

## 01. Introduction

### The Book of Revelation (The 'Apocalypse')

“I will not let you go”



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The Old Testament

The New Testament

God

Catechism

1. Christian Belief

2. Christian Liturgy

3. Christian Living

4. Christian Prayer

Creation

Church/Mission

Pope Francis

Priesthood

Religious Life

Education

RCIA/Cursillo

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[Click HERE for Alphabetical Index of topics](#)

[Click on “New Testament” \(left menu\)](#)

[scroll down to “Apocalypse”](#)

[scroll down to “3. Retreat”](#)

# Asia in 90's



1. Christian life and mission
2. Seduction of oppressive Empire  
'worshipping Caesar'
3. Resistance
  - Economic and social disadvantage
  - Mob violence
  - Persecution (Patmos)



The Apocalypse is reminding them of the power of the exalted Christ and of his active presence among them.

Invited to share in the divine intimacy of the Risen Christ

“I will not let you go.”

Today rekindle mission

‘Joy of the Gospel’.

The world is graced

Power other than love must fail.

# The Apocalypse in inspired

Origen 235AD 'generally accepted'

Athanasius 367AD includes in the canon

Western Church: North African synods 393 and 397

Jerome's Vulgate c. 400AD

Eastern Church checkered career due to unorthodox use

The Apocalypse is accepted by Christians as the word of God. As with all of the sacred scriptures, the inspired word is expressed in human words, with all the power but also all the historical conditioning and necessary limitations that are inseparable from human words.

To accept the Apocalypse as God's word is to accept that the author was responding to inspiration when he composed the work and that it cannot be read properly outside an environment of prayer.

To recognise that God communicates himself to us through human words is to acknowledge the need to discern the meaning of this communication by using the ordinary tools of literary criticism.

The language of the Apocalypse is highly symbolic. Symbolic language keeps a close link between ideas, images and sense experience. It expresses reality in a way that touches human sensibility, fires the imagination, engages the affections and stirs the will. It is a most appropriate vehicle for communicating religious truth.

The difficulty with symbolic language is that like a prism it reflects light in many different directions at once, making it difficult to grasp the fullness of its meaning.

Interpretation helped by other Apocalypses

# Other Apocalypses

## 1. In Canonical Books of the Old Testament

Isaiah 24-27

Ezekiel 40-48

Zechariah 9-14

**Book of Daniel**

## 2. In Canonical Books of the New Testament

Eschatological Discourse in Synoptics



## Other Apocalypses (not in the Canon)

2. 'The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha (Ed. James Charlesworth) Vol 1

Ethiopic Apocalypse of Enoch

Slavonic Apocalypse of Enoch

Hebrew Apocalypse of Enoch

Apocalypse of Zephaniah

Greek Apocalypse of Ezra

Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch Greek Apocalypse of Baruch

Apocalypse of Abraham

Apocalypse of Adam

Apocalypse of Elijah

Apocalypse of Daniel

## Other Apocalypses (not in the Canon)

### 3. New Testament Apocrypha (Ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher) Vol 2

Ascension of Isaiah

Apocalypse of Peter

Ezra 5 and 6

Christian Sibyllines

Coptic Gnostic Apocalypse of Paul

Coptic Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter

Apocalypse of Paul

Apocalypse of Thomas

Interpretation is helped by the fact that the author of the Apocalypse is a highly intelligent writer. He writes in an imaginative way, but he does so in an extraordinarily controlled fashion.

One key to decoding his symbols is to watch for the first time a symbol is used, because its first use provides the context for further uses of the symbol, and the author is very consistent. A careful reading eliminates all kinds of interpretations as patently missing the mark.

Ugo Vanni SJ, professor in Pontifical Biblical Institute Rome, 1987

## Distorting the meaning of the Apocalypse

Rather than attend to its hard message which challenges the reader to live an authentic Christian life here and now in difficult circumstances and to oppose evil, some see the Apocalypse as referring to an indefinite future and choose to throw up their hands and wait for God to intervene.

Alternatively, they read the symbolic language as indicating that God is intervening right now, and they call people to join their sect in order to escape involvement with the real world and prepare themselves to be caught up by God into a new state of being.

No matter how weird an idea may be, its proponents seem to be able to find support for it somewhere in the Apocalypse. They dismiss as being in league with the 'beast of the Apocalypse' anyone who opposes their strange, unsupported and frequently blatantly absurd interpretations of the text. They are especially keen on locating signs of the imminent coming of the end of the world in current happenings . We are assured that these happenings were foretold in this book of prophecy. Chapter and verse are readily supplied.

If you think I am exaggerating read *Armageddon* by Jimmy Swaggart (Louisiana, J. Swaggart pub.1987).

The author uses the Apocalypse as though it were a ball by ball description of the final days of human history, with the wicked finding their due punishment from God, while the just are rapt into the heavens by God, escape the judgment, and then come back and reign on the earth for a thousand years. And so it goes on.

Fine as science fiction, but Swaggart believes that he is describing reality, and as revealed by God.

The uninformed reader readily falls victim to such propaganda, because its perpetrators claim to be in possession of important information from God which provides the key to an otherwise complex and confusing world.

By asserting that the Apocalypse, as they interpret it, is God's word, they claim that their interpretation is beyond the reach of reason or the ordinary laws that govern meaning in human communication.

Mindless acceptance and rote memorisation are all that are required of the reader.

Summing up the fruits of scholarship concerning the Apocalypse, Brevard S. Childs writes:

‘There is a wide consensus that all interpretations which would see in the book a prefiguring of various epochs of world or church history are misconstrued ... Modern commentators, both conservative and liberal, are agreed that the book arose during a crisis of the first century, and was addressed to the needs of its recipients of the same period within the thought patterns of that era. In sum, the book offers neither a blueprint of future history nor a timeless symbol system.’

*(The New Testament as Canon: an Introduction. SCM 1984, 503)*



Some apocalyptic writings reveal a fascination with the other world, and take the reader on imaginary journeys into heaven or hell. Scholars note an influence here from Greek and also from Persian literature.

Others, like the Book of Daniel (the only apocalypse in the OT canon), and the Apocalypse (the only apocalypse in the NT canon) are concerned directly with history.

Like other apocalyptic works, the Apocalypse focuses on the supernatural world, for it intends to examine history from a divine perspective.

Like them also, it is concerned to make the point that the ultimate judgment of history transcends space and time as we know it.

Being a Christian work, its focus is on the influence upon history of the exalted Christ.



If you are studying the Apocalypse hoping to use it as a crystal ball that will give you inside information concerning the twenty-first or twenty-second century, you are in for a complete disappointment. A reading of the Apocalypse was never meant to by-pass either faith or intelligence.

The author's inspired insights concerned his own world. They do, however, have much to teach us. If we understand him intelligently, and reflect in faith on what he has written, we will be helped as we seek divine assistance in responding to our world in the way in which Jesus responded to his.

St Ephrem, 4th century, commenting on the Diatessaron, I,18-19  
Harmony of 4 Gospels by Tatian c.150)

‘Lord, who can grasp all the wealth of just one of your words? What we understand is much less than what we leave behind, like thirsty people who drink from a fountain. For your word, Lord, has many shades of meaning, just as those who study it have many different points of view. The Lord has coloured his words with many hues so that each person who studies it can see in it what he or she loves. The Lord has hidden many treasures in his word so that each of us is enriched as we meditate on it ... Coming into contact with some share of its treasure, you should not think that the only thing contained in the word is what you yourself have found ... Because you could not exhaust it, you should give thanks for its riches. Be glad that you were overcome and do not be sad that it proved too much for you...

St Ephrem, 4th century, commenting on the Diatessaron, I,18-19

‘Rather let the fountain quench your thirst than have your thirst quench the fountain. Because, if your thirst is quenched and the fountain is not exhausted, you can drink from it again whenever you are thirsty. But if when your thirst is quenched the fountain also is dried up, your victory will bode evil for you. Be grateful for what you have received and do not grumble about the abundance left behind. What you have received and what you have reached is your share; what remains is your heritage. What at one time you are unable to receive because of your weakness, you will be able to receive at other times if you persevere. Do not have the presumption to try to take in one draught what cannot be taken in one draught, and do not abandon out of laziness what you may consume only little by little.’

John-Paul II, Introduction to *'The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church'*, 1993, page 19-20.

'To arrive at a completely valid interpretation of words inspired by the Holy Spirit, one must first be guided by the Holy Spirit and it is necessary to pray for that, to pray much, to ask in prayer for the interior light of the Spirit and docilely accept that light, to ask for the love that alone enables one to understand the language of God who is love. While engaged in the work of interpretation, one must remain in the presence of God as much as possible.'

The Apocalypse, like the other writings of the New Testament, was written to be proclaimed by a preacher to the assembled community.

After a brief introduction, we have the opening liturgical dialogue, followed by a prophetic instruction. The Conclusion of the Apocalypse mirrors its Introduction

There are **seven scenes** in the Apocalypse, each of which is concerned with the historical situation confronting the author and his audience. In a masterful way, the author provides the preacher with the means of diverting the focus of the assembly from the persecution they are undergoing to what God is doing in their history. The movement is one of gradual concentration as wider circles narrow and spiral in towards the centre.

Between each scene, we are taken from the earthly to the heavenly plane as the author focuses the attention of his readers on the 'real' world, present and active at the heart of our human experience, but transcending the limited, often false, and surface world in which we are tempted to live our lives. The 'real' world is the world of God's action, a world visible only to the eyes of faith. In this way he reveals the true meaning of history in the light of the already achieved victory of Christ.



# The Structure of the Apocalypse

Prologue (I:I-II)

The Transcendent I (I:12-20)

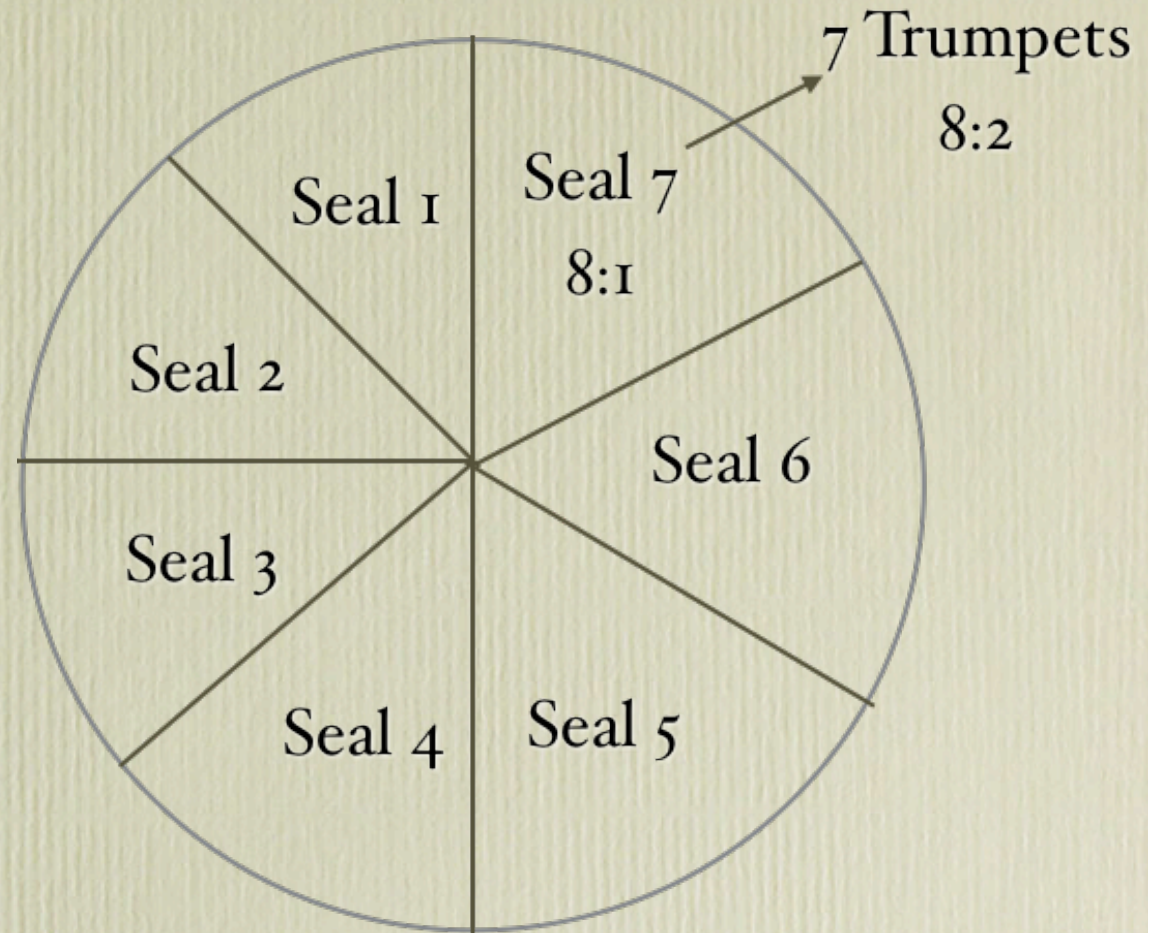
Scene 1: Seven Letters (2-3)

The Transcendent II (4-5)

Scene 2: Six seals are broken (6)

Interlude (7:1-8)

The Transcendent III (7:9 – 8:6)



# The Structure of the Apocalypse

Scene 3: Six trumpets are sounded (8:7 – 9:21)

Interlude (10:1 – 11:14)

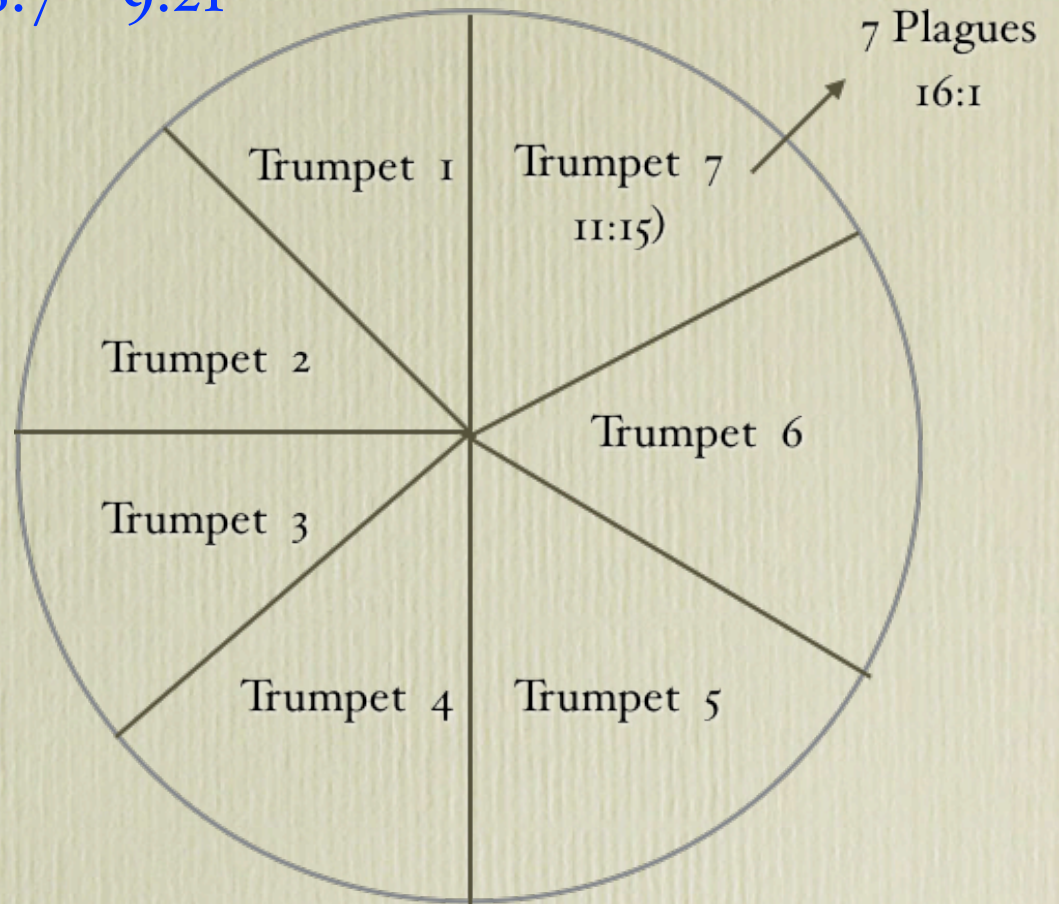
The Transcendent IV (11:15 – 12:12)

Scene 4: Good and Evil (12:13 – 14:5)

Interlude (14:6-20)

The Transcendent (15:1-8)

Scene 5: Seven Plagues (16)



# The Structure of the Apocalypse

Interlude (the fall of Rome) (17-18)

The Transcendent VI (19:1-10)

Scene 6: Victory over evil (19:11 – 20:15)

The Transcendent in History: the Church of God on earth (21:1 – 22:5)

Epilogue (22:6-21)

Transcendent I is a powerful portrait of the exalted Christ, the Lord of history. This portrait is meant to remain before our eyes throughout the work.





Come Creator Spirit, Come