone number with the number 666 in it. A group of churches in one country in which I teach have buried enough food and water in the ground to last them seven years, and every few years they dig it up, use it, and bury fresh stores.

I have met people so confused by Revelation that they refuse to read it. For them, it is altogether too complex, too difficult. At the opposite end of the spectrum, there are people for whom Revelation has become almost an obsession. Every time you meet them, they tell you about some new computer called the beast, or a new microchip, or credit card, or world president or something that is now the certain fulfilment of part of their prophetic scheme. When each latest fad or fiction has blown over, they never seem to apologise to the people they have terrified or confused. No, they just leap onto the next bandwagon of speculation. I can’t recall how many times over the last fifty years or so I have been told with overflowing excitement that someone has heard the Jews

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1      2 Timothy 3:16

are about to build a new temple in Israel, or that there is a big computer in Europe called the Beast.

During my own lifetime, the book of Revelation has “revealed” various American presidents, Russian leaders and confederations of nations. We have been poised for a battle of Armageddon a score of times. Even when the calendar changed from 1999 to 2000, some Christians were driven to distraction by the fear that this would signal the supposed battle of Armageddon. And what fools they made of themselves and us all.

Worse than that, what fools they have made of Christ! A very dear friend of mine, an Indian Christian leader, tells of scores of terrified believers – pastors, in fact – crowding into his home at the turn of the century, uncertain of their faith and their future. That is not the ministry of Christ to his people! It was fear, fuelled and maintained by Revelation’s myriad of end-time speculators and end-time fantasy novelists, as they portrayed a Jesus who cannot control his world, and a cross that cannot save them from a credit card or microchip.

As I hear some of the speculators, I fear that they have more confidence in Satan than in Christ, and certainly a far greater fascination with evil than with righteousness.

In some quarters, the interpretation of Revelation is a determiner of Christian orthodoxy or sincerity. One can disagree on many things in Scripture, weighing various opinions, but disagree on their interpretation of Revelation and they doubt whether you are even a Christian.

Is that what God intended? Did God think that his Word was too simple and so he decided to give us a blast at the end to confuse and terrify us? Did he intend to give us such a puzzle that only the super-students and prophetic magicians could interpret it? Did he intend to lock it up so that none of us could know what he was talking about? These are serious questions.

If our answer to those questions is no, and yet we find that people *are* afraid or confused, we are not reading or teaching the

book as God intended. Or, dare I say, we are not actually reading the book at all.

A colleague of mine was responsible for marking a Bible correspondence course for a particular organisation. She discovered that she was at variance with the organisation's perspective on Revelation and so she asked the leaders if she was at liberty to answer students' questions according to her conscience. She was told that she would be dismissed from her position because she held a different view of Revelation from the leaders'. In a moment of inspiration, she had the temerity to ask them if they had actually studied the book of Revelation for themselves, systematically, from beginning to end. Their honest answer was no. This is a serious and yet fairly typical situation. Many people have a confirmed view, one that they will fight for and divide on, a view used as a demarcation line between sound and unsound believers, without having read or studied the book themselves. They have seen the charts and diagrams, read the novels, seen the movies, had their pulses quickened by talk of beastly computers, implantable microchips, and the latest rumours about the imminent commencement of a new temple in Israel, but have never actually read the book reflectively in its entirety. They come to the book and dip into it with a head *already* filled with all the fascinating, mystifying and exciting things they have been shown in complex charts or scary movies.

Exciting as they might be, popular novels about the end times are *not* Scripture. They are fantasy, pure and simple! They are fiction - hundreds of pages of the author's own creation, usually based on the tiniest hint or phrase from Scripture, or worse, based upon statements that were never actually in Scripture in the first place.

The pathway before us in this brief work is:

*first* to establish what it is we are looking at - what type of book Revelation is and what is God's intention.

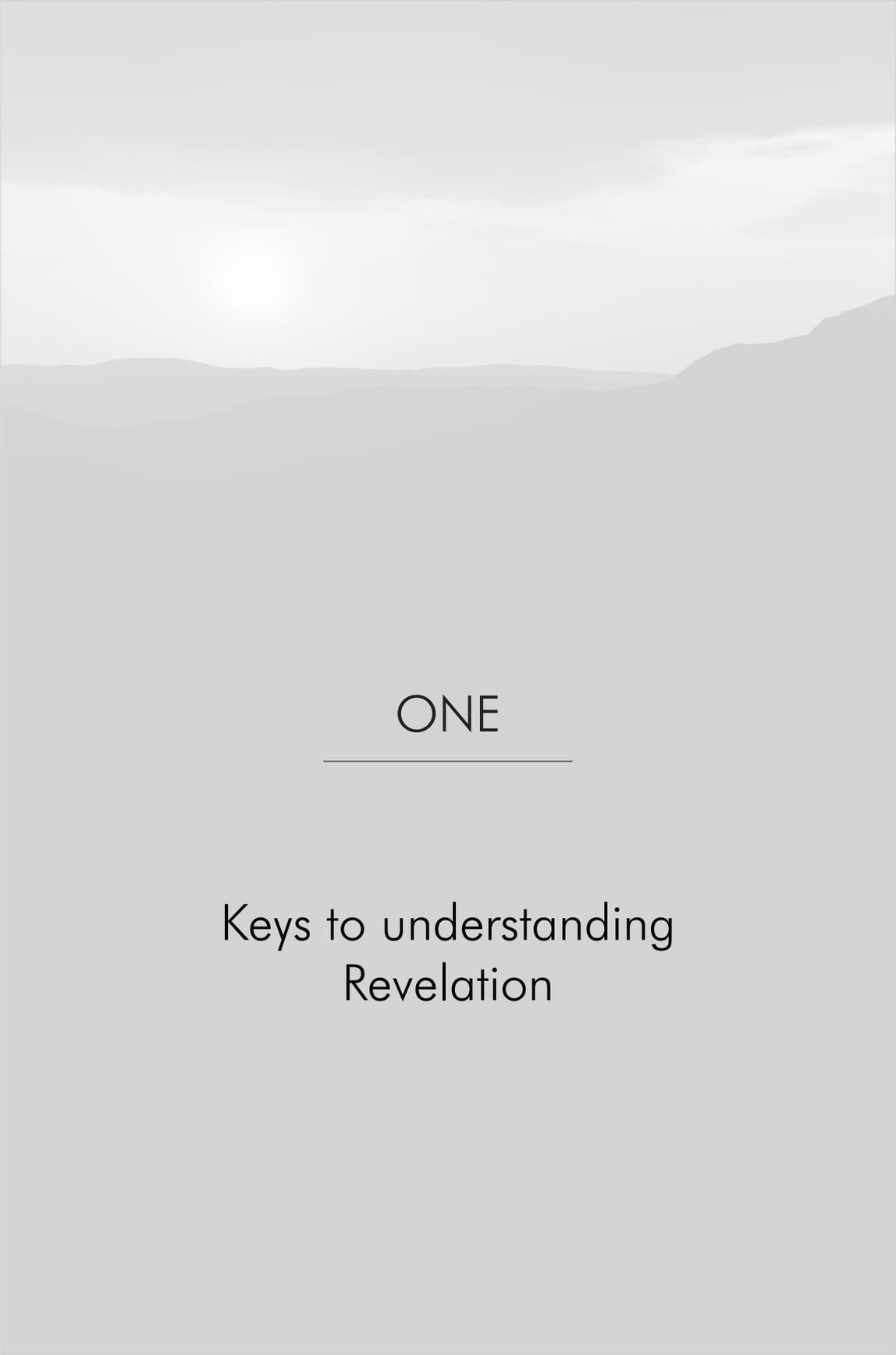
*second* to work through Revelation systematically and simply, just as the very first readers would have done.

I do sincerely hope you learn to love the book of Revelation, to rejoice in it, to find nourishment for your soul in it. I hope it becomes for you one of God's green pastures in which you can lie down; a quiet stream from which you can drink. May it indeed restore your soul. May it become an abundant table for you in the presence of your enemy; wine to fill your cup to overflowing. Having learned to love the book, and the One about whom the book is written, may you never fear, even though you are called to walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Fear not, little flock,  
for it is your Father's good pleasure to  
give you the kingdom.

*Luke 12:32 (RSV)*





# ONE

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Keys to understanding  
Revelation



## Chapter 1

# Keys to understanding Revelation

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The interpretation of any piece of literature is determined by the type of literature it is. A fairy story is not history; a poem is not prose; history is not allegory and so on. What you determine a document to be – its style and structure – will affect your reading of it.

One of the books my middle daughter studied in her literature degree at university was *Alice in Wonderland*. Before reading it, the students were told it was Lewis Carroll's (Charles Dodgson's) scathing attack on organised religion and society in general. So, on that basis, students plunged into the book finding all sorts of allusions to historical personalities, events, places, and organisations. And indeed, if you have already decided that that is what *Alice in Wonderland* is about, you can certainly make it say all of those things and more. You can probably work out who each character is, what mushrooms and roses represent, or what jabberwocky is. However, if – as is the case – you accept that its original intent was a story written for a little girl, a story just for the fun of it without the usual heavy moralism of the time, you will read *Alice* differently. In fact, you will read it as the author intended, and you will probably thoroughly enjoy it.<sup>2</sup>

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2 By way of interest, Lewis Carroll (a nom-de-plume for Charles Dodgson) wrote an Easter Greeting to his young readers of *Alice*, which was included at the end of the earlier editions, but not in most later editions – probably for being

The same is true of any kind of literature, including the various types of literature in the Bible. Psalms are not prose, parables are not psalms, the Gospels are not allegory. As we come to interpret any portion of Scripture, we need to approach it according to the type of literature that it is. In a parable, for example, the meaning is not in the detail but in the overall point of the story. In the parable of the Good Samaritan we are not required to try and work out whether the coins represent baptism and the Lord's Supper, whether the inn is the church, whether the donkey is the pastor, or the oil is a bucket of holy water at the entrance to a cathedral. To do so is ridiculous, and totally robs the story of its original purpose and impact. In the case of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), a question was asked: "Who is my neighbour?" And an answer was given: "A certain man journeyed from Jerusalem to Jericho . . ." The meaning is not in the detail but in the story as a unit, because the whole story is the answer.

There is perhaps no portion of Scripture where the basic concepts of interpretation are abandoned more than the book of Revelation. The result has been that its message and impact have been lost in a sea of confusion and chaos. As we approach Revelation in this study, we will apply normal principles of interpretation. I have called them keys because they help us open its message. Please note that, while we are applying them to Revelation, they are the same sorts of procedures and interpretive disciplines that should apply to any portion of Scripture.

## Key 1. The Style or Literary Genre

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The book of Revelation is a specific style of Jewish literature. This cannot be overstressed. It is a recognisable, identifiable,

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too religious. In it, he revealed his desire to show little children, brought up in the austere, joyless moralism of the time, that God created humour, wonder and imagination and that these things could be enjoyed without dishonouring God. He told his young readers that God had never intended their lives to be divided into two halves but that everything was to be enjoyed. Separate a document from the author's intent, and you can make it say whatever you wish.

unmistakable literary genre. It is *apocalyptic* literature. We find it in other portions of Scripture, however apocalyptic is a style not just confined to the Bible.

*Apocalyptic* is a style of writing that employs great images and symbols to convey truths that might not be readily discovered by normal investigation. Things from the spiritual realm, events behind the scenes, ideas beyond our finite understanding, are unveiled through great and overwhelming symbolism. Apocalyptic uses stars and angels, monsters and mountains, numbers great and small to convey the *feeling* or the *impact* of the truth even while the detail of the truth might be beyond human knowledge. As with parables, the message is *not* in the detail. Please underscore that in your mind – the message is not in the detail. It is not scientific literature with numbers that can be subjected to calculators and dimensions that translate into diagrams.

The message is in the overwhelming feelings and impressions conveyed through its images, and in the stark contrasts between good and evil.

Jewish writers were familiar with the concept of using huge, overwhelming images and hyperbole to speak to the heart about what God had done. Let's look at an example of this style of writing, one set in the midst of an historical book. In Judges chapter 5, Deborah is rejoicing over the victory God won for the people of Israel. Look at some of the things she said . . .

“O LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the land of Edom, the earth shook, the heavens poured, the clouds poured down water . . . From the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera.” (Verses 4, 20)

None of us imagines that God has two legs and marched out of the land of Edom, treading so heavily on the ground that the earth shook. Nor do we imagine that Alpha Centauri or the Orion

constellation fought for Israel. No, the stars and the constellations all stayed where they had always been, providing pinpoints of light in the night sky. So is Deborah lying? Is she delusional? No, she is overwhelmed with joy and unable to even begin to suggest what events or forces might have been at work behind the victory, so she speaks in huge images that match the abundance of her heart. The images are so strong that everyone around her is drawn into the excitement of the song. God marched through the land! The land shook! The stars themselves fought on our behalf! Rejoice!

Three thousand years later, we still understand what she was saying far more so than if she had given us a scientific and detailed description of the battle.

So it is with apocalyptic literature. The first readers of Revelation would not have searched for hidden meanings and details but would have taken the impressions, and the weight and impact of the symbols, and been moved by the enormity of what God was saying to them. It is when we try to find an exact meaning for every detail, or an interpretation for every symbol, that we get off track. We effectively deny the type of literature, and foolishness results.

Stepping outside the genre for interpretation leads not just to foolishness but to serious mistakes that can end up mocking Christ and robbing the people of God of his message for them.

## Common mistakes when we forget the nature of the literature

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*MISTAKE:* IT LEADS PEOPLE TO THINK THAT REVELATION IS ONLY ABOUT THE FUTURE

Forgetting the nature of the genre leads people to assume that the book is *only* about future events. The logic is simple: By assuming that all of the things described in Revelation are literal events, it

becomes clear that we have not yet seen them. So if we haven't yet seen them, they *must* still be in the future.

However, consider some of the Old Testament images we read without so much as a second thought. In Jeremiah's day God told the people that he was going to send snakes through the land to devour them (Jeremiah 8:17). If we examine the historical record from Jeremiah's day until today, we do not see that event happening. So are the snakes a future event? Working the way some readers do with Revelation, we would have to say yes; one day in the future, snakes will come and eat all the people in Israel. And wouldn't we be foolish!

God's word through Jeremiah was an image of death; an image that drew upon Israel's history, taking their minds back to the time when snakes did come through the camp during the time of the exodus and death resulted (Numbers 11). Snakes did not come in Jeremiah's day, but death and destruction did in the form of the Babylonian army. God went beyond the detail, sending a message to their hearts with an image of painful, irreversible death. It was an image with which they were familiar, a reality drawn from their past. The image is powerful, even though there is absolutely no physical comparison or resemblance between Babylonian soldiers and snakes.

In Revelation, we are told about scorpions with hair like women, teeth of steel, etc. So some end-time speculators try to create realities that look like, sound like, and act like such things and they come up with Black Hawk helicopters or Harrier Jump Jets with long vapour trails that look like hair. And foolishness pours down like rain. Stick with the genre! It is apocalyptic literature. The message is not in the details but in the overwhelming impressions.

*MISTAKE: REVELATION'S IMAGES MUST HAVE AN EQUIVALENT, IDENTIFIABLE REALITY BEHIND THEM.*

In Revelation, we are told of the mark of the beast. In my lifetime it has been authoritatively declared to be bar codes, credit cards,

social security numbers and now it is a microchip – something that can be put on our forehead and wrist. After all, that is what the Bible says. So the race is on to be the first interpreter to identify what the “mark” literally is, or will be.

In the Old Testament, God told his people that his Word should be bound as a frontlet between their eyes, and put on their wrists and the doorposts of their houses. Thinking literally, they made small wooden boxes, put copies of the Law inside them, and wore them on their wrists and foreheads. We laugh and say how foolish to make such a command literal. It is easy for us to recognise that, by doing so, they missed the whole point of what God was saying! How could they so misunderstand the *intent* of God? God was not speaking about words in little wooden boxes strapped to wrists and foreheads, but about his Law in their minds and hearts and homes. Everything they did and thought should be touched by the Law of God.

Might not ancient Israel now laugh at us as we scare ourselves with each new literal possibility? Is God’s message to us that our eternal destiny is determined by a tattoo? Are we allowing ourselves to miss what God might be saying to us in the same way as Old Testament Israel missed the point?

Far more than foolishness, it becomes a major undermining of the Gospel. It sets the work of the cross against the ink of a tattoo. It makes the tattoo *stronger* than the cross, because the tattoo is capable of overturning the work of Jesus on our behalf. (We will think more about marks and mayhem when we get to that portion of Revelation.)

Revelation is apocalyptic literature employing symbols that go straight to the heart. They are symbols relevant to every generation and every culture, and they do not *have* to have a specific, literal, time-and-history equivalent behind them.

*MISTAKE: PROPHECY IS ALWAYS ABOUT THE UNKNOWN FUTURE*

Revelation claims to be a prophecy. For many, that word has come to be synonymous with telling the future, but that is not the way the Bible uses it. Prophecy may speak of future events or of past events, but it is a message for the present given to strengthen, encourage and edify the saints.

Our best definition of prophecy comes from 1 Corinthians 14:1-5. In that section, Paul is comparing the benefits of prophecy with the limitations of speaking in foreign languages to people who can't understand them. In verse 3, he says, "... everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort." This is Paul's description of prophecy. It is simple, clear and direct. If you want to see prophecy in action, look at Acts 15. The Galatian churches had been thrown into confusion by false teachers, and we read that,

Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. Acts 15:32

There you have prophecy in action.

The Old Testament prophets also took the Word of God and applied it to the current situation to strengthen, rebuke, correct, and encourage. They may have had a future component in their message, they also spoke of the history of the people, but their message was for "today". They spoke God's Word to the people in their day so that those people would be affected in their day, even by those things that were as yet to be fulfilled.

*MISTAKE: REVELATION'S SECRETS ARE LOCKED IN BEHIND MYSTERIOUS, CODED SYMBOLS*

Another serious mistake that occurs when we forget the nature of the literature of Revelation, is that it is seen to be a book of symbols that only the specially gifted or initiated can master. This then

establishes an “end-times circuit” with these “specially gifted” people travelling from conference to conference, dazzling and frightening people with the latest speculations and fulfilments. But think about the nature of these apocalyptic symbols for a moment. Most of the symbols are universal. They are the images of dreams and nightmares: dragons, beasts, a hero on a white horse, a woman in distress, floods, falling stars, war, brides, thrones and harvest.

When we read of an angel taking his sickle and reaping the earth, we don’t try to analyse the sickle or work out how big it must be to reap the entire earth with one sweep. Are we cut off at the knees or does the blade of the sickle slip below the soles of our shoes? We are schooled enough in images to know that a sickle is an instrument of harvest; it is as simple as that. Even a child can understand it. Even in the West, where we don’t use sickles anymore, we still understand the symbol.

The light and colours of Revelation are also universal – red for bloodshed, light for goodness, darkness for evil. Heaven is high; its opposite is not just a pit but a bottomless pit – lower than the lowest. There does not need to be a literal pit that is “down”, just as heaven is not literally a piece of geography that is “up”. (After all, on a round Earth, “up” for Australians is “down” for Russians and vice versa.)

Evil is like a prostitute; good is like a pure bride. Evil is destroyed in a banquet of blood and flesh, good is celebrated in a great wedding feast and so on. We understand these things. They are symbols that are universal and that don’t need analysis or particularised identification.

Probably the best interpreters are children, because they don’t try and make the symbols scientific or literal. Speak to them of dragons, earthquakes, floods and snakes and they take all the emotion of those images straight into their hearts and imaginations.

Revelation requires an ability to see the obvious, along with a child-like simplicity and receptivity. Adults compulsively complicate things to the point where they lie beyond normal comprehension. The purpose of the symbols is that they should be easily understood by all generations, in all cultures, in all of history. As the title of the book suggests, they are to reveal not to obscure.

However, a word of caution: to say that Revelation can be understood simply does not mean it is a simple book. As with *all* portions of Scripture, we need to reflect carefully on the message and its application.

We may need teachers to guide us, and we may need to stop and think for a while, but Revelation is not like the Greek mystery religions or Freemasonry, requiring secret knowledge held by a certain sect of the wise.

Revelation does not require major knowledge outside the Bible. It still has meaning for someone without CNN World News or the New York Times!

#### MISTAKE: EVERYTHING MUST BE LITERAL

It is by forgetting that it is apocalyptic literature, that people are drawn into our (particularly) Western desire to interpret every detail literally. Obviously, literal things do occur: there is a Christ, there is a Satan, there are enemies of Christ, there are martyrs, and so on. But those who try to make Revelation a literal book create enormous problems for themselves and everyone else because they are way out of line with the nature of the book. People will fight to the death over such things as a literal mark of the beast, a literal thousand-year reign on earth or a literal New Jerusalem descending from heaven. It must be interpreted literally, they say. But not a literal ten-horned beast, nor Jesus literally riding a horse with a sword in his mouth.

In fact, if we turn symbols into literal things, we have a remarkable Jesus! Jesus is a creature with four legs and a woolly

jacket, he has seven eyes and seven horns, he sits on a white horse, and instead of a tongue, he has a sword in his mouth . . . Really? If we know anything about Jesus, we know that he is not a literal lamb! He was born of a virgin as a human being. But the term “lamb” is eternally powerful because it describes what his *role* was to be like – a sacrificial lamb. The word “lamb” is deeply and powerfully symbolic, but not literal.

We must be consistent then, in our treatment of the symbols. We do not feel we are being dismissive by not constructing a literal, woolly-skinned, four-legged Jesus with seven eyes. Nor are we being dismissive if we treat other symbols and images the same way. Look at what the image conveys about Jesus and rejoice. Then treat the other images in Revelation the same way. So much of the confusion caused by various treatments of this book arises when people step out of the literary genre and into literalism.

We should not be surprised if many different pictures or symbols speak of exactly the same thing. This is not a new concept for us. Ask Jesus what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, for example (Matthew 13). His answer will be that it is like a man sowing seeds in a field. It is like a mustard seed. It is like a net in the ocean. It is like yeast. It is like a pearl. It is like a treasure . . . Was Jesus confused? What is the relationship between a mustard bush and a pearl, or a net and a farmer? None, and yet each separate image or simile is speaking of exactly the same thing – the Kingdom of heaven. Why so many and such variety? Because each symbol adds another dimension to our understanding. In Revelation, Jesus can be a lamb, a lion, a horse rider, a man knocking at a door . . . Each image speaks of the same person but gives a different understanding of his character and function. Literalism creates enormous problems because literalism demands that each symbol describes something different.

No wonder a dear lady I spoke to in Russia said she no longer ever reads Revelation because it is just too confusing. What she had been taught was not only confusing, it was laughable.

SUMMARY:

The first major key to understanding the book is to know what type of literature it is and then to doggedly, deliberately, unswervingly stick to the interpretive principles that relate to that type of literature. Revelation is not history; not anecdote; not allegory; it is *apocalyptic*. Underscore that in your mind, because as a modern, rationally educated, non-Jewish reader, you will always want to drop back into the ways of reading that you are used to and whenever you do, you will begin to create things that are just not in the book.