



**“I shall always be ready to remind you of these things...” 2 Peter 1:21**

# Keys to Understanding the Book of Revelation, I

By Alex Hale

Ferrell Jenkins states, “It is regarded as the most difficult book of the New Testament by most Christians. It is the most ‘turned back’ book. Classes make their way through the New Testament, but when they get to Revelation they ‘turn back’ to Matthew.” Robert Harkrider writes, “Neglected, misunderstood, and grossly perverted, Revelation stands quite alone in the New Testament.”

Though it is often overlooked, Revelation is an important book (Rev. 1:3). Furthermore, we can understand much of John’s message. Let us look at some keys to understanding the book of Revelation.

***Key #1: Revelation has a unique style.***

One of the first things we notice about the book is that, quite simply, it sounds different (Rev. 1:1, 12-16). The term “*signified*” in the first chapter is important because it tells us *how* John will make his point in the book. He will not lay it all out in plain language like Luke does in Acts or Paul does in Ephesians. Instead, John will use signs or symbols to communicate his message.

When we try to figure out what Revelation means, we must bear in mind the style that John is using. Revelation is written in a style of literature called “apocalyptic.” Most of us have very little experience with this style of writing, which is one of the main reasons we struggle with this book.

However, people of John’s day would have been much more familiar with it. Revelation is not the only book of the Bible to use this style of writing. Other examples can

be found in books such as Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. Apocalyptic literature was reserved for times of crisis – times filled with trials, sufferings, and persecutions. There was much extra-biblical apocalyptic writing between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100 as the Jewish people underwent tremendous struggles.

Apocalyptic literature uses vivid imagery and symbols to communicate above all *a message of hope*. The apocalyptic literature in Revelation looks beyond the present suffering of the people to a time when God would rescue His people. It was a perfect style for those addressed in this book undergoing Roman persecution.

Some believe the symbolic style served two purposes. First, it would reveal in clear ways a message of hope to suffering Christians. Second, it would conceal that message from their enemies who would not understand the symbolism. This style was used during dangerous times to promise victory over their enemies, hiding the message from those enemies. For example, had a Roman soldier read Revelation, it probably would not have meant much sense to him. However, to the Christians living in the late first century, it promised that their enemy would lose and that God would prevail.

Contrary to many other passages, we do not understand the message of Revelation by literally interpreting the meaning of every word. Instead, we must decipher the meaning of the symbols.

[Continued next week]



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