

Experiencing the Book of Revelation

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What does Revelation assume about its audience?

John takes for granted that his audience is familiar with prophecy, slavery, the imperial cult, and symbols from the Hebrew Bible.

1) Prophecy

i) Generally:

- (a) A normal, expected part of society—like a corporate coach, advisor, pastor
- (b) Given authority: Prophets, seers, diviners consulted for big decisions for business, government, family

ii) For Christians: Prophets were at the center of early Christian communities

- (a) Mediate God's specific word to a group in that time, regarding past, present, or future. (Not so much predicting distant future.)
- (b) Prophets need to be interpreted, judged by/in competition with other prophets (1 Cor 14:26-33)
- (c) Prophets disagreed about God's will, e.g., on eating food sacrificed to idols
- (d) Most Christians were Jews—assume authority of Jewish prophets
- (e) John doesn't write in code, but writes as a Jewish prophet based on prophets and symbols in the Hebrew Bible:

iii) Moses as prophet of the Exodus: Plagues, depart from Egypt, at Mt Sinai

- (a) "the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a **priestly kingdom** and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:5-6; see Rev 1:6, e.g.)
- (b) God's presence and revelation: "On the morning of the third day there was **thunder and lightning**, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain and a **blast of a trumpet so loud** that all the people who were in the camp trembled." (Exodus 19:16)
- (c) Exodus: Plagues necessary to persuade the stubborn King (Emperor) of Egypt to "let my people go" into the wilderness and then the Promised Land.

iv) Daniel the prophet

- (a) Beasts as empires (Dan 7-8)
- (b) Heads as kings (Dan 8)
- (c) Son of Man as God's king for the world (Dan 7)
- (d) Statues set up for worship (Dan 3, 11:31)

v) Ezekiel the prophet

- (a) Eats a scroll = fully "digests" a message from God (Ezek 3:1-3; Rev 10:8-10)
- (b) Four living creatures around God's throne (Ezek 1:5-11)

vi) Zechariah the prophet

- (a) Colored horses sent out to patrol the earth (Zech 1:8-10; Rev 6)
- (b) Kingly and priestly figures as olive tree and lampstand (Zech 4:11-14; Rev 11)

2) Slavery (Not based on race)

i) Captured in war, repayment of debt, or born in slavery

ii) Estimated 1/3 of people in 1st century Mediterranean were slaves

iii) All levels of society:

- (a) from high-level elite secretaries and administrators (e.g. Tiro to Cicero)
- (b) to miners and hard-laborers beaten and treated like beasts of burden (majority)

iv) Runaway slaves marked or branded on arm or hand

v) Way to “buy” freedom: go to a temple, and give the money to the temple (who gave it in turn to the master). Through this ritual, the slave became a slave to the god and free from the previous master.

vi) The Roman Empire had slaves throughout the empire conducting its business

vii) Christians called slaves

- (a) of each other, Matt 20:27
- (b) of Christ, Lk 12:43, Jn 15:20 (compare John 15:15!); Rom 1:1; Rev 1:1
- (c) as prophets, Matt 21:34ff

3) Imperial Cult

i) Local response to distant power—especially in Egypt and Asia Minor

- (a) Pax Romana, “the Roman Peace” that allowed trade, building, and prosperity
- (b) Gratitude by locals
 1. as gods: set up temples, worship, calendars, games
 2. communities compete for honor (esp. Smyrna, Pergamum, Ephesus)
 3. favors from the Emperor and Empire

ii) Temples & Statues

- (a) Statues ‘speak’ through sound tubes
- (b) Fires and lights by concealed panels
- (c) Not mandatory (at least early on) but an expected part of civic life

iii) Language: Words of praise expected for Emperor:

- (a) Lord and Savior of the World
- (b) Peace and Victory
- (c) Glory, Honor and Might

iv) Images

- (a) Statues
- (b) Coins
- (c) Paintings

v) Imperial Letters

- (a) Promises, threats



Vespasian Coin—Note the deified city Rome sitting on seven hills (Rev 17:9)



A mark of Augustus used on official documents to ‘buy and sell’. The word ‘mark’ is the same as used for the ‘mark of the beast’. (From Deissmann’s Light from the Ancient East, p. 340)

4) Symbols from Hebrew Bible

The symbols of the Book of Revelation may seem strange to us, but to 1st century Christians familiar with Hebrew scripture and tradition, they would be instantly recognizable.

Colors

White	Victory, Purity, Intimacy with God
Red	Blood, slaughter, war, aggression
Black	Famine, starvation
Pale Green	Death
Purple	Wealth from commerce (purple was an expensive cloth)
Gold	Wealth

Numbers

3 ½	Danielic number for the limited time of power of evil (7:25; 12:7); half of 7, incomplete, limited or imperfect
4	the created world, the ends of the earth, the four points of the compass
6	imperfect, short of 7; often refers to human limitation
7	perfection, fullness, completion, universal; often refers to the work of God
10	“all of...” or to indicate a large amount
12	God’s people—the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 apostles
24	double 12, referring to both Israel and the Church
40	a long time; days & nights on Noah’s ark; years of Israelites in wilderness; days Jesus in wilderness
10,000	The highest number, has its own word in Greek (myriad)
Multiplication	When two numbers are multiplied, both meanings are added
Squaring or Cubing	Intensified meaning

Objects

Lampstands	Congregations (1:12, 20; 11:4)
Ox	Domestic Animals; also Luke
Lion	Wild Animals; also Mark
Eagle	Birds of the Air; also John
Human	Humanity; also Matthew
All four animals	All creatures; also the total witness of all creatures to Christ
Seal	Often a wax blob marked with the symbol of the one who sent a message or one who can open a message
Trumpet	Announces an event
Stars	Heavenly Beings, angels, or demons (1:20; 9:1; 12:4)
Eyes	Knowledge
Horns	Power
Heads	Rulers, Kings
Jewels	Glory, Wealth (Rev 4:3)

Crown	Authority to rule
Incense	Prayer (5:8)
Measuring	Protection (11:1-3; Zech 2:1-5)
Wilderness	Place of refuge & safety; also simplicity
Bowl	Carries something between heaven and earth
Sea	Chaos, Evil; Also commerce
Earth	Order; “Earth & Sea” means all of creation (Gen 1)
Prostitution/ Fornication	Idolatry; compromising obedience and virtue for monetary gain
Virginity	Purity; obedience and faithfulness to God (14:4)
City	A way of life; a group of people
Sodom	City of corruption
Egypt	City of slavery
Babylon	Rome; the power of corruption and evil; Believers are called to “come out” of this “city” (18:4; also 1 Peter 5:13)
Jerusalem	The Holy City of God; where God’s rule is obeyed; Believers are called to “come into” this “city” (21:6)

Examples:

144,000	= 12 x 12 x 10 x 10 x 10 = “definitely all of God’s people” (7:1-7)
7 eyes	= full or perfect knowledge (5:6)
24 elders	= Israel & the Church (4:9; 7:12; 11:16)
42 months (11:2)	= 3 ½ years (11:9) = 1,260 days (12:6) = a limited time (see Daniel 7:25; 12:6-7)