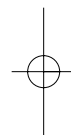
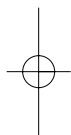


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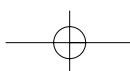
A GUIDE TO THE BOOK
OF REVELATION

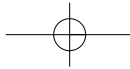


VERN S. POYTHRESS



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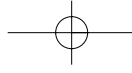
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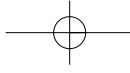
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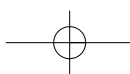
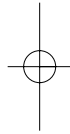
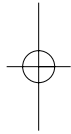
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Can We Understand Revelation?

Can the book of Revelation be understood? Yes, it can. Its message can be summarized in one sentence: God rules history and will bring it to its consummation in Christ. If you read it with that main point in mind, you will be able to understand it. You will not necessarily understand every detail—neither do I. But it is not necessary to understand every detail in order to profit spiritually from it.

The same thing is true of all Scripture. Scripture is inexhaustibly rich, so that we can never plumb all its depths and mysteries. But the main points are clear, so we can know what to believe and how to act (Prov. 1:1–7; Ps. 19:7–13). Second Timothy 3:16–17 tells us not only that all Scripture is inspired, but also that it is “*useful* for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” All Scripture, including Revelation, has practical value for exhortation, comfort, and training in righteousness. Paul underlines this point in 2 Timothy 4:1–5 by drawing a contrast between the solid teaching of the gospel and people’s desire to have teachers who “say what their itching ears want to hear” (4:3). God gave us Revelation not to tickle our fancy, but to strengthen our hearts.

The Clarity of Revelation

Revelation itself makes the same point in the first few verses, 1:1–3 (fig. 1). It is “the revelation of Jesus Christ.” The word *rev-*

elation, or *unveiling*, indicates that it discloses rather than conceals its message. This revelation comes in order “to show his servants” something. The word “show” implies that the book can bring its message home to its hearers. Revelation is addressed to “his servants”—not just prophecy buffs, Ph.D.’s, experts, or angels, but *you*. If you are a follower of Christ, this book is for you and you can understand it. The third verse says, “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.” God knew that some of his servants would hesitate over this book. So he gives extra encouragement to our reading by pronouncing an explicit blessing. Revelation is the only book in the whole Bible with a blessing pronounced for reading it!¹

FIG. 1. REVEALING GOD’S PLAN

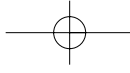
- It is a “revelation.”
- Jesus Christ knows our need.
- He addresses “his servants.”
- His purpose is to “show” them “what must soon take place,” not to keep them in the dark.



But the reading should not be an empty or rote reading, as the continuation makes clear: “take to heart what is written in it.” Revelation should not merely flit through our brain, or lead to vain speculations, but lodge in our heart and produce a practical response, a response of keeping it, just as we are to keep Christ’s commandments by obeying them. (The Greek word *tereo*, translated “take to heart,” is used in the Gospel of John for “keeping” Christ’s commandments.)

Why the Confusion?

If Revelation is clear, why do so many people have trouble with it? And why is it so controversial? We have trouble because we approach it from the wrong end. Suppose I start by asking, “What do the bear’s feet in Revelation 13:2 stand for?” If I start



with such a detail, and ignore the big picture, I am asking for trouble. God is at the center of Revelation (Rev. 4–5). We must start with him and with the contrasts between him and his satanic opponents. If instead we try right away to puzzle out details, it is as if we tried to use a knife by grasping it by the blade instead of the handle. We are starting at the wrong end. Revelation is a picture book, not a puzzle book. Don't try to puzzle it out. Don't become preoccupied with isolated details. Rather, become engrossed in the overall story. Praise the Lord. Cheer for the saints. Detest the Beast. Long for the final victory.

FIG. 2. THE SIMPLICITY OF REVELATION

- Revelation is a picture book, not a puzzle book.
- It is for children also.

The truth is, some teachers of the book of Revelation set a bad example. They turn the book on its head; they turn it into a puzzle book. They preach obscurity instead of clarity, and of course people end up feeling incompetent.

Do the following responses sound familiar? “I’m confused.” “It’s so complicated.” “I’m lost.” “It’s all a puzzle, and only this expert teacher can make sense of it.” “I give up.”

But a few refuse to give up. Instead, they develop an unhealthy preoccupation. They search for a complicated new scheme to “solve” the puzzle. They end up tickling the fancy and missing the real point.

In contrast, people who have not been influenced by super-duper teachers do better with the book. Let me illustrate.

Once, when I was teaching Revelation, I noticed many children in the congregation. “I want you children to read Revelation, too,” I said. “If you are too young to read it for yourself, have your parents read it to you. You too can understand it. In fact, you may understand it better than your parents.”

A boy about twelve years old came up to me afterwards. “I know exactly what you mean. A short time ago I read Revelation, and I felt that I understood it.”

“Praise the Lord!”

“I read it just like a fantasy, except that I knew it was true.”
I thought, “Precisely.”

This story was so good that I began using it when I taught Revelation in seminary classes. A student came up afterward.

“You know that twelve-year-old boy?”

“Yes.”

“I know exactly what he meant. I can remember reading Revelation when I was about twelve years old, and understanding it. I have been understanding it less and less ever since!”

A group of seminary students finished playing basketball in a gym. They noticed the janitor in a corner, reading a book.

“What are you reading?”

“The Bible.”

“What part of the Bible?”

“Revelation.”

The seminarians thought they’d help this poor soul. “Do you understand what you are reading?”

“Yes!”

They were astonished. “What does it mean?”

“Jesus is gonna win!”

A charismatic pastor was praying in his study. “What should I preach on next?”

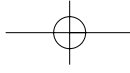
“Revelation.”

“Great! I’ll get out my seminary notes, dig in, whip up some diagrams, and show my stuff.”

“No.”

“What do you mean? What am I supposed to do?”

“Read it.”



Pause. “That’s crazy. I can’t just stand up there and read it. Isn’t a pastor supposed to teach? What good will I do?”

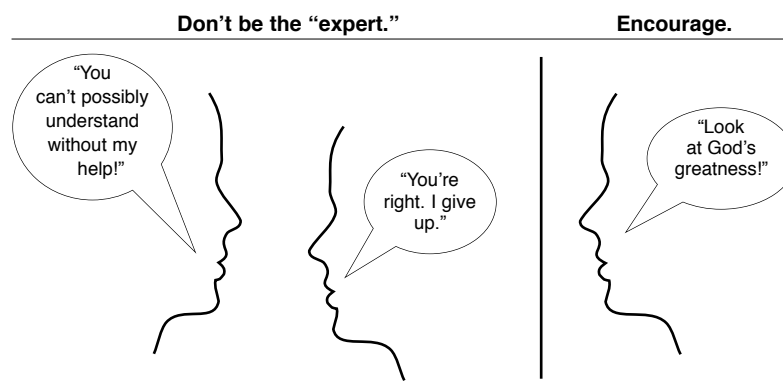
“Do it.”

(Reluctantly) “O.K.”

That congregation had the experience of a lifetime. The pastor dutifully read a paragraph. Then came responses: prayers, songs, praises, spontaneous exhortations, repentance for compromises with the world, and more praise. Then the pastor read another paragraph, and similar responses followed—and so they continued through the book. The congregation found that, taught by the Spirit of Christ, they did know how to understand! But if the pastor had gotten out those seminary notes and lectured, the congregation might have sunk into a puzzle-book mentality.

There is a lesson here. If you are leading a group in studying Revelation, do not become “the expert” in a bad sense. Yes, you can get help with the details by utilizing scholarly resources. And, yes, you can help people over some things that seem mysterious to a modern reader. But do it in a context where ordinary people can experience the book firsthand and follow its powerful drama for themselves, engaging their own hearts in the pictures (fig. 3).

FIG. 3. ENCOURAGING STUDY OF REVELATION



Counterfeiting

We can illustrate how to understand Revelation by starting with one of its most important themes, the theme of spiritual warfare. Satan, the leader of the forces of evil, fights against God and the angels and God’s people, but is ultimately defeated by the victor, Jesus Christ.

Consider the picture in Revelation 13:1:

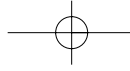
And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name.

Now there’s a strange vision! But it is not quite so strange if we have already read about the Dragon in Revelation 12:3. The Dragon on the shore is a frightful monster. The Beast of Revelation 13:1–8 is likewise a monster. The Dragon has seven heads. The Beast coming out of the sea likewise has seven heads. The Dragon has ten horns. So does the Beast. The Dragon has crowns on his heads. The Beast has crowns on his horns. What is going on here?

The Beast is strikingly like the Dragon (fig. 4). In fact, he is an image of the Dragon. The Dragon stands on the shore of the sea in a way that is reminiscent of the Spirit of God hovering over the waters in Genesis 1:2. And then comes forth his “creation,” the Beast, made in the image of the Dragon.

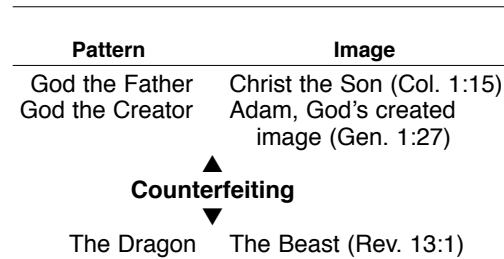
FIG. 4. THE BEAST AS SATAN’S IMAGE AND ASSISTANT

Satan (12:3)	Assistant (13:1)
Pattern	Image
Dragon	Beast
7 heads	7 heads
10 horns	10 horns
Crowns on heads	Crowns on horns



Have we seen a process like this before? Of course we have. “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him” (Gen. 1:27). The Dragon is a picture of Satan (Rev. 12:9), who in Revelation 13:1 imitates what God did in Genesis 1:27. But what sort of imitation does Satan produce? It is not genuine, but counterfeit (fig. 5).

**FIG. 5. THREE IMAGING RELATIONSHIPS,
ONE A COUNTERFEIT OF THE OTHERS**



Originally, God used imitation in a positive way. Man, as an image, reflected and displayed the character of God. In fact, imaging did not start with man! According to Colossians 1:15–16, even before creation the divine Son, the second person of the Trinity, was the image of God: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created.” The creation of man in God’s image imitates the imaging relationship between God the Father and God the Son.

Now Satan is a counterfeiter. He counterfeits God the Father by producing a counterfeit “son,” the Beast. The Beast is clearly the counterfeit of Christ the Son. Satan aspires to be God and to control everything for himself. He has a plan, analogous to the Father’s plan. He will work out this plan through his executor, the Beast.

Is there then a counterfeit of the Holy Spirit as well? Yes there is, in Revelation 13:11–18. Another beast comes out of the earth (13:11). This beast is later identified as “the false prophet”

(16:13). The False Prophet works “miraculous signs” (13:13), reminiscent of the miraculous signs worked by the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. Through miraculous signs, the Holy Spirit draws people to worship Christ. Analogously, the False Prophet promotes worship of the Beast (13:12). As “another Counselor,” the Holy Spirit has the authority of Christ (John 14:16, 18). Similarly, the False Prophet “exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf” (Rev. 13:12). The Holy Spirit guides us into the truth (John 16:13). The False Prophet deceives (Rev. 13:14).

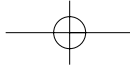
The Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet, therefore, form a kind of counterfeit trinity (fig. 6). They are linked together as a threesome when they organize people for the final battle (Rev. 16:13).

FIG. 6. A COUNTERFEIT TRINITY

Original	Counterfeit	Function
• The Father	• Dragon	Originate, plan
• Christ the Son	• Beast	Execute
• The Spirit as witness	• False Prophet	Witness, propagandize

The counterfeiting in Revelation can be demonstrated most impressively when we look at how the Beast counterfeits Christ (fig. 7). The Beast has ten crowns on his horns (13:1). In 19:12, Christ has “many crowns” on his head. The Beast has blasphemous names (13:1). Christ has worthy names (19:11–13, 16). The Beast has great power (13:2). Christ has divine power and authority (12:5, 10).

The Beast experiences a counterfeit resurrection. It seemed to have “a fatal wound,” but the wound was healed (13:3). The counterfeit character of the Beast is clear in this feature. The Beast did not actually die and come to life again. He did not experience an actual resurrection. But he had a wound that one would think *should* have led to his death. His recovery was mar-



velous and astonishing—so astonishing that it was a big factor in leading people to follow him. Just as the resurrection of Christ is the chief event that astonishes people and draws them to follow him (John 12:32), so here a counterfeit miracle, a counterfeit resurrection, leads to people following the Beast.

There are still further parallels. The Beast receives worship (13:4), just as Christ receives worship (5:8–10). The worshipers offer a song of praise to the Beast: “Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?” (13:4). This song blasphemously counterfeits the song offered to God at the Exodus: “Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (Ex. 15:11).

The Beast has a seal that is put on his followers (Rev. 13:16). In parallel fashion, Christ seals his followers with the seal of his name on their foreheads (14:1). At the last day, people from all nations will worship Christ (5:9), and he will exercise his authority over all. Meanwhile, the Beast “was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation” (13:7).

The climactic confrontation between Christ and the Beast occurs in Revelation 19:11–21. Christ appears on a white horse, going out to war against God’s enemies. The Beast appears as his chief opponent, leading the kings of the earth (19:19). The chief result of the battle is that the Beast and his assistant, the False Prophet, are defeated and consigned to the fiery lake (19:20).

In this scene, Christ is the divine warrior.² He fulfills the Old Testament prophecies that speak of God appearing to fight against the enemies (Zech. 14:1–5; 9:14–17; Isa. 59:16–18; Hab. 3:11–15). Christ is the holy warrior, who judges with justice (Rev. 19:11). The Beast, we infer, is the demonic counterfeit, the unholy warrior from the demonic region of the abyss. As Christ is the head of the holy army, so the Beast is the head of the unholy army.

FIG. 7. THE BEAST, A COUNTERFEIT OF CHRIST

	The Beast	Christ
Diadems	13:1	19:12
Name	13:1	19:11–13, 16
Power	13:2	12:5, 10
Resurrection	13:3, 12	
Worship	13:4	1:6
Praise	13:4	Ex. 15:3, 11f.
Seal	13:16	7:3; 14:1
Nations' allegiance	13:7f.	5:9

The picture of heading up a whole realm of followers recalls the idea of “federal” headship, that is, covenantal headship, expounded in 1 Corinthians 15:45–49. According to 1 Corinthians 15, there are two Adams, the first Adam and the last Adam. The first man, Adam, made from dust, is the pattern for all human beings descended from him. We too have bodies of dust, belonging to the earth. The last Adam, Christ, is the second man from heaven. He is the pattern for all human beings who are united to him, that is, all those who are under his federal headship. “Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven” (1 Cor. 15:49).

FIG. 8. THE WOULD-BE HEADSHIP OF THE BEAST

- Unholy vs. holy warrior (13:1–10 vs. 19:11–21).
- Two representative men (1 Cor. 15:45–49).
- The Beast as a third man, from the abyss.



- His worshipers bear his mark (13:16; 14:9).
- He is a head representing a whole kingdom.

The Beast aspires to head up all nations (13:7–8). As a counterfeit of Christ, he aspires to be another federal head (fig. 8)! He would be a third man, from the abyss. The seal of his ownership in 13:16 then proclaims that his followers will be like him.

But note well that he is a *beast*, a hideous combination of lion, bear, leopard, and ten-horned monster. To be sure, the Beast as a symbol may possibly stand for a human being or a human institution in its rebellion against God. But it is no accident that it is represented as a beast. Although human beings may be involved, the thing is at root bestial. The tendency of the whole thing is subhuman, dehumanizing.

And that very fact is already an announcement of failure. The Beast cannot succeed, because he is bestial. Christ is not only “second” (1 Cor. 15:47), but “last” (1 Cor. 15:45). No one else can be a third after him, in the way that the Beast attempts to be. Genesis 1:28 indicates that the beasts are to be subordinate to Adam. And in the last days, the last Adam will make all beasts subject to him, including this great Beast (fig. 9). Christ wages war in Revelation 19, not only on behalf of God and his justice, but also on behalf of man and his welfare. He frees us forever from the threat of bestial tyranny. As the last Adam, he achieves perfect dominion. The Beast is subjected to Man.

FIG. 9. THE SUBJECTION OF THE BEAST

- Symbolically speaking, he is a beast.
- Beasts are destined to be subdued by man.

In Genesis 1	In Revelation 19
Adam	Christ
▼	▼
Animals	Beast

One other form of counterfeiting in Revelation needs to be mentioned. We have seen that an unholy trinity consisting of Satan, the Beast, and the False Prophet counterfeits the Holy Trinity consisting of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What about the worshipers of God? They are represented in Revelation 19:7–8 as the pure bride of the Lamb. Can Satan counterfeit the bride? He can and does. The counterfeit image of the bride is the Prostitute of Revelation 17–18. To the purity of the bride corresponds the corruption and immorality of the Prostitute.

The fall of the Prostitute becomes the occasion for the manifestation of the bride (19:1–6). Since the bride represents true worshipers, the true people of God, we infer that the Prostitute represents false worshipers, the counterfeit church.

FIG. 10. TWO OPPONENTS OF THE CHURCH

Satan	“Who will defeat God’s people for me?”
The Beast	“I will.”
The Prostitute	“I will.”

Satan attacks the church directly through deceit and doctrinal confusion. He tries to turn the church away from the truth (12:15). But he also raises up underlings, in the form of the Beast and the Prostitute, who attack the church in specific, complementary ways (fig. 10). The Beast represents state power and threatens to persecute those who do not worship it. It attempts through threat, pain, and death to terrorize Christians into giving in to an idol. It stirs up fear of what will happen if you don’t give in. We can generalize this tendency: we worship what we fear, whether the scorn of human beings, physical pain, or poverty. The remedy for this, of course, is the fear of God, which drives out the fear of man and of adverse circumstances.

But Satan also has another way of attacking. The Prostitute represents sex, money, and pleasure. Instead of threats and fear, she uses seduction and the lure of pleasure. Give in to your illicit desires. We worship what we desire, whether sex, money, health, long life, fame, or riches. The remedy for this is the desire to be in the presence of God in the new Jerusalem (Rev. 22:4). (See fig. 11.)

FIG. 11. HOW TO RESPOND TO BOTH FORMS OF OPPOSITION

Calling of the Church	Opposition	Response
Light-bearing witness	Persecuting power of the Beast	Endurance (13:10)
Virgin purity	Seductive luxury of the Prostitute	Separation (18:4)

Practical Lessons

We can immediately draw some practical lessons (fig. 12). Revelation shows that history involves spiritual war. In this war, there are two sides. You are either for God or against him. You either serve God or in one way or another will be found worshipping Satan and his bestial agents (cf. Rev. 13:7–8). Thus, Revelation implicitly issues a challenge like Joshua’s: “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve” (Josh. 24:15). Giving our loyalty to God is absolutely crucial in determining the sort of life we have and the contribution that we make. Revelation reveals the crucial issues of life and the crucial destinies toward which life moves.

FIG. 12. LESSONS FROM COUNTERFEITING

- People are either for God or against him.
- Satan can only imitate God (2 Cor. 11:14).
 - There’s a danger of believing the counterfeit.
 - Satan is not the Originator.
- We can see the repulsiveness of the counterfeit.
- A fit punishment for followers is to be under the Beast.
- God controls Satan (Job 1–2; Ps. 76:10; Rom. 8:28).

The fact that Satan engages in counterfeiting helps us to understand and prepare for spiritual war. Counterfeiting implies both danger and hope. The danger lies in the fact that Satan may fool people. The counterfeit is close enough to the truth to lure people into its grip.

But there is hope in the fact that Satan and his cohorts will surely be defeated. In fact, their defeat is implied by the facts about who they are. Satan aspires to be God. But he cannot succeed. He is not the creator or originator, but only an imitator. He is constantly dependent on God. Similarly, the Beast is bestial, and his kingdom must submit to the kingdom of the Man, the last Adam.

Revelation also gives us a key for escaping Satan’s deceit. Although Satan continues to deceive the world, Revelation un-

masks his devices in order to arm us to resist him. The world is in awe of the Beast and willingly worships him (13:3–4, 7). But when our eyes are enlightened by Revelation, we see how hideous he is. We may still be tempted to fear him because he looks so powerful. But, having seen him for what he is, can we honestly want to have him as our master?

Revelation shows not only the horror of following the Beast, but something of the consequences. In following Christ, the last Adam, we are conformed more and more to his image (2 Cor. 3:18; cf. 1 Cor. 15:49). By analogy, the followers of the Beast are in danger not only of being under his bestial tyranny, but of becoming bestial with him, since they bear his mark (13:16–18). It is like what the Psalms say of idolaters:

Their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see. . . . Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them. (Ps. 115:4–8; cf. Ps. 135:18)

The punishment fits the crime.

Revelation uses irony in its depiction of God's opponents. Although they aspire to be like God, they end up being like beasts. Satan aspires to be the creator, but imitating the true Creator is already a confession of failure. Satan's resistance looks terrifying to the casual observer, but the person who probes more deeply sees that it is a miserable, stupid failure from beginning to end.

Finally, through its depiction of spiritual warfare, Revelation underlines an exceedingly important point: God is in control. He is in control not only of the general outline of history, but of its beginning, its end, and its details. He controls even the works of Satan for his own glory! The idea of God controlling evil and bringing good out of it occurs here and there in the Bible: Job 1–2; Psalm 76:10; Romans 8:28; Acts 4:25–28. It is clear in Job 1–2 that both God and Satan are actors behind the disasters that

happen to Job (Job 1:12, 21–22!). Satan intends to destroy Job’s faith and integrity and to disgrace the name of God as a result. God intends to magnify his own glory and cause Job’s faith to grow through trial. Similarly in the crucifixion of Christ, according to Acts 4:25–28, Herod, Pontius Pilate, and the religious leaders perform their evil actions, filled with evil intent. But in those very actions, God accomplishes the salvation of the world. We do not comprehend fully how these things operate, but we can see that God’s goodness and power are both absolute.

The same message comes out clearly in Revelation in pictorial form. Satan and his agents have impressive power and cleverness. Revelation does not conceal or minimize the reality of evil. The forces of evil, by their absolute opposition to God, and God’s absolute opposition to them, underline the contrast between God’s goodness and their evil. The warfare is real and bloody. But who is it that depicts the entire scene? Who is it that tells us not only what Satan is like, not only what he will in fact do, but what he *must* do because he has no alternative? It is God. God shows us the whole course of the warfare *beforehand*, thereby showing how thoroughly he controls the whole of history (cf. Isa. 41:21–29; 48:5–8).