



How the First-Century, Asia Minor, Jewish Christians Understood the Book of Revelation

Abbreviations: FCAM JC – First-Century, Asia Minor, Jewish Christians; RE – Roman Empire; FW – Faithful Witness

2. Overview – Statements and Sources

The book of Revelation or John's Apocalypse (Unveiling) is a promise of blessing with the purpose of comforting and challenging the FCAM JCs (see legend above) whom John pastored. It is the announcement and promotion of the gracious salvation of Yahweh's Kingdom of Shalom meant for those who follow Yeshua (Jesus), the Slaughtered Lamb. In it, God's Kingdom collides with the kingdom of chaos and darkness, and we learn what it means to live as His Faithful Witnesses (FW) in this world.

Four Statements about the Book of Revelation

1. **It is a present prophecy.** It is a forthtelling, not a foretelling. It is not a prediction of the future. When we understand its application to its original audience, we can then apply it to our lives today and stay protected from speculation.
2. **It made sense to the first people who heard and read it.** They may not have liked it in the same way we may not welcome its challenge, but its meaning was readily accessible.
3. **It gives an exalted view of Yeshua** which was radical in the first century. Messiah, the Slaughtered Lamb, is on the throne with God. Yeshua is Israel's Messiah for the entire world!
4. **It is Apocalyptic literature.** Therefore, we must understand this unique genre of literature that was pioneered by the first-century Jewish community. God used this genre to communicate the ultimate victory of His kingdom in a world of brokenness and suffering. It is *resistance literature* against the ruling class meant to subvert power structures and declare that evil would not go unchecked.

The Greek *Apocalypso* means *to unveil, to lift the lid, or to uncover as a surprise*. Apocalyptic writing is the most dramatic way to capture an audience's attention and to burn its message into the hearts of the people, because it draws them into an experience of the senses, like a surround-sound theatre. It uses striking images that have three traits: *Constant, fluid and repurposed* (example: a woman can represent a bride or a prostitute), and *transformed* for the author's own use.

These images fall into three types:

- *Icons* – Signs that represent what they signify (such as a trashcan icon on a computer) It is what it says. Example: Yeshua is described as *like* a Son of Man, a human;
- *Indexes* – Signs that tells you something as it is changing or being affected (such as a weathervane). Example: The elders bowing down represent worship;
- *Symbols* – Signs that have been given an agreed-upon meaning by a group of users; (such as our traffic colors red, green, and yellow; we all know what they mean.) Example: A double-edged sword represents God's word healing and judging; stars represent angelic beings; and numbers mean more than their numerical values.

The writing does not give a *doom and gloom* message. **In the first century, the defining event of deliverance that transformed all of time had already taken place in the death and resurrection of Yeshua. His coming is the apocalyptic surprise – the mystery of God revealed!**

Historical events are described with their apocalyptic, cosmic, unseen perspective. As an example, Revelation 12 is an account of Yeshua's birth from Matthew 2 based on the language and imagery of Psalm 2. Compare the two passages: the **setting**, **characters and descriptions**, storyline, message, and **purpose**. Why did Matthew tell this story of the killing of the infants? Why does Revelation tell the story? Let's take a look:

Revelation 12:1-5

¹A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; ²and she was pregnant and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth. ³Then another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven crowns. ⁴And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and hurled them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her Child. ⁵And she gave birth to a Son, a male, who is going to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her Child was caught up to God and to His throne. ⁶Then the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she would be nourished for 1,260 days.

Matthew 2:16-18

¹⁶Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent men and killed all the boys who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. ¹⁷Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: ⁸“A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; And she refused to be comforted, because they were no more.”

Observations

- Both authors use Scripture – Revelation 12 uses Psalm 2 and Isaiah 27.
- We see Messiah vs. the Serpent; King Yeshua as the rightful heir; King Herod as the dead king.
- The woman represents the people of God or Israel through whom the Messiah came.

John's Four Sources

1. **The Old Testament** – John would have memorized the Torah, the Writings, and the Prophets from childhood. He knew them well. In these following passages of Revelation, we find striking similarity to passages in Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and the Psalms. Following are four examples of many. Compare these Old Testament passages to Revelation. It is a blessing to read these passages together:

- Psalm 2 Revelation 2:26-27; 12:5; 19:11-16
- Ezekiel 27 about Tyres doom – similar to Revelation 18:1-24 about Rome's demise.
- Isaiah 54 Revelation 21:18-21 – the New Jerusalem
¹⁸The material of the wall was jasper, and the city was pure gold like clear glass. ¹⁹The foundation stones of the city wall were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation stone was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, chalcedony; the fourth, emerald; ²⁰the fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, topaz; the tenth, chrysoprase; the eleventh, jacinth; the twelfth, amethyst. ²¹And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; each one of the gates was a single pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold like transparent glass.
- Isaiah 60 Revelation 21:22-27 – the character of the New Jerusalem
²²I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illuminated it, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵In

the daytime (for there will be no night there) its gates will never be closed; ²⁶and they will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it; ²⁷and nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

2. **The Second-Temple Period Jewish Literature** found in the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran.
3. **Greco-Roman Mythology** – John engages with these images familiar to the FCAM JCs and reuses them to tell the Gospel and turn them on their heads.
4. **The Christian worship and visions** at the time.