

## THE BOOK OF REVELATION: INTERPRETING RELIGIOUS TEXTS

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD ([Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu](mailto:Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu))

The final book accepted into the “canon” of the Christian New Testament was the “Book of Revelation.” This book—which seems to describe a vision about the end of the world—has frequently been the source of conflict both within Christianity, and between Christianity and other groups, such as the Romans (some of whom saw early Christians as an “**apocalyptic cult**” who couldn’t be trusted to follow society’s rules, since they thought the world was about to end). In particular, some groups within Christianity have regularly read the book as a prophecy about the (imminent) end of the world, and have interpreted the various evil characters in the book as portraying their political enemies (be these Roman Emperors, the Pope, or whoever it is they happen to dislike). The book played a minor role in Christianity’s eventual divisions, with Orthodox Christians not including it as part of their standard services, and Martin Luther (an early leader of the Protestant Reformation) arguing early in his career that it had something like a “lesser status” than the other books of the New Testament.

Nevertheless, for all this, the book of Revelations has survived as a “canonical” book in all major branches of Christianity. Mainstream Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox Christians generally interpret its message as either a historical one, meant to help provide early Christians with a way of conceptualizing their religious persecution by the Romans (with a reassurance they would conquer in the end), or as a (abstract and highly metaphorical) prophecy about the far distant future. Both historically and up to the current day, however, the book of Revelations has *also* continued to play a major role in inspiring various end-of-the-world cults. Many “heretical” sects of Christianity (of the sort that often ended up being persecuted by mainstream Christians) adopt such readings of the book. The book is also central to intra-Christian debates about the existence/nature of **hell**, as this is one of the few places where it mentioned (hell doesn’t feature in the Hebrew Scriptures at all).

In this lesson, we’ll be looking at a few of the more famous passages from the book. As an activity, I’ll ask you to consider how *you* would interpret this book.

### THE “SEVEN SEALS” AND THE END OF THE WORLD

Revelations 5-8 describes the opening of the “Seven Seals” of a divine scroll that will apparently precede the second coming of Christ, and usher in the end of the world. The end of the world (starting in Revelation 19) will apparently feature a “beast”, “false prophet”, and “devil” who will eventually be overcome. There will be some people sent to hell. Here’s a taste:

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#### REV.5

- [1] And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals.
- [2] And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?
- [3] And no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon.
- .. Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.
- [13] And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.
- [14] And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.

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#### REV.6

- [1] And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see.
- [2] And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.
- [3] And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see.
- [4] And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.
- [5] And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand.

[6] And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.

[7] And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see.

[8] And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

[9] And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held:

[10] And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

[11] And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.

[12] And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood;

[13] And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind.

[14] And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.

[15] And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains;

[16] And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb:

[17] For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?

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....REV.8

[1] And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.

[2] And I saw the seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets.

[3] And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne.

[4] And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand.

[5] And the angel took the censer, and filled it with fire of the altar, and cast it into the earth: and there were voices, and thunderings, and lightnings, and an earthquake.

[6] And the seven angels which had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound.

[7] The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth: and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up.

[8] And the second angel sounded, and as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea: and the third part of the sea became blood;

*(Brendan's Note: Similar things follow from here, as the angels sound their trumpets. Now, we'll skip to the end of the world)*

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REV.19

...[11] And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war.

[12] His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself.

[13] And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God.

[14] And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean.

[15] And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.

[16] And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.

[17] And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God;

[18] That ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all men, both free and bond, both small and great.

[19] And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army.

[20] And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone.

[21] And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of his mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh.

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REV.20

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[10] And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

[11] And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.

[12] And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

[13] And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.

[14] And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

[15] And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.

#### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Suppose that you are a Christian. What do you think the \*best\* interpretation (i.e., the one that best fits with other texts, such as the Gospels and Torah) of the Book of Revelations is? Is it meant to be history (albeit a history told in an allegorical manner)? Prophecy? Something else? How would you argue for your interpretation to those that argued differently? What about hell and the fate of non-believers?
2. Suppose that you are NOT a Christian, but are instead an adherent of a rival religion or philosophy (Judaism, Stoicism, Islam, or something else). If you'd never encountered Christians before, and this was the \*only\* document you knew of theirs, what impression might you have of Christianity? What would your response be? (This sort of thing was a real issue for early Christians.).
3. Christianity isn't the only religion with texts that can be read as "end times" prophecies! In fact, these sorts of passages can be found in the texts of many/most world religions, and the reaction has tended to be similar (e.g., "mainstream" members of the religion tend to read them allegorically, but smaller sects make a lot out of them). What do you think the \*reasons\* are that end-times prophecies are so attractive?