

## How to Read Scripture

To take the scriptures seriously is not to take them literally. Literalism is invariably the lowest and least level of meaning. Most Biblical authors understood this, which is why they felt free to take so many liberties with what we would call "facts." In many ways, we have moved backward in our ability to read spiritual texts, especially after the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when religious people became defensive and lost their own unique vantage point.

We must be careful not to jump into reading sacred scripture without some understanding of the historical and theological significance of the book or books we are reading. As Episcopalians, we believe that our sacred scriptures, both the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) and the New Testament, are Divinely Inspired. "Divinely Inspired" does not mean the scripture is dictated by God or the Holy Spirit. Divine inspiration as we understand it is God or the Holy Spirit causing a person to experience a creative desire. Divine inspiration is closely tied to the concept of revelation, the belief in information being revealed or disclosed to a person, who then in turn writes down that revelation through his or her own experience.

As such, it helps a reader to know such things as *when* they were written, *why* they were written, *for whom* were they written, and *how do they fit* into God's plan of salvation? In that way we come to understand how the sacred scriptures, some of which were written up to four thousand years ago, still have application for us today.

Serious reading of Scripture allows us to find an ever-new spiritual meaning for the understanding of God in every generation. Then the text is true on many levels instead of our trying to prove it is true on just the one simple, factual level. Sacred texts always maximize our possibilities for life and love, which is why we call them sacred. People have inappropriately used the Bible over the ages merely to prove various church positions or their own personal or political beliefs, which largely narrows the Bible's range and depth. Instead of transforming people, the Biblical texts used to prove a position then become merely utilitarian and a type of handy ammunition, not the reason for which they were provided.

Biblical messages often proceed from historical events, but they do not depend upon communicating those events with perfect accuracy. Moses, Jeremiah, and the prophets did not share those concerns. Our Jewish ancestors sometimes called this deeper approach midrash or extrapolating from the mere story to find its actual message.

We all do the same when we read anything today, but Jesus and his Jewish people were much more honest and up-front about this. Even more than telling us exactly what to see in the Scriptures, Jesus taught us how to see, what to emphasize, and also what could be deemphasized, or even ignored. Jesus is himself our lens, and he was in no way a fundamentalist or literalist. He was a man of the Spirit. Just watch him and watch how he does it (which means you must have some knowledge of his Scriptures!).

Jesus consistently ignored or even denied exclusionary, punitive, and triumphalistic texts in his own Jewish Bible in favor of passages that emphasized inclusion, mercy, and honesty. He had a deeper and wider eye that knew what passages were creating a highway for God and which passages were merely cultural and legalistic additions. When Christians pretend that every line in the Bible is of equal importance and inspiration, they are being very unlike Jesus.

He read his own inspired Scriptures in a spiritual and highly selective way, absolutely ignoring and even rejecting some parts of them in favor of inclusive and helpful messages and parables. Jesus read the inspired text in an inspired way, which is precisely why he was accused of "teaching with authority and not like our scribes" (Matthew 7:29). He then accused fervent and pious "teachers of the law" of largely missing the point: "You understand neither the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Mark 12:24).

The New Testament was largely written in Greek—a language which Jesus did not speak or understand—and this was done thirty to seventy years after his death and centuries before the age of digital recorders. We can conclude that the exact words of Jesus were apparently not that important for the Holy Spirit—or for us. We have only a few snippets of Jesus's exact words in his native Aramaic.

This understanding will help us as we study the four gospels and note that there are some differences and contradictions in the gospels.

It also is important to understand, as we approach a study of the gospels, how they originated.

The gospels originated in the preaching of the early church. The process was rather long and complicated, beginning with the first disciples of Jesus who spoke of their faith experiences after his death and resurrection. The oral tradition began to take a discernable shape in literary form, eventually being written down for posterity. Decades after the events, the four people we identify as the four evangelists, designated Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John collected, edited, and shaped these oral and written traditions into the four gospels accepted by the Christian church.

The process of creating the four gospels is sometimes summarized in three parts, or “traditions”. The first is the Oral Tradition. It began during Jesus’ life (ca. 6 B.C. – A.D. 30) and consisted of the telling of the stories, sayings, teachings, etc., from his lifetime. The Written Tradition (began perhaps ca. A.D. 50s or 60s) is characterized by gathering materials from the oral preaching of the apostles and early disciples. The Edited Tradition (ca. A.D. 65-100) is represented by materials shaped by the evangelists and their respective communities. This process implies that the gospels contain various levels of tradition that reflect both the historical and theological interests of the early church. Scholars point to these three Traditions or layers of development evident in all four gospels. While somewhat overlapping, they date across the entire Christian first century.

Although reaching absolute certainty of history in such development of final written books can be tricky, the gospels all reflect both historical and theological realities in the life of Jesus and the early church. Reading the gospels requires being mindful of this complex process. Through a thoughtful and careful reading of the gospels, and the other books of the New Testament, we come to understand and to know Jesus through his life and his teachings in the words and stories of the Apostles, disciples, and faithful followers.

The message of Jesus is what we seek. His words changed with his crowds. His emphasis differed from time to time. His teachings are reported in different ways. But his message, his voice, his commands, were consistent and constant. His was a message of love, forgiveness, concern for the underprivileged, options for the poor, and the importance of living in the kingdom daily.

So, with that background, let's begin our journey through the four gospels, exploring one "voice" at a time.



## Revelation: Number Seven

The number **seven** is of great symbolic significance in Revelation. Some suggest it may be a key to the structure of the entire book. In Hebraic thought, seven is the perfect number, it represents wholeness and completeness. The chief opponent of the number seven is the number six, since it always falls short of perfection. Therefore 666 (Rev 13:18) is the symbolic identity of the beast.

| Seven...  | Referencce   |
|---|--|
| Letters   | 1:4-3:22   |
| Churches  | 1:4-3:23   |
| Spirits before the throne   | 1:04   |
| Gold lampstands (= churches)  | 1:12, 20   |
| Stars (=angels)   | 1:16, 20   |
| Flaming torches (= spirits)   | 4:05   |
| Seals on scroll   | 5:1-5  |
| Horns and eyes on the slain Lamb (=spirits)   | 5:06   |
| Trumpets  | 8:2-11:19  |
| Thunders (= God's voice)  | 10:03  |
| Seven thousand killed in the earthquake   | 11:13  |
| Heads on the red dragon (= hills, as in Rome)   | 12:3; 17:9-11  |
| Diadems on the heads of the red dragon (= kings, as in Roman emperors)  | 12:3; 17:9-11  |
| Heads on the sea beast  | 13:01  |
| Last plagues (cf. Exod 7-10)  | 15:1-16-21   |
| Gold bowls (filled with the fury of God)  | 15:7; 16:1   |
| Scenes of God's victory over evil (return of Christ; last battle; binding of Satan; thousand year reign; defeat of Gog and Magog; last judgment; new Jerusalem) | 19:11-16, 17-21; 20:1-3, 4-6, 7-10, 11-15; 21:1-22:5 |

## Revelation: Colors

Like numbers, the **colors** used throughout the book of Revelation are symbolic. While the context often helps us understand their significance, this list of color symbols provides basic meanings.

| Color      | Significance        |
|------------|---------------------|
| White      | Victory, triumph    |
| Red        | Bloodshed, violence |
| Scarlet    | Royalty, bloodshed  |
| Purple     | Royalty, bloodshed  |
| Black      | Famine              |
| Pale Green | Death               |

Source: "Revelation," Little Rock Scripture Study, Liturgical Press 2022

## Revelation: Symbols

Revelation is essentially one long, complex vision of God's ultimate victory over evil. It is filled with **symbolic language** for the sake of the original Christian audience who lived in a time of persecution by Roman authorities. The following chart lists some of these symbols in Revelation 12-17.

| Symbols  | Reference                  |
|--|----------------------------|
| Woman adorned with the sun, the moon, and stars, most likely representing the new people of Israel (the church); Roman Catholics traditionally see in her the image of Mary. | 12:01                      |
| Red dragon representing Satan, evil personified  | 12:03                      |
| Beast from the sea representing the Roman Empire and its emperors  | 13:01                      |
| Beast with the number 666, most likely representing Caesar Nero  | 13:18                      |
| 144,000 of the elect who are ransomed, representing the twelve tribes of Israel  | 14:03                      |
| Baylon, symbolic of Rome   | 14:8; 16:19;<br>17:5; 18:2 |
| The harlot, representing Babylon (Rome); Old Testament background of harlotry as idolatry (e.g., Hos 1:2; 2:4-15)  | 17:1-18                    |

Source: "Revelation," Little Rock Scripture Study, Liturgical Press 2022

## **The thousand-year reign (Rev 20)**

The thousand-year reign has fascinated interpreters for generations and has fueled a movement known as millenarianism (or millennialism). Although its roots go back to the early church, modern versions of it exist among some fundamentalist Christians who envision the thousand-year reign as lasting literally one thousand years, either before or after the second coming of Christ. Most interpreters, however, understand the “thousand years” as representative of a suitably long period of time – a time when victory has been declared (by the death and resurrection of Christ) but is not yet final. In the end, God’s victory will be definitive, establishing a lasting kingdom of justice and peace.

## **Revelation and the Afterlife**

Revelation is a book about God’s ultimate victory over evil. Christ, the victorious Lamb, will conquer all evil and establish an endless reign of justice and peace. But the message of victory is accompanied by a warning: those who do not repent of the sinfulness here and now may face eternal condemnation, “the second death” (20:6, 14; see also 2:11; 21:8). The warning is not unique to Revelation. Jesus’ preaching in the Gospels also calls for repentance and conversion so as to avoid eternal damnation (e.g., Matt 13:40-43; Mark 9:43-48).

The image of fiery condemnation most likely originates in the stark reality of the garbage dump outside the city walls of Jerusalem known as “Gehenna” (see Matt 10:28, 23:23; Luke 12:5; James 3:6). By New Testament times, the smelly, fiery, smoldering reality had become the primary symbol for a place of punishment and life without God’s presence; that is, hell.

Like many difficult topics and ideas in the book of Revelation, we are left to grapple with its dire warnings about the afterlife. One thing is clear: what we do with our lives here and now makes a difference in the life to come (rev 20:12-13, 22:12; see also Matt 25:31-46; 1 Thess 1:7-10).

[Source: *Revelation*, Little Rock Scripture Study, Liturgical Press 2022]

## The name of the beast in numbers

At the conclusion of this vision of the beast from the earth, John adds a note to his readers concerning the identity of this beast (13:18). To appreciate what John is saying here, we must imagine a community that already knows the identity of the beast and, together with John, shares a bit of "naughty" delight in talking about the beast behind his back! The practice in which John is engaged is called *gematria*. Jewish rabbis of the ancient world were skilled at it, but non-Jewish people in the Greco-Roman world enjoyed it too. It was a process of assigning numbers to letters of a word or a name and using the resulting number to designate something about the holder of that name.

Because Latin, Hebrew, and Greek do not have separate sets of symbols for numbers, people used the individual letters and combinations of letters to designate quantities. It became quite natural, then, to refer to a person by their number, particularly among friends who wished to share a "secret" that they wanted to keep from outsiders. People who already knew the name could very quickly discern the number, but those who did not would find it almost impossible to solve the riddle. Sometimes the number also has symbolic meaning, as in the case of 666. Six is one short of perfection or fullness and therefore means imperfection or evil. Thus, John is saying to his audience, "Here is this beast who has deceived and enamored the whole world, but we know who he really is—he is evil itself!"

What, then, is the name of the beast? Since he appears to be one of the emperors of Rome, and presumably someone known to John, our choices have been narrowed considerably. Most scholars believe him to be Nero, since his Greek name and title (Nero Caesar or Nron Qsr), transliterated into Hebrew, adds up to 666: N(50) + r(200) + o(6) + n(50) + Q(100) + s(60) + r(200), while his Latin name and title (Neron Kaisar or Nro Qsr), transliterated into Hebrew, adds up to 616: N(50) + r(200) + o(6) + Q(100) + s(60) + r(200), which is a variant reading found in some of the manuscripts (handwritten copies) of the book of Revelation. Nero was already deceased at the time of John's writing, but because of the legend associated with his departure (suicide) and because he, like Domitian after him, also persecuted Christian believers, some have concluded that Domitian was Nero returned to life.

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