

BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!
Interpreting Words and Images in Revelation.

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Abstract:

Revelation is a description of a vision. John was looking at images when he wrote down the words in the book. Rather than approach it as words to be translated and then interpreted, I will suggest that we use the words to reconstruct the images, and then interpret the images. A comparison will be made between the images broadcast of New York City after the World Trade Center towers fell on 9-11 and the images in Revelation chapter 18.

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I was sitting at my desk in my office with my door open getting ready for class when another professor came into the reception area. He said “A plane has just hit the world trade centers.” At first I was not really alarmed. A plane hitting a building nearly a quarter of a mile tall is not unbelievable, and several planes have hit the Empire State Building. So I turned on the news radio out of Columbus Ohio in time to hear that a second plane had hit the other tower. Now I was alarmed. I tried to get on the news sites on the internet and could not, likely due to the large number of people trying to log on to the sites. Something was obviously terribly wrong. The nearest television set was in the lobby of the women’s dorm across the quad from my building. I ran over there as spent the rest of the day glued to the television. I left the room long enough to cancel my one public speaking class for the day.

As the terrible drama unfolded, I was shocked to see the pentagon attacked. But I was truly and deeply frightened when the newsreader came on and said that the airlines have confirmed that 4 planes had been hijacked. Only three had been accounted for. An overwhelming sense of dread and heaviness enveloped me for the next 25 minutes until word came that a plane had crashed in rural Pennsylvania. I knew it had to be the one. It was a terrible kind of relief, knowing that was the last plane.

As the towers burned, there was only standing room in the lobby. Few were talking. The footage moved to a helicopter circling the burning buildings. People were jumping from the buildings rather than burn to death. Suddenly one tower was enveloped in a plume of thick gray smoke. Someone said “Look at that smoke! Is the building exploding?” I said, “No the tower is falling. That is concrete turning to powder.” Less than an hour later the second tower fell.

The sight of people screaming and running down the streets of the city was disturbing, but I caught myself in an uncomfortable chuckle as the hideous irony occurred to me. This looks just like an old black and white Godzilla movie. Images moved through my mind as I compared what I was seeing in reality to movies; The Towering Inferno came to mind.

But soon the camera shifted. The network had moved a camera to the New Jersey shore directly across from the towers. As they panned back, the smoke and dust was centered in the frame, and water covered the area from Manhattan to our vantage point. Suddenly another image came to my mind with crystal clarity. I said out loud “I have seen this before.” People reacted with disbelief. It wasn’t a feeling of deja-vu, it was just like the memory of the image from the movies. Only it was not a movie. I said “Does anyone have a Bible handy?” Someone produced one and turned to Revelation chapter 18. After a moment I read out loud:

Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, “Was there a city like this great city?” They will throw dust on their heads and with weeping and mourning cry out: “Woe! Woe, O great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin!” Rev. 18:17b-21

Silence followed. A few were sobbing. A young lady asked “Dr. Behr? Is this the end?” Not quite sure, I read the rest of chapter 18 starting at the beginning.

Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! She has become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird. For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries. Rev. 18:2b:3

The more I read, the more convinced I was that what I was seeing was what the same image described in Revelation. America was Babylon, represented poetically by the twin towers. What could describe this nation better than “For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries”?

Then something odd happened.

This sense of peace came over me. I realized that whether or not this was the fulfillment of a prophecy, it was a clear reminder that God is ultimately in control of all history and that no evil can befall us that God cannot bring good out of it. I shared this insight with those assembled in the lobby. Someone began a prayer. The mood shifted dramatically.

Little more than a decade later, I am no closer to determining if this was the fulfillment of the prophetic vision of John in Revelation 18. My scholarly conclusion: maybe so, maybe not. But I am convinced that whatever John saw that day on the island of Patmos, was certainly very much like what I saw on 9-11. This led me to begin interpreting Revelation from a different perspective. Rather than focus on a word for word or dynamic equivalent interpretation, we could look at the pictures.

The purpose of this essay is to suggest that Revelation could be interpreted as a series of images and sounds, rather than as a text, full of words. I have not done a full content analysis, but a quick review yields a number of clues to sensory images: “Revelation” itself is a visual term. The book itself was meant to be read aloud “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy and blessed are those who hear it.” Rev. 1:3. One problem with a purely linguistic interpretation is the details. Any theory of interpretation of language must account for the preponderance of the details of the text, and this is where most seem to be lacking. They cannot account for every detail in the theory. Another problem with a purely linguistic interpretation is that the language of the original Greek is highly metaphorical and any translation necessitates an interpretation.

It is written in the poetic genre of Apocalyptic literature. All sorts of questions arise: What kind of hermeneutic do we use to translate? How literal are we? What if the beast is literally a beast?

But if we consider that the details the description of images, sounds, and sensations then the details are there to build to a broader vision. They help us reconstruct what John saw, and felt, and heard. So rather than ask, “what do these words mean?” We should be asking, “what was John looking at when he described this?”

Sound and image even overlap “I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me” Rev. 1:12 I am not sure that human sensory organs are designed to see sounds, but John seemed to indicate it was possible, poetically emphasizing both his eyewitness testimony and the visual nature of this prophecy. Many of the Old Testament prophets saw visions, like Ezekiel and Daniel, but most were given words of God to proclaim. When we parse the individual words

apart from the broader images we make an interpretation error of focusing on the trees rather than the forest.

It is reasonable to me, as rhetorical critic that the Revelation cannot be taken far out of its historical context. Just as the Gettysburg address cannot be divorced from the battle or from the conflict of the Civil War. Revelation is indeed an example of the genre of apocalyptic literature, as popular in that day as fantasy is today. Were it entirely a prediction of the future it would have been meaningless to its intended audience.

But John identifies it as a prophecy and suggests there is some predictive value. “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him to show his servants what must soon take place.” Rev. 1:1. Perhaps this explains why so many people, over so many cultures, over so many years insist on attempting to interpret it in a way that could predict the future.

While we understand from the Old Testament that most prophecy is forth telling rather than foretelling, and that the predictive value came not from some magical vision of future events, but the logical extension of current trends or behavior to their logical outcomes. The proclamations against the kingdoms around Israel were descriptions of where those nations would end up, based on where they were heading.

Even now we know the messianic prophecies only in retrospect. They were of limited predictive value even to the wise men that mistakenly showed up at Herod’s palace asking after the king of the Jews. They even missed the significance of Bethlehem, when it was named directly in Micah 5:2. But when we compare the life of Jesus of Nazareth to the scriptures from Genesis on, it is clear that he was the Messiah.

Today we have a number of views on the interpretation of Revelation. I tend to like the historicist view that looks at the book being fulfilled through the broad scope of history. It

would be nice if we could get enough world historians in a room together to compare notes. We might be able to look back and find out what visions in revelation correspond to which world events. According to this view, if 9-11 was indeed Revelations chapter 18, then we have spent 2000 year getting from the letters to the churches in chapters two and three to the present. I particularly favor the view that the beast out of the sea was Hitler and that his prophet was Goebbels and the fire out of the sky was the V2 rocket. But see how easily I slip into that linguistic interpretation. It is remarkably persistent and appealing.

The preterist view sees revelation as being almost entirely the history, or prehistory, of the Roman Empire. I admit being very persuaded by the amount of detail in the book of revelation that is accounted for by this interpretation. The seven heads of the beast become seven emperors. And there are even charts of the possible seven. But again we are focusing on the language of the text and not the vision represented. By this interpretation 9-11 was just a similar incident to the burning of Rome during the reign of Nero, in that big cities of powerful nations occasionally catch fire, a mere coincidence.

The futurist interpretation was especially popular in the 70's. I can recall reading Hal Lindsay's "The Late Great Planet Earth" as high school senior in Sunday school. We were shown the film "A Distant Thunder" which showed Christians being pulled from their homes and beheaded in the streets. Even our music of the day reflected it. My father was the music director and I recall the pastor joking, "If I don't have time to write a sermon some Sunday, I will let you know to have the choir sing 'The King is Coming' so I won't have to preach." Larry Norman's "I Wish We'd All Been Ready" still sends me a chill. Nazarene evangelists even went so far as to predict a date of the second coming. I can remember being on campus of Mount Vernon

Nazarene University when the chaplain had to address the 88 reasons why Christ will come in 88. I still have a copy of that pamphlet.

By this interpretation, 9-11 was absolutely predicted in Revelation 18, and we had better get cracking, because there are only 4 chapters left and it will all come to pass in a single generation. Among scholars, this interpretation, however, is surely in disfavor.

Another view is the idealist interpretation. This is an easily defensible view because it claims that nothing in the book can be taken literally. Revelation is simply a powerful, vivid work of poetic prophecy; an allegory of the battle between good and evil. Its themes are archetypal. Looking at 9-11 from this view, the images of the city burning are archetypal as are the themes of an oppressive and greedy institution suffering from its own hubris.

I prefer a view suggested by the Eastern Orthodox Church that reconciles several of these views (Averkky). The book of Revelation described events in the apostolic era, having meaning to the audience to which it was written, but those images and events repeat themselves throughout history. It is an argument for “both/and” rather than “either/or.” It is both the past present and the future. Here the importance of the vision and images becomes salient as the individual details in the difference between the burning of Rome during the reign of Nero and 9-11 are less important than the striking similarity in the vision. By this reasoning, revelation could even be found in the description of the destruction of Pompeii by Pliny the Younger, who escaped by boat. It reminds us that God is eternal, not bound by the kind of sense of time that we are. So Revelation is concerned with “kairos”-at the right time, rather than “chronos” –a temporal sequence of event. It teaches us that God’s time is not ours, and he is not restricted to our sense of the passage of time.

Like the preterist view, the book is fully contemporary with its audience, but like the historicist it reveals the currents and eddies of history. While it does not mesh well with a purely futurist view, the Orthodox position maintains that we cannot predict thing to come using the text, someday we may look back and see that many of the visions cast by John occurred near the end of time. Of course the idealist view could be reconciled with the Orthodox if we consider the battle between good and evil to have begun in the garden in Genesis 2 and ending in the garden in Revelation 22. The battle is ongoing with many similar skirmishes.

By this view, 9-11 was clearly described in revelation.

It goes along with what Mark Twain said: “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme.” Just as Rome was the Babylon of its day, so America is the Babylon of today. (Of course Babylon was the Babylon of its day, but I digress.) Thus England was the Babylon of the time when the sun never set on the British Empire. And so we see the archetypal image again and again in history. We could never have predicted 9-11 from studying scripture, any more than we could have predicted the burning of Rome. But we can see the similarities in the accounts if we leave the text as language and look at the pictures: the images created by the words (Reddish 346)

The Orthodox interpretation, combined with my suggest to look at images, preserves several important lessons to be learned from the book of Revelation. One lesson here is that history is finite. It had a beginning and it will have an end. We may not know when it will end, but we can see where things are headed based on where they have been and where they are going. It is not a circle like Norse mythology or an endless cycle of reincarnation as in Hindu or Buddhist teaching. So that 9-11 was one point on that line. When it comes to the end times, maybe the most we can say is that it’s possible that we are closer than further away.

Another lesson we can learn from Revelation is preserved with this interpretation. In the great battle between good and evil, good wins. God wins. It wasn't really even a fair fight. God's ultimate will, cannot be thwarted. Satan will be clearly, totally and completely defeated.

Another lesson, and most salient to my experience of 9-11, is that Revelation is a source of comfort. In spite of its violent and dramatic imagery, the story ends as one of peace. Comfort comes in the midst of tribulation, knowing that God is still in control, and that he wants to be close to us and comfort us. Whatever our pain, it will end.

Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away." 21:3-4.

Finally, we can learn to appreciate the book of Revelation for the power, majesty, beauty and terror contained in the visions which are all of the past present and future, together at the same time, "kairos" We find that God not only knows everything, but he sees everything. Past present, future are not defining concepts for the vision he showed John. And we can avoid falling into the trap of predicting the end of the world.

So let me review some of the basics of my position in this essay. Motivated by the similarity in images between 9-11 and Revelation 18, I suggest we can learn something from looking at the pictures described in John's vision. The Eastern Orthodox view of interpretation can account for the images of 9-11 being part of the vision of the book, without denying its interpretation to the apostolic era, and without claiming that 9-11 was the fulfillment of a prediction of the end times. Many of our traditional lessons of the book are preserved but a new lesson can be learned. And we learned to appreciate the power of the visuals contained in the text,

and to look for those images as history, as our life, unfolds. We know that when things look their darkest, the God's light will soon dawn; when we feel defeated, God's is ultimately the victor.



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