

The Book of Revelation

From a Jewish Perspective

*To Dr. Walter Wessel, my New Covenant professor of Greek and Revelation at Bethel Seminary West, who taught me the valuable use of Greek while interpreting the Scriptures.
How he loved the New Covenant in its original language.*

The book of **Revelation** is important because it is the last inspired book of the Bible. The New Covenant opens with the four Gospels relating to the First Coming of Christ and the book of **Revelation** closes the B'rit Chadashah with the general theme of the Second Coming of **Christ**. This book is also the climax of many lines of revelation running through both Covenants, and it also brings to conclusion the revelation of many prophecies yet to be fulfilled.

The Second Coming of **Messiah** and the years immediately preceding it are revealed more graphically in **Revelation** than in any other book of the Bible. The book of **Daniel** describes in detail the period from **Daniel's** time to **Christ's** First Coming and speaks briefly of the Tribulation and the messianic Kingdom. But the book of **Revelation** amplifies the Great Tribulation with many additional details, culminating in the new heaven and the new earth and the eternal New Jerusalem.¹

Authorship

The apostle **Yochanan** was caught in a tangled web of emperor worship and banished to the island of Patmos, an island in the Aegean Sea, off the coast of Asia Minor or modern day Turkey. The name **John** occurs four times in the book (**1:1, 1:4, 1:9, 22:8**). From the second century on, it was held by the Church that **John** the apostle, the author of the Gospel of **John**, wrote the book of **Revelation**. By that time, he was a very old man, probably in his eighties. Earlier **Jesus** had said to him: **In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world** (**Yochanan 16:33**). It was from this exile that **Yochanan** wrote his letters to the seven churches who were facing this kind of conflict.

Date

Most evangelical scholars believe that **Revelation** was written in AD 95 or 96. This is based on accounts of the early righteous fathers of the faith, who said that the Apostle **John** had been exiled on Patmos Island during the end of the reign of the Roman Emperor Titus Flavius Domitianus, commonly known as Domitian. Following the death of Domitian in AD 96, **Yochanan** was reportedly allowed to return to Ephesus.

Original Context

During the rule of Domitian, emperor worship, which had been a kind of off and on thing during the history of the Roman Empire, came to a climax. Emperor worship began after the death of Julius Caesar. Cesar Augustus succeeded him and he allowed emperor worship along with the worship of the goddess of Rome who was called Roma. Tiberius, who followed Cesar Augustus, discouraged emperor worship. The mad emperor Caligula, who insisted on emperor worship, followed him. Claudius then became emperor of Rome after the assassination of his nephew Caligula. Nero, who followed Claudius, didn't take his own divinity seriously and did not insist on emperor worship. But then came Domitian after a quick succession of four nondescript suitors to the throne. He came to the throne in AD 81, and he brought a complete change. He was the worst of all things, a cold-blooded persecutor. With the exception of Caligula, he was the first emperor to take his divinity seriously and to demand Cesar worship. The difference was that Caligula was an insane devil, whereas Domitian was a sane, calculating devil. He took emperor worship to a whole new level and began a campaign of bitter persecution against all who would not worship him and the ancient gods. He called all those who opposed him, "the atheists." He declared that anyone who addressed him in word or in writing was commanded to say, "My lord and my god Domitian." Emperor worship was even more pronounced in the outer provinces. People were forced to come to his statue and take a little pinch of incense and drop it in a flame and say, "Cesar is lord." In particular, he launched his hatred against the Jews and the Christians.

The Purpose of the Book

The purpose of **Revelation** is to reveal events that will take place immediately before, during, and after the Second Coming of **Yeshua Messiah**. As a result, it devotes most of its revelation to this subject in **Chapters 4-18**. The Second Coming itself is given the most graphic detail anywhere in the **Bible** in **Chapter 19**, followed by the messianic Kingdom in **Chapter 20**. The Eternal State is revealed in **Chapters 21-22**. Therefore,

the obvious purpose of the book is to complete the prophetic theme presented earlier in the prophecies of the TaNaKh and the prophecies of **Yeshua**, especially in the Olivet Discourse (**Matthew Chapters 24 and 25**). Along with a large amount of prophecy, the book also touches on a great deal of theology in a wide variety of subjects. There are also many applications to daily righteous living that can help us today. So specific knowledge and anticipation of **ADONAI's** future program can motivate us to be committed to **Jesus Christ** and live holy lives.

The Rules of Interpretation

All too often teachers of the Bible have had one set of rules for the interpretation of non-prophetic passages, but have been unable, or unwilling to apply the same set of rules to prophetic passages. In this way, prophecy has often suffered at the hands of its enemies. But prophecy has also suffered at the hands of its friends. Even when the same set of rules is applied to prophecy as to other passages, there has often been an inconsistency in the application of rules, giving way to a tendency to spiritualize and/or sensationalize parts of a passage. Therefore, prophecy has also suffered at the hands of its friends, which, in turn, has given prophecy a bad name in its witness to the world.

There are four basic rules of interpretation that are keys to understanding the prophetic word. The first is called *The Golden Rule of Interpretation*. *When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word as its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and self-evident truths, clearly indicate otherwise.* In other words, this law states that all biblical passages are to be taken exactly as they read unless there is something in the text indicating that it should be taken some way other than literally. If the words of the Bible do not mean what they say, then no one can say what they mean. If *the Golden Rule of Interpretation* is applied consistently, much of the "newspaper prophecy" can be avoided, as well as other errors such as Amillennialism. So when the plain sense of Scripture makes sense, no other sense needs to be sought. As in any language, literal or normal interpretation does not rule out figures of speech, but even these have a literal background. We should not approach the Bible with the idea that it is filled with symbols that are hard to understand. It is not. We should approach the Bible with the assumption that it can be understood just like any other book that is taken literally. *The Golden Rule of Interpretation* is the first of four basic rules of interpretation and is by far the most important because it lays the foundation for the other three.

The second law is called *The Law of Double Reference*. This law observes the fact that often a passage of a block of Scripture is speaking of two different persons or two different events that are separated by a long period of time. In the passage itself they are blended into one picture, and the time gap between the two persons or two events is not presented by the text itself. The fact that a gap of time exists at all is known because of other Scriptures. But in that particular text itself the gap of time is not seen. A good example of this law is some of the prophecies of the TaNaKh regarding the First and Second Coming of **the Messiah**. Often these two events are blended into one picture with no indication that there is a gap at all. **Zechariah 9:9-10** is a good example of *The Law of Double Reference*. **Verse 9** is speaking of the First Coming, but **verse 10** is speaking of the Second Coming. These two comings are blended into one picture with no indication that there is a separation of time between them. Another example is **Isaiah 11:1-5**. **Verses 1-2** speak of the First Coming, while **verses 3-5** speak of the Second Coming. Again, the two are blended into one picture with no indication of a gap of time between the two. Because many of the prophetic passages follow this principle of *The Law of Double Reference*, this is an important law to know.

This law should not be confused with another law often called *double fulfillment*, which I do not accept as valid. This law states that one passage may have a near view and a far view; hence, in a way, it may be fulfilled twice. **Isaiah 7:14** is often used as an example of this view. The near view would be a reference to a child being born in Ahaz's day; but the far view is that of a virgin-born child, which is the birth of **Christ**. But a single passage can only refer to one thing unless the text itself states that it can have many fulfillments.

The third law is *The Law of Recurrence*. This law describes the fact that in some passage of Scripture there exists the recording of an event followed by a second recording of the same event giving more details to the first. Hence, it often involves two blocks of Scripture. The first block presents a description of an event as it transpires in chronological sequence. This is followed by a second block of Scripture dealing with the same event and the same period of time, but giving further details. An example of *The Law of Recurrence* in a prophetic passage is **Ezekiel 38:1 to 39:16**. **Ezekiel 38:1-23** gives a complete account of the invasion of Israel from the north and the subsequent destruction of the invading army. This is followed by a second block of Scripture, **Ezekiel 39:1-16**, which repeats some of the account given in the first block and gives some added details regarding the destruction of the invading army. A similar example is found in the first two chapters of **Genesis**. From **Genesis 1:1 to 2:3**, we are given an outline of the seven days of creation. **Chapter 2** verse **3** concludes with the seventh day. But following that in **Gen 2:4** through the end of **Chapter 2**, we have the story of the creation of Adam and Eve. It is obvious that this second block is going back and giving us the details of exactly how Adam and Eve were created.

The fourth law is *The Law of Context*, which states: *A text apart from its context is a pretext.* A verse can only mean what it means in its context and must not be taken out of its context. When it is taken out of its context, it is often presented as meaning something that it cannot mean within the context. A good example of this is **Zechariah 13:6**, which states: **If someone asks him, "What are these wounds on your body?" he will answer, "The wounds I was given at the house of my friends."** This verse is often used as a prophecy of **the Messiah**. Pulled out of context, it does indeed sound like it refers to **Yeshua**. But the context of **Zechariah 13:2-6** is speaking of false prophets. This is the danger of studying a verse by itself rather than in its context. The old saying that you can prove *anything* by using the Bible is only true when you pull verses out of their context. Therefore, these are the four basic rules of interpretation, which, if followed, will help in the study of the Bible in general, and of prophecy in particular.²

*The Use of the Hebrew name **ADONAI** rather than **YHVH***

A basic problem in Judaism is that **God's** personal name is never spoken. When Moses saw a bush that burned without being consumed in the wilderness of Midian, **God** revealed **Himself** to Moses and told him **His** own personal name. That Hebrew name consists of four letters. It is forbidden to speak the four-letter name of **YHVH** (Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay), also known as the Tetragrammaton (four-letter writing). Today, **ADONAI** is a word used to refer to **God** by many people of the Jewish faith. Jews simply translate **YHVH** as, *the Name*.

The name of **God** is a serious topic in Judaism, and there are many rules and traditions surrounding its use. Only the High Priest was allowed to speak *the Name*, and then only in the Temple - which of course no longer exists, making it prohibited for anyone to speak the name anywhere. Since it is necessary to speak the name of **God** during certain prayers, a way had to be conceived of to refer to **Him** without committing blasphemy. So it is that when reading prayers that refer to **YHVH**, many Jews will read the name **ADONAI**, instead. It is their way of showing respect for the use of **God's** name.

The relation between a name (*shem*) and a thing (*davar*) hold a foundational level of importance in the Holy Scriptures. From the Jewish mindset, *naming* and *being* are the same thing. As a result, the names of people in the TaNaKh reflect their personal characteristics. In the same way, *the Name* of **God** reflects **Him** and **His** attributes.

Thus, God does not have many names, He has only one name - YHVH (Yud Hay Vav Hay). All the other names in the Bible describe His characteristics and attributes. Hear, Israel! ADONAI our God, ADONAI is One (Deuteronomy 6:4). The Jewish tradition, then, forbids the pronunciation of **the Divine Name**, but instead chooses to use ADONAI in its place. Therefore, I will frequently be using ADONAI in this devotional commentary instead of YHVH.

*The Use of the Hebrew term **TaNaKh** rather than the phrase, the Old Testament*

The Hebrew word **TaNaKh** is an acronym, based on the letters T (for "Torah"), N (for "Neviim," or the Prophets), and K (for "Ketuvim," or the Sacred Writings). It is the collection of the teachings of **God** to human beings in document form. The term Old Testament implies that it is no longer valid, or at the very least outdated. Something old, to be either ignored or discarded. But **Yeshua Himself** said: **Don't think I have come to abolish the Torah and the Prophets, I have not come to abolish but to complete (Matthew 5:17 CJB).** As a result, I will occasionally be using the Hebrew acronym TaNaKh instead of the phrase, the Old Covenant, throughout this devotional commentary.

The Chronological Framework of Revelation

As indicated above, a literal view of **Revelation** accepts **4:1** through **22:21** as truly prophetic, built around a chronology beginning during the time of the *Gentiles*, written in the AD 90s and extending into eternity. Prior to the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth, which starts the ages of eternity, there will be a final period of a thousand years on earth called the messianic, or millennial, Kingdom (**20:1-7**).

Prior to the messianic Kingdom, the world is to be ruled by a satanically controlled man identified as **the beast**. This period of totalitarian world rule under the beast is predicted to be just forty-two months, **Chapters 4-11**, before he is defeated and **God** pours **His** wrath out on a non-believing world for another forty-two month period in **Chapters 12-18**. Thus there is a final seven-year period of history immediately prior to the messianic Kingdom. **Chapters 4** and **5** describe a great scene in heaven immediately preceding the seven-year period called the *Great Tribulation* on earth. There, in heaven, all the redeemed (**5:8-13**), sing praises to **the Lamb of God, the Redeemer**.

Since **God's** faithful are not appointed to suffer wrath, **the Lord** promises: **I will keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole earth to test those who live on the earth (Revelation 3:10)**. It, therefore, becomes clear that the seven years of the *Great Tribulation* described in **Chapters 6 through 18**, are prophesied to take place only *after* the coming of **the Messiah** to raise and receive **His** redeemed ones (**John 14:2-3; First Corinthians 15:51-57; First Thessalonians 4:16-17**). This leaves only **Chapters 2 and 3** to deal with the time period of about AD 96 to the rapture. These chapters consist of letters to seven real churches in Asia Minor, who would represent the different periods of Church history and the very real needs of all the believers during the Dispensation of Grace.³