

Apocalyptic Letters E6 Final

Five Strategies for Reading Revelation

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Five Strategies for Reading Revelation

- Jon: In the 1st century, a man named John had a prolonged vision. After experiencing it and pondering it, he wrote it down in the form of a carefully crafted letter. A letter we call the Revelation. It's the last book in the Bible. It's a confusing book. It's full of symbols, but the symbols aren't random.
- Tim: In a way, the book of Revelation is the combination of all the design patterns in the Hebrew Bible. And then it gives you the reader the commission to go look at your reality through the lens of the design patterns.
- Jon: The reality is, to understand the book of Revelation, you kind of need to understand the entire biblical story and be fluid in the images that begin from the very first pages of the Bible and weave all the way through it. If you've been following along with us, this might become an easier task for you. It requires a lifelong meditation, and you shouldn't do it alone.
- Tim: By far, the Revelation is off the charts the most dense allusions to the most different number of books. Whatever you need to read this book, you're going to need the insights of other people in present and past.
- Jon: So, today we're going to get practical. We're going to look at five historic strategies on how to interpret the Revelation, and we're going to look at common pitfalls that we make when we read it. Thanks for joining us. Here we go.
- The time is near.
- Tim: Yes, the time of the apocalypse is near or now. Is it near or now? Or is it the past? Or is it all of them?
- Jon: Oh, boy.
- Tim: These are the questions that one has to ponder when you read biblical apocalyptic literature.
- Jon: So that's what we're doing. We're going to make a video on how to read apocalyptic literature in the Bible. This is maybe the last episode.
- Tim: Yeah, it depends on how talkative we are.
- Jon: I don't really feel like recapping. I just feel like going.
- Tim: Okay. We're well into our conversation. If you haven't listened to previous episodes, you'll probably follow what we're doing, but it will make a lot more sense in light of where we've gone up till now. So here, we've been talking about the meaning of apocalyptic literature, the world in which it

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makes sense. From this point on, what I want to get is more practical, like how to actually read this literature and understand it. At least take a step forward in your understanding of it.

One part of it is to understand we're not interpreting this literature in a vacuum. So it's important to know that you're likely already somewhere on a grid of how people read the book. So what I want to quick is use the work of a scholar Michael Gorman, who's created a really helpful map to understand all the different approaches, and why they are the way they are.

Jon: Different approaches to how to read apocalyptic literature?

Tim: Yeah, different views on how to read this literature.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: That will help us zero in on the approach that we're going to recommend in the video, which actually could be at home in almost any of the approaches. First of all, Jewish apocalyptic literature is widespread, both in the Hebrew Bible, in the New Testament, and in literature that was never considered part of the biblical collection. That's the first thing to notice is when we say how to read apocalyptic literature in the Bible, we're narrowing to really a small section of a much wider body of literature from ancient Judaism. That's just helpful to realize. So, what we're doing now would actually hold true for reading First Enoch, Second Baruch or Fourth Ezra.

Jon: It would or wouldn't?

Tim: It would. It would. So, in terms of the two books that are given the label apocalyptic, there's one in the Hebrew Bible, one in the New Testament: Daniel and Revelation. With Daniel, it's a bit of a misnomer because half of the book is these dreams and visions. But the first half of the book are the narratives about Daniel and his friends. Those two halves go together in a crucially important way, but the whole book isn't an apocalyptic like the Revelation is.

It's also true that there are sections of other books that are apocalypses. Like Zechariah, first half of the book is about his dreams and visions in the heavenly temple. Sections of the book of Ezekiel, the beginning, middle, and end. The prophet Isaiah has an apocalypse in one chapter, chapter 6. The Prophet Amos has a series of apocalypses: chapter 7 through 9. And then we talked about Abraham has dreams, visions and so is Jacob. There you go. In a way, what we're focusing in on is when you have a whole book or a section of a book that is full of this kind of dream imagery. That's what we're focusing in on.

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Michael Gorman is a New Testament scholar who's written the most clever title of a book on Revelation. Seriously, it's the first thing I recommend and hand to people. It's called "Reading Revelation Responsibly". It's so good.

Jon: You hinted that to my mom because she had it on her coffee table.

Tim: Oh, sweet. That's cool. It's so well written. For a wide audience, you don't have to know Greek or Hebrew. He presents the history of interpretation in mapping out approaches to how people read the book in a really helpful way. Gorman presents this map in the form of a cross that creates a box with four quadrants. The vertical line is called the time axis, the vertical axis. From here, this would be, from the perspective of the reader, is apocalyptic literature only about the past?

Jon: Some historical thing that happened in the past.

Tim: This is what Daniel saw for his day and his near future. This is what John saw for the churches in Asia in the 1st century.

Jon: That's one end of the spectrum.

Tim: That's the top. The middle of the whole square, the middle line is what he calls the present focus, the reader's present. It's about my time here and now. The bottom is the future focus. It's about events that are yet to come. You can line up approaches all along that line. There's also a horizontal axis that divides between two approaches. And this is very helpful. On the left is people who read the Revelation as a code, as a divine secret code. And it's a coded map predicting a certain set of events that will have or did happen based on where you are on the past or future access. But the whole point is it's a code about a very particular specific series of events. That once they have happened, you can decipher the code and the book will have served its function.

The goal of these reading strategies for these approaches will be decoding, deciphering, finding one to one correspondence between an image or symbol, and a historical event, person, or place. On the other end of that spectrum...

Jon: In the y-axis?

Tim: In the y-axis. ...is what he calls reading the text as a lens. This is about letting apocalyptic literature give you imagery through which you see the world. The goal is not to view it as a code, but to see it as a set of images that allow you to think of analogies and similarities in your own environment. The goal here is to see patterns, to understand symbols and images that help you see your own world, past, present, or future in

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a different way, in light of a transition perspective. That's the map. And you just go through, there's about five patterns through which people read apocalyptic literature. One would be the predictive futurist.

Jon: This is how I was taught to read.

Tim: This has been a very popular approach throughout history. But especially it's become the majority view and popular Christianity in modern America.

Jon: This is the left behind series.

Tim: Correct. And in the generation before that, "The Late, Great Planet Earth," Hal Lindsey and so on. This is the text is a code and it was written down without the author fully understanding, or even the original audience fully understanding because it's real meaning can only be unlocked once the specific set of events that it's predicting will take place.

Jon: And the events are all in the future?

Tim: And the events are all in the future for the author and the original audience, for sure.

Jon: And for us, the reader.

Tim: And perhaps even for us. Though, at some points in...

Jon: Some point in human history, it'll happen.

Tim: That's right. Though a big part of this movement, the predicted futurist interpretive movement, was to say, "We're beginning to see the signs." The idea is that, you know, you read Revelation in one hand with a newspaper in another. Or your news phone app in another. And you're like, "Oh, okay, this is happening in the Middle East. This fulfills this thing in Revelation 13. Therefore, the train must be coming."

Jon: Which in a way is very close to the other side of the y-axis, which is reading it pastorally.

Tim: Oh, it is meant to make you think about the present and future, but with a totally different purpose. I actually think more similar to this is its opposite end of the spectrum, which is what's called preterist or past. Preterist is a word for the past. Namely, that it is a code to be deciphered.

Jon: But it was all about stuff happening.

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Tim: It all happened in the 1st century here within the generation of the author and the readers. You can see how those two have dominated interpretive history. However, there have always been, and there is a resurgence of views that have more of a reader's present focus and viewing the text not as a code of secret fulfillment but of viewing it as a lens through which the reader is to look at their present in a new way. One is called the poetic or theopoetic. I'll just let him define it.

He says, "The Revelation uses mythical and poetic symbolism and language to express ultimate truths about God, evil in history. This is sometimes called the idealist or spiritual approach. Essentially, it's all of the images symbolize ideals, good and evil, God's kingdom and it's not trying to locate it at any particular time or moment in history. It's about realities that are always happening in any time in any place." Fourth in this family over here would be...he calls it the theopolitical. "It's essentially that the book originated out of a time of suffering and persecution, which is partially true. It's a document that is a form of political protest and dissent from the powers that be, namely, the Roman Empire in the 1st century." And so its main purpose is actually to give readers a vision of the kingdom of God as the antithesis of the kingdoms of this world. And it's meant to fuel endurance and faithfulness despite opposition.

Another approach in here he calls pastoral prophetic. This is the most encompassing in that it comes from the past, but it's meant to speak to every generation of readers through our present and on into the future by means of its imagery through which we see the world in a new way through these images and symbols. And that it's essentially a pastoral letter calling the church to faithfulness, giving comfort and giving warning and challenge. So all of those are in the viewing the text as the set of glasses you put on.

Jon: It will span from more of a past focus to more of a future focus.

Tim: Correct. That's right. I find that helpful. And the longer that at least I'm sitting with the Revelation and seeing how it works, I am very compelled, completely compelled actually, that viewing the text as a lens through which every audience of this book from its original audience to me, to my grandkids, and every generation in between is the addressee of the book. And is meant to see their time and place in light of the images and the narrative at work in the book.

And so it is working as a poetic work. I think that's how it transcends. It's the 1st century speaks to us. It is theopolitical. It's very much about economics, and politics, and religion, and power. And it's also pastoral. It's a word spoken to communities of Jesus' followers. So, it's essentially

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on that side of the column, or that side of the table that we're going to fill out.

Jon: But the preterist view, it does seem like there were things happening in the 1st century that was being talked about. But is it because you're not decoding? Is that why you wouldn't put yourself in the preterist's view?

Tim: In a way, this is what happens when you create these five views on Revelation. All of them actually have their thumb on something really important. That's why it's such a prominent view. The book was written in the 1st century. So that's its primary context of meaning. Which means there's going to be a lot of reference to 1st century stuff. And there is. But the book, like all apocalypses, you get up on the mountain, and you can see the whole landscape of human history. Yahweh looks down from His throne, and He looks on the kingdoms of humanity. And so it is also ultimately driven by a vision of the ultimate future.

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Jon: Tease out for me a little bit more the difference between decoding and looking through a lens.

Tim: Oh, got it. Reading the text as a code would be to say, "Ah, look, the dragon has seven heads in the scene in Revelation, and it's referred to as seven kingdoms and seven hills." And then a lot of people link this as a clear reference to the geography of the city of Rome, with I think they are called the Palatine Hills in the city of Rome or around it.

Jon: Kind of like a preterist.

Tim: That's right. Predictive view would be to say, "This is going to be a new city, a new Babylon that is yet to be built, from which a world empire will be ruled." It's a code. We're waiting for a city with seven hills. Viewing it as a lens would be to say, the imagery of the dragon didn't come from those seven hills. That came from the poetic images of chaos and evil in the Hebrew Bible. And those images are political images of a spiritual rebellion at work in and through human empires and power structures—theopolitical. That image is anchored in the Roman powers for the original audience, but by calling it a dragon, now freeze it from its Roman context and being limited to that to now speak of any human power institution that acts like the beast for any generation, including mine.

So, now, that image that is anchored in the past, becomes an image for me to talk about human power structures in my present and in my grandchildren's future. It's the dragon with seven heads. And so, it becomes an image for me to see there's diabolical things at work.

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Jon: It becomes...

Tim: A set of glasses or lens.

Jon: A set of glasses or lens. It becomes like a symbol by which I can then discern a meaning, all sorts of events.

Tim: Mm hmm. So then the dragon can be the Ottoman Turks, the British Empire, America, or whatever is yet to come. It can refer to all of them. And does. This is going to be as we dive into how to read the book. It's how to understand how the symbols work and how the symbols refer to things. And it's crucial to see where the symbols come from in the Hebrew Bible because that teaches you how to know how to apply them in your own context.

Jon: Now, if the author, like John the visionary or in Daniel, there may seem to have been a very specific historical person or event that they had in mind, if that's the case, will that seem kind of like a decoder ring kind of moment where it's like, "Hey, the little horn, maybe it's like..."

Tim: Nero or something like that.

Jon: Yeah. But I guess if you would grant that even you would then go on to say, but it is a symbol that goes beyond that.

Tim: Part of the reason for that is because where John, for example, or Daniel even got these symbols in the first place is from the biblical tradition that use the symbols to describe something earlier. So throughout the story of the Bible, the dragon is Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Antiochus Epiphanes. John picks it up and applies it to most likely Rome of his day. And so the fact that the dragon image can be used of all of these empires, it's a design pattern. In a way, the book of Revelation is the culmination of all the design patterns in the Hebrew Bible. And then it gives you the reader the commission to go look at your reality in your time through the lens of the design patterns.

Jon: Through the lens.

Tim: And that's the function of the Bible. It's the set of glasses through which you see and make sense of your world. That's why I'm compelled by these positions with...

[crosstalk 00:19:16]

Jon: Would you say, though, that while these design patterns are cycling through human history over and over the dragons and harlots, and the wars, and the violence and all this stuff...

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Tim: Chaotic seas and the beasts.

Jon: ...there will be a culminating one, a future final set that leads to new creation?

Tim: I presume so. I mean, the universe is going somewhere.

Jon: You presume so? Or do you think the Bible presume so?

Tim: I think the biblical authors think so. In as much as creation is a finite reality, apart from the sustaining, guiding work can't of itself produce the new creation, it has to be a new creation that emerges out of the old. But the thing is, is that these symbols have referred to so many different kinds of political, social events. I don't think we should mistake the image for the reality. The images help us understand the meaning of reality and the meaning of human history. And so what the actual set of events is that marks the culmination, I don't think we're meant to see these texts as giving us that kind of information.

Jon: Of when and how we'll see the culmination?

Tim: Correct.

Jon: But it is hope in that there will be a culmination.

Tim: Yes, very much so. And that's where the predictive futurist approach understands a key element of apocalyptic. It is about where things are going in the ultimate future. But what it under emphasizes is the routing of all of the symbols and images in the past and the ability of those images to speak to our present, not just the future. Otherwise, the book essentially just becomes a sealed scroll, so to speak, that is waiting for the right set of events to decipher the code. And then all of a sudden, 2,000 years plus later now we understand what it means. And it's been sealed in its meaning to every generation before us. That's an uncharitable way to say it, but like what a presumptuous point of view? But it's so Western. Because clearly, America is the culmination of history. And so it would be in our day and time...

Jon: Well, I don't, it feels like they're living in the culmination of history.

Tim: That's exactly the point.

Jon: Right?

Tim: That's right. That's right. But there's something uniquely...

Jon: And in some way, we always are living in the culmination of history.

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- Tim: That's true. Good point. That's really well said. That's true. Every generation is living at its version of the culmination.
- Jon: Yeah. And it feels like this must be the end almost all the time for a lot of people.
- Tim: I was thinking about this the other day. Oh, yeah. Oh, 1917. I watched the film "1917."
- Jon: Oh, yeah, I've seen that.
- Tim: Holy cow. Man, to think about that generation...
- Jon: Did that show up in the Oscars?
- Tim: Yeah, it got best in photography. Well earned. Stunning achievement. To have lived in the 19 teens in early 20s through World War 1, and to have seen what felt like the civilized world collapsing in on itself, how many young men were shipped off to their deaths? I mean, it's millions. And then within - what? 25 years, it happened again. The two world wars were in many ways the end of a world. And the world that emerged out the other side is what we call the modern west. It's a different world in many ways. Those wars and cataclysms reshaped much of the humans' population's reality. And so, in a way, that was the end of a world.
- Jon: That was the end of the world.
- Tim: It was the apocalypse. I just use the word apocalypse in its improper sense.
- Jon: Oh, yeah, you did.
- Tim: Sorry. It's hard. Old habits die hard.
- Jon: It wasn't the end of the world. It was the culmination of human history, and yet human history continues and heaven and earth have not been united.
- Tim: Correct.
- Jon: That seems to be, you know, you can...
- Tim: The least not fully.
- Jon: The least not fully. True. And there's this hope that one day it will be fully. And there's this almost expectation that "Oh, I bet it's this time in human history that fully is realized." And on and on for every generation for thousands of years. Would it surprise you if you were carried in the spirit

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or something—of course, it would surprise you—but you somehow were shown that human history survived in some sort of form of us just on earth figuring stuff out 10,000 years from now...

Tim: We're on Mars or something.

Jon: I'm sure partly on Mars. Would you just be like, "Oh, okay?"

Tim: No, not anymore. I wouldn't be surprised.

Jon: You wouldn't be surprised? One of the fundamental portraits of God in especially the Hebrew Bible is that the divine sense of time is very different. Not just very different, fundamentally different than my experience and perception of time. It's a major theme, especially in the wisdom literature. So, however, the divine purpose is working itself out in history, clearly, time efficiency is not...

Jon: Yeah, right.

Tim: ..is not of value to God.

Jon: I know. Well, especially when each of us only gets, whatever, 80 years.

Tim: But then you just have to reckon with the fact that God is so patient and accommodating. Even just within the storyline and time scope of the Bible was so many generations of people, allowing them to fumble through some wins, many losses, and yet God is persistently at work patiently. That portrait anymore is so powerful to me that I have no idea how long God's going to let this thing go. And in the light of whatever we mean by transcendent and ultimate time and eternity, even our sense of the deep abyss of time of the universe is nothing compared to that. I don't even know. This is the point where I don't know how to have a conversation about it anymore.

Jon: There's a YouTube video. It basically goes from today and then it starts clicking off years and showing you where the universe is heading in terms of...I mean, it's a lot of assumptions. But then it goes all the way. It's just trillions of years into the future. And it just speeds up exponentially. But you know, because our star, it's not going to burn out for another 5 billion years. And that's a long time to imagine.

Tim: Totally.

Jon: But we're still, even at that point, in the very earliest embryonic stages of the universe as we can understand the progression of the universe.

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Tim: Yeah, sure. As far as the heavens are about the earth. I think it's God's sense of time and space.

[00:27:01]

Tim: I think that arms us I think with some awareness of what Gorman calls the most common pitfalls. If you get the most common pitfalls in reading a work like what we're trying to describe, and you understand the map, I think that can arm you with some simple steps. Actually, no matter what view you hold, I think, some simple steps that can take your reading of Daniel and Revelation to the next level.

Jon: Okay. Can we do this with a text in our minds?

Tim: Yeah. We can pick either the first throne scene in Revelation. I thought we could pick the sign in heaven about the woman and the stars and the baby boy and the dragon.

Jon: Let's do that one.

Tim: Revelation 12. All right. First, let's scan through a chapter in the book of Revelation. And then we can work through what are the pitfalls that we want to avoid, and what are some helpful tools for how to read a text like this? The first actually helpful thing is to recognize this is chapter 12. And it comes at an important moment in the literary design and sequence of the book that we don't have time to unpack.

Jon: But you made a video about that.

Tim: Yeah, we made two videos about it that.

Jon: The overview of Revelation. About 20 minutes both videos.

Tim: Together, yeah. That's right. This is what's called...it's a pause. The story is, "Hey, seven churches, things are going to get hard. Hang in there and Jesus will reward you in the new creation." Opening, "vision in heaven," chapters 4 and 5. And he sees the lamb...the crucified and risen Jesus is the Lord of history. And so he can open up the scroll, which symbolizes God's purposes and plan for the cosmos.

Jon: What was that Psalm?

Tim: Oh, Psalm 33.

Jon: Psalm 33.

Tim: Oh, yeah. You said, "Wouldn't it be great to be able to know the plan?"

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Tim: Yeah, to know the plan.

Jon: And here's the lamb unrolling the plan.

Tim: Here's the lamb seizing and opening the scroll of God's purposes for history. And what fold out of it are three cycles of seven, of seven acts of divine justice that represent God's justice on humanity's evil and that vindicate the blood of the innocent that has been spilled on the dry land. It's all about the Cain and Abel story and the flood narrative purifying the land from the innocent bloodshed upon it.

Jon: What is the first? The seven seals?

Tim: All of that sevens are iterations of the flood design pattern in the Hebrew Bible. Because the flood design pattern then becomes the ten plagues, which is the new flood of divine justice, which becomes the conquest of Joshua on the Canaanites is a new flood of divine justice. There's all through hyperlinks and word patterns and so on. But you get this portrait of when there are moments of God bringing the hammer on the city of man because of the shedding the blood of the innocent, all that's rooted in Genesis 1 through 11. And so the cycles of seven, the opening of the scroll, the seven seals of the scroll, the seven trumpets, the seven bowls of God's anger each one of those is working out...literally the language of all these sevens is you take the flood narrative, the 10 plagues, the conquest narrative, and then a bunch of stuff from the prophets about the fall of Babylon and you put them in a blender, that's what you get.

Chapter 12 through 15 represents a pause in between the second and third cycle of seven. It gives you almost a meta-commentary on the whole biblical story. It retails the whole biblical story in a set of seven signs or seven signs that he sees. This is the first one. Revelation 12. "A great sign appeared in the heavens: a woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and on her head, a crown of twelve stars. She was with a child—she's pregnant—she cried out in labor and in labor pains gave birth."

Another sign in the skies, a great red dragon, seven heads, ten horns on the heads of seven crowns. His tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven, throwing them to the land. The dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth so that when she gave birth, he could eat the child." Whoa "She gave birth to a son, a male child, who was to rule all of the nations with a rod of iron. But that child was snatched up to God in His throne. The woman fled into the wilderness where a place was prepared for her where she could find nourishment for 1,260 days."

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- Jon: This is what I'm talking. We've done like five hours of conversation and it's been wonderful. But then you just start reading this, and it's like, "What in the world?"
- Tim: Totally, totally.
- Jon: It's a cryptic fantasy novel.
- Tim: Totally. All right. Step one in reading apocalyptic literature, read the work as a whole. That's not going to help you for this, but just read the whole work. And as you do, start to pay attention...
- Jon: And be prepared to be confused 90% of the time.
- Tim: Yeah. Just like the rest of the Bible is meditation literature. Understanding will not come quickly. When you're reading Jewish meditation literature, there's no two ways about it.
- Jon: Or listen to it.
- Tim: Because the opening paragraph of this book, Revelation, said it was designed to be listened to. It says it. Second step is recognize that it's dream literature. And then is dream literature that happened to people who were the most ultimate Bible nerds you could imagine. And so their dreams and then how they represent those dreams and literary works is going to be like Jewish meditation literature. Super dense, full of hyperlinks and illusions. And because it's dream literature, symbolism. I think the easiest way to communicate the fact that imagery and symbolism is that it's rooted in dreams and visions. Just to go back to our first episodes even.
- Jon: And that it's about design patterns too.
- Tim: It's about design patterns. That's exactly right. In the same way, these aren't as popular anymore in our culture. When I was growing up, for some reason, I found out about the comics page of the newspaper, and then particularly political cartoons. I don't know why I liked them as a kid. I thought they were funny. And because they were usually really fantastic images of caricatured political leaders...
- Jon: Like animals.
- Tim: ...but often people are depicted as animal. And so it'd be like a donkey, you know, democratic donkey, sitting on top of the building, or an elephant, republican sitting in the National Mall with a big plate of food in front of it. Actually, this is a great analogy for apocalyptic literature. If you were from another culture, you would look at that and just be like,

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"These people think elephants sit in the National Mall eating meals? What is this?" Obviously, it's insider lingo to a subculture. Apocalyptic symbolism works the same way. You're just supposed to know what the symbols are.

Jon: You talked about that y-axis of decoder ring to the lens. And here it feels like you kind of have to use the biblical theology decoder ring in order to discern the lens.

Tim: Correct. Correct.

Jon: What is the dragon? Well, how does the Bible talk about dragons? That's the decoder ring.

Tim: That's it.

Jon: And then now let's look at that not as now we need to decode a specific event in human history. Now it's a lens to look at all of human history.

Tim: Exactly right. We're into key steps for reading apocalyptic literature wisely. First thing—we talked about just a minute ago—read the work as a whole, and look at how themes and ideas develop and especially look for the most repeated anchor images. In Revelation, this is going to be the heavenly throne room, the lamb. Jesus is only referred to in two places in the book as something other than the lamb. He's the Son of Man in the first chapter, and he's the Word of God on the riding on a white horse in the end. In the middle, He's always the lamb. The dragon and the Beast. Essentially, these are the one on the heavenly throne, the lamb, the dragon and the beast. And they are like the key characters in the story. So those are clearly anchor images.

So, I want to go through the book, as I'm reading it in sequence, then is to begin to identify what the symbols are and then begin to decode them. Not decode the book to look for predictive fulfillment, but to decode the symbols to understand what they mean. And there's two places that you need to look. The first is always the Hebrew Bible. The second layer is 1st Century Greco Roman context, which is a little bit harder because you can't just turn there. But you can with Hebrew Bibles. Let's start with the Hebrew Bible, and let's go back to Revelation 12.

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Tim: A great sign appeared in the heavens. There's a cosmic woman in the skies. Actually, we could get really nerdy on this. Twelve stars, you know, something to do with the Zodiac. People go a lot of places with this. Let me just go very basically. Can I think of anywhere in the Bible where humans, male and female are described in a way that have a cosmic

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identity, where they in some way are associated with the transcendent, divine realm of the stars? And I think this should send our imaginations to the exaltation of the humans in Genesis 1 and then in God's promise to Abraham that your seed will be like the stars, Psalm 8, God's taking the dirt creature but exalted him with divine glory to rule above the cosmos. So a cosmic woman...

Jon: Cosmic woman.

Tim: ...elevated among the stars.

Jon: Now we also have the Proverbs cosmic woman.

Tim: Oh, Lady Wisdom you mean?

Jon: Is that related to Lady Wisdom?

Tim: Yeah, yeah. Oh, for sure. That's right. A cosmic woman who's pregnant and in grief, in labor. This is Genesis 3. This is Genesis 3.

Jon: Great pain in your childbirth, but the seed will...

Tim: But through that grievous toil of childbirth, a redemptive seed is brought forth. So we're first introduced to the cosmic woman, then we're introduced to a great dragon. So then I get out my concordance and I'm looking for dragons in the Hebrew Bible. And there's lots of them. They're also associated with snakes and reptilian sea creatures and so on. Then I think, oh, yes, Genesis 3 once again. The woman versus the snake. This whole chapter is about Genesis 3:15. The woman and the snake and hostility between them, and then hostility between the seed of the woman and the seed of the snake. Seven heads, ten horns, and diadems.

Later in the book, I'll be given a clue that the seven dragon heads are seven kings. I know seven from Genesis 1 is a number of completeness or totality.

Jon: To all the kings.

Tim: Yeah. This dragon is that works among all the kingdoms of the earth. Seven, ten horns.

Jon: Ten horns is?

Tim: This is from Daniel chapter 7. The horns of the beasts which represent these little towers of human arrogance that emerge from the kingdoms of this earth. And so this dragon is represented through the kingdoms of the earth, the heads, and the horns, but he's also rallied alongside of him some of the stars of heaven...

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Jon: Yeah, the host of heaven,

Tim: The rebel divine council. And now we're to the sons of God in Genesis 6, and the Nephilim, the rebel warrior kings of the ancient world. Now we've got the seed of the snake. Kings of the earth and rebel violent human kings.

Jon: I only see the snake

Tim: Yeah. Then we're back to the snake. But here's the thing...

Jon: Because In Genesis 3, the prophecy that God gives, or what would you call it?

Tim: It's a promise.

Jon: Promise.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Seed of the woman will be at odds with the seed of the snake. The seed of the woman will crush the head of the snake. Snake will bite the humans, heal venomous bite, but the snake will be destroyed.

Tim: Yeah. Notice, then at the end of verse 4 the dragon is standing there trying to eat the child. Trying to kill it, like Pharaoh. Trying to kill the seed of the woman. Verse 5, she gives birth to a son. And the description of the son comes from Psalm 2. He's going to rule the nations with a rod of iron. It's copy and paste from Psalm 2, which is about the seed of David.

Then that child is exalted up into the heavens and to God's throne. If we're talking about Jesus here, this is about Jesus coming onto the scene and then exalted up to the divine throne. And then the woman then becomes this stand in, as it were, for her child. Her child's exalted up in the heavens, and she's now down in the realm of the dragon. And so she goes into exile in the wilderness, and God provides for her in exile. This is Hagar. Hagar, and it's ladies Zion from the book of Lamentations. And then God cares for her for three and a half years, 1,260 days.

Jon: Which is a half of seven.

Tim: Which is a half of seven. The meaning of that all comes from the book of Daniel. It's that God's work is coming in Sabbath cycles in seven. His work of creation happened in the Sabbath cycle. His work of new creation is going to happen in Sabbath cycles. And so to say somebody there for half a Sabbath cycle is to say...it's like 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. You're waiting in the wilderness, but God has a purpose. The

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seven is yet to come to say half a seven. That was short. You kind of get it?

Jon: Yeah. You kind of have to know the whole Bible.

Tim: You have to know the whole Bible to make sense of apocalyptic literature. How does that feel?

Jon: Well, actually, in one sense, we read that. When we were reading that I was picking up on a lot of it because I think we've been reading the Bible together for a long time. I got thrown at the 1,260. I had no idea what that was. Iron scepter, I didn't know that from the Psalms.

Tim: The woman fleeing into the wilderness.

Jon: So when we got to the iron scepter and the woman fleeing in the wilderness for 1,260 days, I was just like, "Yeah, I'm lost." But up to there. I was like, "Oh, yeah, this is about Genesis 3. I was picking it up," which I wouldn't have before. The tail sweeping out the stars of the sky, I didn't pick that up as the seed of the snake. I thought that was more maybe God's judgment in some sense. I mean, it's hard. There's a lot here.

Tim: It's true. But to be honest, this is just as dense as biblical narrative. And it's just as dense as the prophetic books, and it's as dense as the Psalms are. It's biblical literature. But somehow, like the Bizarro factor isn't more on the surface at least for a lot of modern readers.

Jon: Yeah. It's as dense, but then it's also got that Bizarro part of it, which makes it feel even less attainable. It makes me go, "How am I supposed to be? What kind of jujitsu am I supposed to be doing to figure this out?" Versus when I'm reading a really dense narrative or something, I'm not really thinking of that. I'm not distracted by that.

Tim: So really, the art of interpreting apocalyptic revelation in Daniel is the art of reading the Bible as a unified whole, and understanding house design patterns and symbols, developing images work throughout the story. The Revelation and Daniel, they're like the deep end of the pool of the Old and New Testaments. They assume a lot of the reader. One of the best things you can do to understand these two books in the Bible is to read the rest of the Bible. And then also learn how to use a concordance, which there's digital version now, so many of them, where you can just look up "dragon". And then you'll start seeing that dragons are in the same context as snakes. And then it would be like a theme study on dragons and snakes.

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Jon: Well, honestly though, how much of this can you pick up on your own versus...? I mean, like, for example, you read the Bible and I'm sure you pick up on this kind of stuff, but also you just read other scholars who have picked up on it.

Tim: Totally. Oh, yes, that's right.

Jon: So it's not simply just...

Tim: This is our mantra: don't read the Bible alone. Do but also don't.

Jon: Right. If you put me on an island with the Bible, and every day, I'm going to read it and meditate on it with this paradigm in mind, I'll find some of it. But man, it will take a lifetime to connect dragons to serpents to the seed and I'm like, "Oh my goodness, we did it." But just that was just like scratching the surface where when you're reading it and community with other people have been doing it for lifetimes, it's like such a head start.

Tim: Yeah, that's totally right. You have to read it in community. It was designed to be read aloud to seven communities. That's exactly right. I have this interesting chart by scholar Steve Moyice called "The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation." It's about hyperlinks to the Hebrew Bible. And he has these cool comparative charts about the number of direct references or quotations for the Revelation. Just a quick scan here. 82 references to places in the Torah, 97 to the Psalms, 122 references to Isaiah, 48 to Jeremiah, 83 to Ezekiel, 74 to Daniel, 73 to the Minor Prophets.

And he compares it to references and Hebrews, Matthew and Romans. And by far the Revelation is off the charts. The most dense allusions to the most different number of books. Whatever you need to read this book, you're going to need the insights of other people in present and past. The steps are almost too simple because they imply so much. The first is read it as a literary whole.

Jon: Great.

Tim: Because what preterist and futurist approaches tend to do is isolate images and symbols as codes out of context in the whole. The most famous one is the, whatever, the demon locusts beasts of one of the seals.

Jon: Like helicopters?

Tim: Yeah. This is how Lindsey in the late 70s thinking that they're, you know, like Apache helicopters. And so, that's so ignoring what that particular

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strike of God's justice is doing in the sequence that it's in, in that place in the book.

Jon: And what locusts do throughout the whole story of the Bible.

Tim: And then what locusts symbolize throughout the Hebrew Bible. It's exactly right. So reading it as a whole. Then second is a lifetime of just creating your own little spreadsheet of symbols. What's the symbol? And here's the thing. There's about a dozen different symbols interpreted for you the moment they're introduced, especially in the book of Revelation. In chapter one, Jesus has said...

Jon: Kind of like when you get the worksheet from school and the first couple are filled in.

Tim: Totally. In chapter 1, Jesus is holding seven stars and seven lamps. These are the angels and the seven churches. The angel in chapter 8 has incense ball with incense going up to the divine throne, and you're told, "These are the prayers of the saints." This has happened multiple times in the book. So you're already being told...

Jon: Those are the ones that John doesn't think you'll get on your own?

Tim: I guess so. That's a good point. I don't want to belabor this point. I think we've already made the point. Let me just pause. It's an implication that I wanted to highlight when we talked about poetry and metaphor in our how to read the Bible series. This is yet another whole section of the Bible that's primarily appealing to our imagination. Imagery and symbols.

Imagery and symbols communicate more than just an idea. They shape your view of reality. When you shape somebody's imagination, you're shaping their sense of what is real. And here we are two more books of the Bible and the sections of a bunch of others where when people ascend into the heavenly realm, they get a God's eye view of past, present, and future, but what they see are symbols. To me, that's so important to protect and honor that. It's another part of the Bible shaping us more than it is giving us information.

[00:49:30]

Jon: Image of a slain lamb on a throne shaping us.

Tim: Yes. The victor of Daniel and the Revelation is a human who's been trampled by beasts, who's vindicated by God to rule the world. In Revelation, it's a sacrificed lamb with a slit bloody throat that is the king of the cosmos.

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Jon: Because these are images that will shape us to be true humans, to shape us to be image bears when we let them do the work on us.

Tim: Yes. What else does an image of a victorious slain lamb mean except that those who follow the lamb? Which is the description of Jesus' followers in the book of Revelation—those who listen to the lamb's voice and follow him wherever He goes. It's an image that undercuts. All sense of triumphalism and superiority. Whatever God's kingdom looks like, it doesn't exalt people. It exalts the one human who did for us what none of us could do for ourselves, and whom we killed, with whom we all partnered with the dragon in participating and contributing to a world system that killed our creator. But his love and creative power is so great that even death can't conquer His love and life that He wants to give us as a gift. That's what these images mean. So powerful.

This is Michael Gorman's point then. The pastoral function of this book is to summon every generation of readers to follow the lamb in its footsteps and to resist the beast within and without and to suffer along with the lamb if need be, and bearing witness to what he's done. If that's not where it ends, then we've totally missed the purpose of apocalyptic literature.

Jon: Thanks for listening to this episode of the BibleProject podcast. Next week, we're going to do a question and response episode on how to read apocalyptic literature. And then after that, we're going to begin a brand new series on how to read New Testament letters. It's a series we skipped so that we could get to apocalyptic literature quicker. So we're going to circle back and we're going to look at the small books at the end of your Bible written by apostles of Jesus to the early Jesus communities in the Roman world. The first two episodes we actually recorded live in Dallas, and it was a lot of fun and I can't wait for you to hear it.

Tim: The letters actually become easy and accessible, I think, only when we ignore their literary form. And when we honor their literary form, all of a sudden, we have a way to account for all of what's there, not just some of what's there. And all of what's there includes a lot of texts that are really challenging for us to appropriate or understand in our modern context. And so this is the swirl of challenges that comes along with interpreting the New Testament letters. Talk about how y'all are living stones. Oh, you laugh because I said, "Y'all."

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Sorry. It's like I don't know that's funny. It's cool, but it's not funny. Maybe it's funny, I don't know.

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Jon: Today's show was produced by Dan Gummel. Our theme music comes from the band Tents. If you're new to the BibleProject, we are a crowdfunded nonprofit in Portland, Oregon. Our mission is to experience the Bible as a unified story that leads to Jesus. So we make all sorts of resources: this podcast, videos, we've got some study notes and other downloads on our website. It's all free, and you can find it at bibleproject.com. Thanks for being a part of this with us.

Kiva: That's "hello, how are you" in Irish. My name is Kiva and I am from Central Washington. I use the BibleProject in the ministry that I work in, where I do discipleship training and character training. We believe that the Bible is a unified story that leads to Jesus. We're a crowdfunded project by people like me. Find free videos, study notes, podcasts, and more resources at the BibleProject.com.