

The Deep Things of God
By Jon Paulien

Chapter Five

Tools of the Trade

About a decade ago I received a package from a pastor (let's call him George) I respected a great deal. It contained a letter asking me to read the accompanying notebook on a very difficult passage in Revelation. George wanted my feedback on his research. I get many more such requests than I can handle, so I laid the notebook aside at home, hoping to get to it sometime.

A couple of nights later I was tossing and turning, completely unable to sleep. Not only did sleep elude me, my mind was crystal clear, as if I were wide awake, walking in the sunshine! Nothing is more boring than being wide awake, crystal clear, in total darkness. It felt like solitary confinement! So I decided I might as well get up, go to the other end of the house, and quietly use that time in a useful way.

I walked out to the living room and remembered George's notebook. I went downstairs to my home office and brought the notebook back upstairs, where it wasn't so chilly. As I read through his explanation of the passage, I was fascinated by his logical presentation. If I had not

already spent twenty years on that passage I would have been completely convinced by his exposition. George wrote clearly and with passion. Yet for some reason, he saw something in each symbol and in each verse that my research indicated was not possible. It seemed to me that he was stringing a series of zeros together, believing that it added up to something. I thought it would not be difficult to set him straight.

Unlike other moments of apparent genius at three o'clock in the morning, the light of day did not change my opinion of George's notebook. So I sat down and wrote him a 15-page, single spaced letter (a few days later). He responded a week or so later. He didn't buy a single thing I said! Back and forth the letters flew (funny how you can find time when the issue is interesting enough). No matter what either of us wrote, we didn't agree on a thing in this text!

Finally, one day it dawned on me what was happening. I was reading the book of Revelation as if it were written around 90 AD. He was reading it as if it were written in 1990 AD! Since it seemed rather obvious that Revelation was written in 90 AD, I thought I had the smoking gun that would help him see my point of view. So I sat down and explained it to him in a letter. He responded. It was the first time we agreed on anything! But was I ever in for a shock!

He explained to me his belief that as an Adventist he was obligated to read the book of Revelation as if it were written directly to Adventists. As if John were familiar with the writings of Ellen White. As if John had spent time in the SDA Bible Commentary and other Adventist books. As if John were still a living prophet, speaking directly to the issues that drive Adventists in today's world.

I must confess, I remain fascinated with his logic and his honesty. While his position would have been soundly rejected by the participants in the 1919 Bible Conference and most Adventist thought leaders since, he has maintained his conviction and continued to express it with clarity and passion. I remain, however, convinced that such a stance lies at the root of most misunderstanding of the book of Revelation.

No matter how one pretties things up, the reality is that the book of Revelation was not written in the last decade or even the last century. It was written in the first century and spoke powerfully to that time and place. Everything we have covered so far in this book tells us that reading the book as if it addressed our personal situation directly is a sure-fire way to misreading the book's purpose and message. And I have noted through the years that Adventists who have taken George's position on Revelation rarely agree with each other. To read the Apocalypse from one's own point of view is to end up where you began, with ideas of your own making. In the chapter that follows I will begin to outline the path leading to an understanding of the book of Revelation in the context of its own time and place.

Revelation's Own Introduction

I would like to begin by asking the question, *What does Revelation tell us about itself?* The best method for studying Revelation will be the one that emerges naturally from the text. We can learn a great deal about the book of Revelation from the first four verses of the book.

"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him to show to his servants what must take place soon, and he signified it sending it through his angel to his servant John, who testified concerning the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, which he saw. Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy,

and who keep the things which are written in it, for the time is near.

“John, to the **seven churches which are in Asia**: Grace to you and peace from **the one being and the he was and the one coming**, and from the seven spirits which are before his throne. . .”

Revelation 1:1-4 (author’s translation)

These four verses contain a few clues about how the author himself would have wanted us to exegete the book of Revelation. Let me remind you that exegesis involves a couple of things: seeking to understand **what** the writer was trying to say and holding open the possibility that we might learn something from the text. The text itself should govern what we see in the text. What do these four verses tell us about a proper exegesis of Revelation?

A Christian Book

“**The revelation of Jesus Christ**, which God gave to him. . . .”

Revelation 1:1 (author’s translation)

It is evident from the very first phrase (“the revelation of Jesus Christ”) that Revelation is a Christian book (Rev 1:1). Jesus Christ is present everywhere, both explicitly (1:1, 2, 5, 9; 11:15; 12:10, 17; 14:12; 17:6; 19:10; 20:4, 6; 22:16, 20, 21) and in symbol (1:12-16; 5:5ff.; 7:17; 12:5, 11; and 14:1ff., etc.). There are references to churches (chaps. 1-3 and 22:16) and to the cross (1:18; 5:6, 9, 12; 11:8; 12:11). The careful reader also becomes aware that there are scores if not hundreds of echoes of NT themes, vocabulary and theology in the book. As a result, although the book has a different style, vocabulary and subject matter than the rest of the NT, we should not expect its theology to be radically different than what we find there. It is the natural conclusion to the New Testament, the collection of books that forms the basis for Christian faith.

Let me give you a quick example: in Revelation 9:2-6, there is an incredibly strange description of locusts and scorpions tormenting people for five months. But if you compare Revelation 9 with Luke 10:17-20, you discover that the message of the two passages is the same--God takes care of His people in the face of a demonic plague. So even though the language is radically different than the rest of the New Testament, the theology is in harmony with the other twenty-six books of the New Testament. The book we are studying is a revelation of Jesus Christ and everything in the book needs to be understood in light of that insight.

A Divine Revelation

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which **God gave** to him to show to his servants what must take place soon, and he signified it. . . .”

Revelation 1:1 (author’s translation)

The second thing we can learn from Rev 1:1-4 is that the book is a divine revelation (“God gave”). He repeatedly points to a supernatural origin for the scenes portrayed in his book (1:10-20; 2:7,11 etc.; 4:1; 10:11; 17:1-3; 19:9,10; 22:6-10). He considers himself a prophet and his work a prophecy. The book of Revelation is more than just the intention of a human writer, it is also the intention of a divine writer. It is God through Jesus Christ who not only gives the visions but selects the symbols for this book (“and he signified it”). Revelation is more than just a human author’s intent. The vision is from God, therefore the words selected by John are also the words of God.

If this book comes from God, the meaning of Revelation will often go beyond what the

human author might have understood. This, however, does not license interpreters to indiscriminately seek all kinds of extended meanings in the book. Just as God limited Himself when He took on human nature in the incarnation so He also limited Himself when He chose to express Himself in Scripture through the language of human authors. Thus, whatever divine intent we may see in a passage should be a natural development of the human author's own language and purpose. In the text the divine intent and the human intent meet. Having discerned as far as possible the meaning of the human author's language, the divine claims of the book compel us to ask what extended meaning God may have placed in the text, to be revealed by history and later revelation.

Relationship to Daniel

"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him to show to his servants **what must take place soon**, and he signified it sending it through his angel to his servant John, . . .
Revelation 1:1 (author's translation)

In his monumental commentary on the book of Revelation, G. K. Beale demonstrates that this puzzling phrase, "what must take place soon," is a deliberate allusion to the book of Daniel, chapter 2.¹ There Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar that the dream came to him because God wanted to "show him what must happen in the last days" (Dan 2:28—author's translation from Greek OT). By alluding to this text Rev 1:1 seems to be saying that events Daniel promised would occur in the distant future were now getting under way and would be clarified in the book of Revelation. For Beale this means that the content of Revelation is to be understood in significant relationship to Daniel 2 and its parallel apocalyptic prophecies, such as Daniel 7.

The author of Revelation seems to believe that there is a close relationship between the

end times of Daniel and the prophecies of Revelation. The two books need to be laid side by side. Their essential themes are similar. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, (Rev 1:5-6; 3:21; 5:5) the great consummation of God's plans outlined in Daniel and Revelation is now secure, the final work of God is under way. To read Revelation without a close awareness of the prophecies of Daniel would be a mistake.

The Language of Apocalyptic Symbolism

"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him to show to his servants what must take place soon, and he **signified** it sending it through his angel to his servant John,
Revelation 1:1 (author's translation)

In the very first verse of Revelation is a clear indication of symbolism in the book ("and he signified it"). In the rest of the Bible the normal procedure is to take things literally unless it becomes overwhelmingly clear that symbolism is intended. In Revelation, on the other hand, the opposite strategy is called for. In Revelation you take things symbolically unless it is overwhelmingly clear that a literal understanding is necessary.

But even a cursory reading of Revelation reveals that the symbolism of the book is out of the ordinary. It is even rather bizarre at times. There are animals that do not look anything like the kind you find in the forest. There are abundant symbols and concepts that are foreign to normal life. For example, there are beasts with seven heads and ten horns. If you ever saw something like that in the forest you would know you had been drinking! One of these seven-headed, ten-horned beasts even had feet like a bear, a body like leopard, and a mouth like a lion. Such an animal does not exist in the real world.

But while this kind of symbolism may seem strange to us at first, it was fairly common in the ancient world. In a book called 1 Enoch (or Ethiopic Enoch), written perhaps a hundred years before the time of Jesus, there are seven archangels, including Gabriel and Michael. There are, of course, archangels in the book of Revelation as well, and they usually number seven. Enoch also has a heavenly city with twelve gates, three on each of four sides. In another book, called The Apocalypse of Zephaniah, a Jewish book of the first century, you have a remarkable description that is similar to the book of Revelation:

“Then I arose and stood and I saw a great angel standing before me with his face shining like the rays of the sun in his glory, since his face is like that which is perfected in his glory. And he was girded as if a golden girdle were upon his breast. His feet were like bronze which is melted in a fire. And when I saw him I rejoiced for I thought the Lord Almighty had come to visit me. I fell upon my face and I worshiped him. He said to me, Take heed. Do not worship me. I am not the Lord Almighty but I am the great angel Eremiel who is over the Abyss and Hades, the one in which all the souls imprisoned from the end of the flood are which came upon the earth until this day.”

Apocalypse of Zephaniah 6:11-15

There are a number of elements in this description that remind me of the vision of Jesus found in Revelation 1. Apocalyptic was a style of writing in the ancient world, one that communicated very clearly in those days. So while the language of Revelation is often bizarre, the first century reader had a context in which to interpret it. What I find exciting is that this apocalyptic style is increasingly popular in today's world. Movies like *The Lion King*, *Armageddon* and *The Matrix* apply apocalyptic themes and images to life as we know it. This suggests to me that the book of Revelation has never been more relevant than it is today.

The Churches of Asia

“John, to the **seven churches which are in Asia**: Grace to you and peace from **the one being and the he was and the one coming**, and from the seven spirits which are before his throne. . .”

Revelation 1:4 (author’s translation)

The third point that we gather from Rev 1:1-4 is that the book of Revelation is set in Asia Minor, the churches belong to the Roman Province of Asia. This is no surprise to us, we spent some time on the book’s setting in the first chapter. The question is, was Revelation written for a later time or was it intended to be understood by its original audience? The answer is found in verse 3.

“Blessed is the one who reads and **those who hear the words** of this prophecy, and who keep the things which are written in it, for the time is near.” Rev 1:3 (author’s translation). The highlighted words translate a Greek expression which implies “hear with understanding.” In other words, the book of Revelation was intended to be understood. This is a point of difference with the book of Daniel, where a significant portion of the book was sealed up, not intended to be understood:

“I, Daniel, was exhausted and lay ill for several days. Then I got up and went about the king’s business. I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding.”

“But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge.”

Dan 8:27; 12:4

So there were things in the book of Daniel that were not understood by the original author or the original audience. But that is not the case with the book of Revelation.

In the Greek, the verb for “hearing” (Rev 1:3) has two possible implications: you can hear **without** understanding or you can hear **with** understanding. In Rev 1:3 the verb “hear” is

combined with an object (“the words”) in the accusative case and that means that the “hearing” is combined with understanding. In other words, the book of Revelation is not a book that was sealed up for some future time, it was intended to be heard and understood.

So the book of Revelation tracks with the concept we learned in Chapter Two, **God meets people where they are**. God met John where he was. In the process He used some of the live symbols of his day. The book is set in the Asia Minor of the first century and it makes the most sense in that context.

Let me give you an example of what I mean by a “live symbol.” In Revelation 1 there is a glorious picture of Jesus. He is the source of the revelation John receives in his vision. He has the keys of hell and of death. He is the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last. He sends His angels to guide John, etc. There is a surprising connection between these images and the ancient setting of Asia Minor.

There was an ancient goddess named Hekate who was very popular in western Asia Minor. In those days the universe was thought of as a three-story building--heaven was at the top, hell was below, and in between was the earth where people lived. Hekate had the keys of both heaven and hell. She could travel back and forth between the three “stories,” reporting to earth what was going on in the other two. She was also known as “The Beginning and the End” and used angels to mediate her messages. Can you see the parallels between Hekate and Jesus? John seems to be telling the pagans of Asia Minor that the true source of revelation, the true holder of the keys, was not Hekate, it was Jesus. All that they had sought from Hekate, they would find in Jesus.

It seems clear, then, that the book of Revelation reflected things that were going on in the real world of Asia Minor. The book of Revelation was not isolated from its world, it was written in the language of that time and place. But the question naturally arises: “Why would an inspired writer use pagan concepts? What purpose would there be in describing Jesus in the language of a pagan goddess?”

I think there are two reasons. First of all, pagan concepts could be used to communicate. This kind of language communicated to people who lived in a pagan culture, it was part of their thought world, it made sense. Secondly, inspired writers might use pagan language to do battle with pagan theology. If you are going to oppose ideas that are floating around, you need to speak the language in which those ideas are given. So the book of Revelation is more than just a letter to the churches, it also enters into a dialogue with the ancient non-Christian world. The book addresses the time and place of first century Asia Minor.

The Grammar of Revelation

“John, to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from **the one being and the he was and the one coming**, and from the seven spirits which are before his throne. . .”

Revelation 1:4 (author’s translation)

My translation of verse 4 is an attempt to show how the grammar of Revelation would have struck the original readers. The greeting at the beginning of the book comes from the One “who is and was and is to come.” But in the Greek, the language is an unnatural combination of participles with a finite verb. That’s why I translated it, “From the one being, and the he was, and the one coming.” That is not good English grammar and it is even worse Greek grammar. So

right at the beginning of the book you run into this incredible construction that would stop any Greek in his or her tracks. What is going on here? Is the writer of the book uneducated? Is he translating in his mind from some other language? Or is this some sort of “language of heaven?”

In the Introduction we examined several possibilities briefly. Probably the best explanation is that John was not from a Greek background and was separated from expert editorial help while on Patmos. The Greek of Revelation comes across like the immature writing on a child's school tablet. The good news is that God can use someone even though s/he is not an expert in the language of the day. Revelation brought a powerful message to God's people even though the language is ungrammatical at times.

Use of the Old Testament

Moving beyond Rev 1:1-4, a careful reading of the whole book exposes the importance of the Old Testament to the book's visions. To quote William Milligan, a commentator on the book:

“The book of Revelation is absolutely steeped in the memories, the incidents, the thought, and the language of the church's past. To such an extent is this the case that it may be doubted whether it contains a single figure not drawn from the Old Testament, or a single complete sentence not more or less built up of materials brought from the same source.”²

We noticed this point in Chapter Two, when we briefly examined Revelation 13. Perhaps 2,000 words, concepts, and ideas in Revelation touch base with the Old Testament in one form or another. Knowledge of the Old Testament becomes the key to the code of Revelation. If you

do not know the Old Testament, there is little hope that you will understand Revelation.

But there is a complication in John's use of the Old Testament. The book of Revelation never quotes the Old Testament. It only alludes to it with a hint here and there, a word here and a phrase there. Because of this we need to examine the use of the Old Testament in Revelation very carefully. It is important not to miss those places in the book where the author intends readers to make a connection with some Old Testament passage. On the other hand, it is crucial not to manufacture parallels where there are none. So any method we might develop for the study of Revelation must give serious attention to how one determines allusions to the Old Testament.

Repetitive Structure

Another thing that is fairly obvious as you work your way through Revelation is its highly repetitive structure. There are seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. Furthermore, as you compare the trumpets and the bowls, you see tremendous parallels between them. The first trumpet affects the earth (Rev 8:7), the first bowl also affects the earth (Rev 16:2). The second trumpet affects the sea (Rev 8:8-9), so does the second bowl (Rev 16:3). The sixth trumpet and the sixth bowl both deal with the Euphrates River (Rev 9:14; 16:12), and so on. There are also numerous parallels between the opening section of Revelation and the verses at the close (Rev 1:1-8; 22:6-21). So any method that hopes to unlock the secrets of the book of Revelation will need to give careful attention to the book's structure.

Scenes of Worship

Finally, a surprising aspect of the book of Revelation is the constant reference to worship. In spite of all the strange beasts, violence and military language, the book of Revelation is never complete without some reference to the worship of God. It is almost impossible to read through the book and not notice how central worship is. The book of Revelation is full of hymns, images of the sanctuary, and scenes of worship. Notice this glorious example of heavenly worship.

“And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders ***fell down before the Lamb***. Each one had a harp and they were holding ***golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints***. And ***they sang a new song***:

“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on earth.’

“Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. ***In a loud voice they sang***:

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!’

“Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, ***singing***:

“***To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!***”

“The four living creature said, ‘Amen,’ and ***the elders fell down and worshiped***.”

Revelation 5:8-14

Basic Exegetical Strategies

The goal of the observations we have been making is to help us to understand how the author of Revelation intends us to exegete the book. What I would like to do here, and in the chapters to come, is develop these observations into practical steps that draw out the meaning

of Revelation. In the rest of this chapter we will briefly cover the first main step, doing basic exegesis of the text. The goal of this step is to determine as far as possible what the author intended by writing it. Basic exegesis is the kind of approach one would follow with any text in the Bible. It includes procedures such as the following.

Looking for Key Words

First of all, it is helpful to begin by reading the chosen passage through several times in a variety of translations. After all, a blessing is pronounced on those who read the book of Revelation (Rev 1:3)! As you read through the passage make a list of the difficulties in the passage that you need to resolve. In particular you will want to identify the words in your passage that need special study. Note words that have large theological meaning in other parts of the Bible. Note words that are unclear at first glance. Note words that are used repeatedly in the passage. Basic to any exegesis of a text is understanding the key terms that the writer was using.

When you have identified the key words in the passage, you will want to discover the range of meaning each word can have. For starters, you can turn to Bible dictionaries or lexicons to discover this range of meaning. If you don't know Greek you can still touch base with the original language by looking up the word in a Greek-English lexicon. Use an interlinear Bible or an analytical concordance (like Young's or Strong's) to find the form of the Greek word, then look it up. Concordances can be helpful here as well. You can discover how a key word is used in other parts of the Bible, how it functioned in a variety of contexts. Give particular

attention to how the word is used elsewhere by the same author. This process is similar to learning the biblical language in context, the way a child learns language. Let's look at an example of this kind of word study.

“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.” (Revelation 1:1) This is one time when the translation does not help us. The phrase “made it known” reflects a word that can also be translated “signified.” “He signified it by sending his angel to his servant John.”

If you look up the Greek word for “signified” in other parts of the New Testament (Acts 11:28; John 12:33, 18:32, and 21:19), you will find that it has a very particular meaning. It means something like “a cryptic saying or action that points to a future event.” So Revelation is a signified book, it is a book full of symbolic sayings and actions that point to future events. The author of Revelation here defines the whole book in one word.

The NIV lets us down here by offering an interpretive phrase that is somewhat helpful but leaves the reader with no clue about the original word. So this is one of those times when using a variety of translations can help you see that the translation is more interpretive than literal. Then you can use a lexicon or a concordance to develop your own understanding of the word. Once you have established the range of meaning the word could have, you will want to determine which meaning of the word is intended in the context of the passage you are studying.

Examining the word for “signified” has provided an important payoff. Many people

believe that when you are studying the Bible, you should always take the text literally unless it becomes obvious that a symbol is intended. And this is generally true, when it comes to the gospels or the letters of Paul. But in Revelation, the opposite seems to be true. It is not a literal book, it is a signified book. It is in most cases to be taken symbolically.

Looking for Key Words

- 1) Read the passage you are examining several times
- 2) Determine the key words
 - √ Unusual words
 - √ Words of uncertain meaning
 - √ Words crucial to understanding
 - √ Words used repeatedly
- 3) Discover the range of meaning for each key word
 - √ Determine the original word with an interlinear or analytical concordance
 - √ Look the word up in a lexicon or Bible dictionary
 - √ Use a concordance to see how the word is used in other texts
- 4) Determine the specific meaning in the context of your passage

How Words Relate to Each Other

The second step in basic exegesis is what scholars would call “syntax.” This word has nothing to do with taxes on prostitution or alcohol! Rather the word syntax represents how word pairs affect each other's meaning. When two words are placed in relationship with each other the meaning of both words often changes. So it is important to consider how major words in a passage affect each other.

So read through the passage several times, once again. Identify words and combinations

of words that require a decision between two or more options. Consider those options in the light of similar usages elsewhere in the book and in the author's other writings. Let's look at an example or two of how this works.

The book of Revelation begins with the phrase, "the revelation of Jesus" (Rev 1:1). What exactly does this phrase mean? Is it a revelation that comes "from" Jesus? Or is it a revelation "about" Jesus? That is an example of a syntactical question. Both options are possible based on the grammar and syntax of the phrase. Interpreters may make an arbitrary decision about the passage without thinking about other options. But that limits the possibilities of the text. An arbitrary answer may satisfy, but it may nevertheless be wrong.

Is the Revelation of Jesus something that comes from Jesus or is it something that tells us about Jesus? Both possibilities may be true. But in the case of Rev 1:1 the emphasis seems to be on a revelation "from" Jesus. The text offers a chain of revelation moving from God to Jesus to John to the churches. The point of the passage is the origin of the vision more than the topic.

Another example. What is "the testimony of Jesus?" Is it a testimony that Jesus gives? Or is it a testimony that someone else gives "about" Jesus? Great treasures of meaning can be hidden behind simple questions like that. In the case of Revelation, scholarship indicates that the normal usage of the "subjective-objective genitive" of "testimony" is subjective. In other words, the testimony of Jesus is a testimony that Jesus bears, just as "the word of their testimony" (Rev 12:11) is a testimony given by the overcomers, it is not a testimony about them.

In summary, once you have identified and defined the key words in a passage, you will

want to determine what combinations of words offer alternatives to understanding. You will want to consider the options in the light of similar phrases elsewhere in the book or even in the Bible as a whole. You will then want to decide, as far as possible, how the phrase is to be understood in the specific passage you are studying. Often these word relationships are very clear in a specific context. At other times we may never know for sure.

How Words Relate to Each Other (Syntax)

- 1) Identify and define the key words of the passage
 - 2) Note word pairs and phrases that may be ambiguous in meaning
 - √ This is particularly true with “of” phrases
- How similar word pairs and phrases are used elsewhere in the book or in the Bible as a whole
- √ Find similar phrases by reading lines in a concordance
 - √ Use word pair searches in a computer Bible program
- When possible, make a judgment as to the likely syntactical meaning, where such a judgment cannot be made with reasonable certainty, leave the phrase ambiguous and work with

Sentences and Their Context

A third step in basic exegesis is grammar. Grammar, in the narrow sense, is the study of how words and groups of words relate to each other in sentences and ultimately in paragraphs. Are the nouns in a passage the subject or object of the verb? What is the main sentence? What words or phrases are in a subordinate relationship to the main sentence? Is the main verb present, past or future, and what difference does that make? What role do the adjectives and adverbs play in the sentence? For those who have learned the skill, diagramming sentences can be a very effective tool for biblical understanding. Some books recommend what is called a

“syntactical display.” See the bibliography at the end of the chapter for further resources.

It should go without saying, perhaps, that the more faithful and exact the translation you are working with, the more productive this step can be. In the English language the Bibles most faithful to the grammar of the original text are the King James Version, the American Standard Version, and the New American Standard Bible. Working with the grammar can be difficult for many people but practice develops the skill. The more we grow in use of grammatical tools, the better our understanding of the biblical authors’ intentions.

As you work with a biblical text it is helpful to determine the boundaries of that text. Where do paragraphs begin and end? A paragraph is a group of sentences focused on a single main idea. You can usually mark off a paragraph at the point where a new sentence takes off on a different theme or idea. Using a variety of translations, you can compare how others have marked off the paragraphs in your chosen passage. Where all translations agree, there is reasonable certainty. Where there is disagreement among translations, you will need to wrestle with the options for yourself. The larger scenes of Revelation may be marked off by a phrase such as “after these things” (Rev 4:1), or “and I saw” (Rev 5:1; 6:1). Once again the chapter and section divisions of the major translations can provide a guide to a tentative assessment of boundaries. Further exegetical work of your own can help you come to a more final decision.

Sentences and Their Context

- 1) Choose a version of the Bible that is faithful to the grammar of the original
 - √ King James Version
 - √ American Standard Version
 - √ New American Standard Bible
- 2) Determine subject, object and subordinate clauses in each sentence
- 3) Try diagramming sentences or using a “syntactical display” (see bibliography)
- 4) Determine the boundaries of each paragraph
 - √ Compare your insights with a variety of translations

The Ancient Background of the Text

Finally, and perhaps most difficult for the lay scholar, is determining the background (the historical, literary, and cultural setting) of the book. In the case of Revelation, the setting in Asia Minor, the live symbols that would have affected people there, the apocalyptic language, the gods they worshiped, etc., are examples of the kinds of things that lie in the background of any ancient writing. But these things are often thought to be the domain of specialists. How can the average person get at those things without getting specialized training in the history and culture of the first-century world?

You can begin with a general encyclopedia, a Bible encyclopedia or encyclopedias of the Roman world, learning all you can about the Roman Empire and first-century Asia Minor. It is good to start with the big picture. Bible dictionaries, then, will often contain articles which discuss various aspects of this background. Critical commentaries, like the one by David Aune in the Word Biblical Commentary series, will connect the passage you are studying with information about the goddess Hekate or parallel passages in ancient books like *1 Enoch* and *The Apocalypse of Zephaniah*.³ While you don't ever want to treat commentaries as the voice of

God, some knowledge of the background will help you to make wise judgments about the text and its context. The introductory articles in the SDA Bible Commentary are another good source of information about the ancient world.

Ultimately, you will find it worthwhile to use the sources at your disposal to try answering questions about the historical, literary and cultural setting of the book, questions such as the following: For what kind of audience was the book originally intended? What was the author's purpose for the book as a whole? What can we know about the landscape and the climate, and how does that affect the way the book is written? What was the political and religious situation of the recipients of the book? What other writings of the time might give us some clues to the message of Revelation? And how did people of the time live and support themselves?

The Ancient Background of the Text

- 1) Read articles about the Roman World in encyclopedias and Bible dictionaries
- 2) Look up the passage you are studying in a critical commentary or two
 - √ David Aune: Word Biblical Commentary
 - √ G. K. Beale: New International Greek Testament Commentary
 - √ R. H. Charles: International Critical Commentary
 - √ Ranko Stefanovic: Andrews University Press
 - √ SDA Bible Commentary, introductory articles in volumes 5-7
- 3) Bibliographies and references in the above as a guide to further understanding
- 4) Become familiar with translations of some of the non-biblical apocalypses
 - √ Ethiopic Enoch (1 Enoch)
 - √ 4 Ezra (2 Esdras)
 - √ The Apocalypse of Zephaniah

Conclusion

The procedures that we have just outlined are typical of the approach one ought to take toward any biblical text. If you want to understand what an author was trying to say, the basic steps include: looking at the words and the relationships between words; looking at the larger structure of sentences and paragraphs; and then asking questions about background and trying to understand the significance of the text within that background. This type of approach will be successful in unlocking most parts of the Bible. If you can figure out what Paul was trying to say in Romans, for example, you will have understood Paul.

But this approach does not work as well in Revelation. Actually, in the book of Revelation, it is not difficult to understand what the author was trying to say. The problem is, even when you know what John was trying to say, you have almost no idea what he meant. A classic example of this is the first trumpet (Rev 8:7): “The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.”

It isn't hard to figure out what the author was trying to say here. He was trying to say that *an angel sounded his trumpet, fire mixed with blood was thrown to the earth, a third of the earth and trees were burned up and all the green grass was burned up*. It isn't difficult to figure out. The problem is, while you know what he was trying to say, you still have no idea what he meant. So the basic strategies of exegesis are inadequate by themselves to unveil the meaning of Revelation.

Based on the characteristics drawn from Revelation at the beginning of this chapter, understanding Revelation requires a broader, more theological method of exegesis. We cannot limit ourselves to methods that might work just fine for Matthew or for the book of Romans. We need to develop a method of exegesis that will work for the book of Revelation. Revelation will not reveal its secrets without three further steps that we will cover in the last three chapters of this book. These steps include (1) careful attention to the structure of Revelation, (2) to its Old Testament background, and (3) to how the gospel transforms Old Testament images in the light of what Jesus has done. The following chapter is an exciting look at the structure of Revelation and the way that structure helps to unpack the book's secrets.

Resources on the “How To” of Biblical Exegesis

1. L. “New Testament Word Analysis,” in *Introducing New Testament Interpretation*, edited by Scot McKnight, Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 97-113.

2. J. *Handbook for Bible Study* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1995).

3. M. “New Testament Background,” in *Introducing New Testament Interpretation*, edited by Scot McKnight, Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 21-51.

4. D. *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, revised edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

5. R. C. Jr. *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981).

6. S. “New Testament Greek Grammatical Analysis,” in *Introducing New Testament Interpretation*, edited by Scot McKnight, Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 75-97.

7. J. Ramsey. *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, Guides to New Testament Exegesis, edited by Scot McKnight (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 89-94.

8. J. *New Testament Exposition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House,

Notes

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1. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, edited by I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 153-154.
 2. William Milligan, *Lectures on the Apocalypse* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1892), 72.
 3. These books and many others have been translated into English in James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, volume 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983).