

# Overcoming

a study guide for the  
Book of Revelation

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## *Prologue*

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The Book of Revelation! The Apocalypse! People either love it or hate it; they fear it or avoid it altogether. Many who wade in at the shallow end soon find themselves sinking over their heads in hot water. They immediately climb out and run to the far end where they think it is again shallow and comfortably warm. When the Apocalypse comes up in conversation, some close their minds and their mouths and switch on blank stares. Others show by their animated and opinionated jabbering that long ago, their minds were set—in concrete! Still others look around, frantically searching for an escape route.

Let me reassure you. I intend for this study guide to open your mind and calm your nerves about the Book of Revelation. The Apocalypse was not meant to create terror and dismay but to engender confidence and hope. And despite what you may have heard to the contrary, its message—even down to many of the details—can be understandable to the modern reader. In fact, the phrase, “The time is near” that occurs in the opening paragraph of the Book of Revelation is a key to understanding the prophecy as a whole. Once you grasp the concept of viewing it from the perspective of the original reader, most of the hard work of interpreting it is done.

I have designed this material to be usable in a number of ways. You can get a quick overview, which will guide you to the essential parts of the Introduction and brief summaries of each chapter. You can compare the various schools of interpretation, or study a particular passage. The annotated bibliography can guide you to a more extensive inquiry.

Of course, nothing will help you more than actually reading the text of Revelation. It is the only book of the Bible that pronounces a blessing on the person who will read it (Rev. 1:3). The best way to start is to read it in its entirety all at once, and if possible, aloud. This takes about 90 minutes. Then, of course, you should read each chapter again as you go through this study guide. You should also read those parts of the Old Testament that form the main sources for the concepts and imagery in the Apocalypse, particularly Ezekiel and Daniel.

As you read, focus on the main message of Revelation; it is easy to slog through the swamp of the details and never look up to see the mountains towering in the distance. But surely those mountains—the holy influence of a godly life, the resurrected Redeemer, and the ultimate victory of God—are your final destination. My hope is that you will make it safely through that swamp and explore those thrilling heights. Perhaps this study guide can serve as a compass.

Those of us who study Revelation can be “Overcomers” in two senses. First we can overcome all of the obstacles that time and misinterpretation have created that hinder understanding this powerful part of

God's Word. Second, we can actually experience what the original readers of the Apocalypse did—we ourselves can become Overcomers.

My thanks to the many students through the years whose questions and comments have helped me to focus on what is important and to de-emphasize what is not. I am grateful to my family, my wife Cindy and my children, Jonathan, Michael, and Jennifer, without whose enthusiastic encouragement this study guide would still be only a vision. I have learned more from you than you have from me. Thank you, Cindy, for constantly reminding me to keep it practical. I hope someday that "the word of my testimony" is as courageous as yours.

### **He Arose!**

*Some say Jesus is a mystery lost behind a solid wall.  
Some say Jesus is a legend, and He never lived at all.  
Some say Jesus is a concept, ever changing as it grows.  
I say He's our only rescue, and I know  
that He arose.*

*In that age before all ages, when the Father formed His plan,  
He knew He would need an answer to the sinfulness of Man.  
Then the Logos made His offer, and His path He freely chose.  
He came down to be our ransom, and He died,  
but He arose.*

*If you'd lived back in the old times, when the Romans ruled the land,  
You could trace right where His sandals made their footprints in the sand.  
You could meet the risen Jesus, place your fingers in the holes.  
Then you'd say, "My Lord was murdered, but I know  
that He arose."*

*I once thought I was so worthless, there was nothing left to save.  
Then they told me of the Master and the love He freely gave.  
In the water I could feel my sinful life draw to a close.  
Then I died there with my Savior, Jesus Christ,  
but we arose.*

*When the world has stopped its spinning, and when God puts out the sun,  
When all humans stand in judgment, facing all we've ever done,  
Then the one thing most important will be that His image shows,  
For the Sovereign of all ages gave His life,  
but He arose.*

To the tune of "The Rose," lyrics by Amanda McBroom.  
Above lyrics by Steve C. Singleton. Copyright ©1996. All rights reserved.

## *Introduction to the Book of Revelation*

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You may be wondering why we should spend so much time introducing the Apocalypse rather than just jumping into the text. Can't we pick up what we need to know inductively as we read along? That was certainly possible for the original readers of the Book of Revelation, believers in seven congregations of the Roman province of Asia some time during the last half of the First Century after Christ. They shared with the human author of Revelation the same language, thought patterns, knowledge of the Old Testament, historical background, and cultural background.

Unfortunately, we are separated by time, space, language, and culture from both that original audience and the human author of Revelation. We must attempt to throw bridges over these chasms by careful gathering and analysis of information and by a close examination and refinement of our operating principles. If we believe the Apocalypse teaches one thing and not another, we should attempt to explain the basis of that belief.

To make matters a hundred times worse, we as modern readers of the Apocalypse have inherited 20 centuries of teaching about Revelation, much of it confusing and even contradictory. For most of us, it is necessary to unlearn what we have been taught, or at least to set aside our entrenched preconceptions before approaching the text of the last book of the Bible. To read Revelation critically, analytically, but with an open mind to new ideas—that is the formidable challenge that confronts us.

“Overcoming” must first mean bursting through the barriers of our assumptions about the Apocalypse, then overcoming the culture shock of reaching back to an alien time and place as we attempt to read Revelation as they would have read it only one or two generations after the cross and the empty tomb.

If you are willing to make the attempt to understand, if you are willing to take the trouble to lay aside what you may have been taught all your life, then you will find Revelation opening up for you. You will begin to discover what it means to overcome ignorance and confusion. You will find yourself listening to the Lamb Himself as He speaks to you about the challenges you face, those that you can overcome by His help.

# 1. *Hermeneutics*

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As we begin our study of Revelation, we must consider what principles we are going to use to interpret the book. The development and application of interpretive principles is called *hermeneutics* (from the Greek word meaning “to translate, to interpret”), while each principle is called a *hermeneutic*.

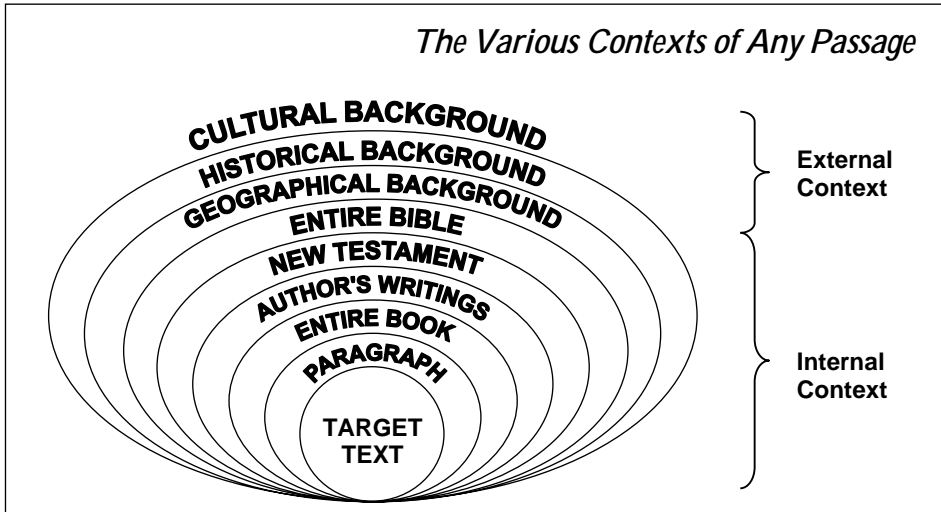
First, we must consider the hermeneutics applicable to every biblical text (“general hermeneutics”). Second, we will look at principles that specifically apply to Revelation (“special hermeneutics”).

## ***General Hermeneutics***

The following principles apply to any biblical text you are studying, whether Revelation, or Mark, or First Samuel:

1. Interpret the Bible as you would any other book. Go with the simple and obvious meaning.
2. Assume the writer employed the right combination of words and forms to get his point across the way he wanted it.
3. The meaning of any text is limited and controlled by its internal context, that is, the paragraphs and sentences leading up to and following the target text.
4. The meaning of any text is limited and controlled by its external context, that is, its geographical, cultural, and historical background (see the chart on the next page).
5. Assume that the author is consistent; assume that he will not contradict himself, or other biblical writers. This is the canon of *the analogy of Scripture*: use a clear passage to interpret an obscure passage, not the other way around.<sup>2</sup>
6. Recognize the genre of the document, and do not interpret it as if it were a different genre. The variety of biblical genres includes: didactic, homily, narrative, poetry, epistle, and apocalypse. Each genre has its own set of special hermeneutics, in addition to, and not in contradiction of the general hermeneutics.
7. Interpret each text in the frame of its own philosophical presuppositions.

8. Recognize the reality of progressive revelation—not that the early authors understood less than the later ones, but that we understand more about what the early authors intended in the light of what was revealed later.



### *Special Hermeneutics for the Book of Revelation*

1. *The Literal vs. Figurative Hermeneutic* – We must carefully distinguish within the Book of Revelation between the vision and the explanation, applying a different hermeneutic to the one compared to the other.

In the explanation sections of the book (e.g., Rev. 1:1–11, 19–20; 2:1 – 3:22; 7:13–17; 13:9–10, 18; 14:12–13; 17:7–18; 19:8b–10; 22:6–21), the literal hermeneutic applies: assume what is being described is literal unless the text indicates otherwise.

In the vision sections of the book (e.g., Rev. 1:12–18; 4:1 – 7:12; 8:1 – 13:8; 13:9–17; 14:1–11; 14:14 – 17:6; 18:1 – 19:8a; 19:11 – 21:5), the literal hermeneutic is reversed: assume you are dealing with symbols unless you have good reasons to believe otherwise. The text itself prompts us to impose this reversal, because here and there in the text occur explanations that indicate certain details of the vision are symbolic. These explanations, unfortunately, are few and far between, but are nevertheless suggestive of the approach we should take in interpreting the vision sections of Revelation.<sup>3</sup>

It is amazing how often those seeking to explain Revelation disregard these two principles. Some ignore the distinction between vision and explanation and seek to explain everything literally. Others are quite arbitrary in switching back and forth, taking some things literally, some figuratively.

It is true that in some places, the two overlap—unexplained symbols occur in explanation sections (e.g., “bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire” in 17:16) and explanations are embedded within a vision (e.g., “the prayers of all the saints” in Rev. 8:3)—but these are relatively easy to untangle.<sup>4</sup> What you want to avoid is making the explanation into another symbol that requires a further explanation beyond what the text provides.<sup>5</sup>

**2. The Hermeneutic of Original Intent** – We must seek to limit our interpretation to those objects and events that were well within the author’s sphere of experience.<sup>6</sup>

This means that we would be mistaken, for example, to expect the 666 riddle to be solved in a way that depends on the English language or the ASCII code, for both are totally alien to the author’s time and culture. Many other modern explanations of Revelation are guilty of making this same mistake.<sup>7</sup>

**3. The Hermeneutic of Original Audience** – In studying Revelation, we must first try to understand what is being said from the perspective of the original readers.

As the original recipients of Revelation, the Christians of the Roman province of Asia were presumably the readers John had in mind when he wrote the book. What were their concerns? What dangers and challenges did they face? How could he encourage them not to give up their faith in Jesus Christ? Only after determining what Revelation would mean for them can we leap across more than 19 centuries and ask what it means for us today.<sup>8</sup>

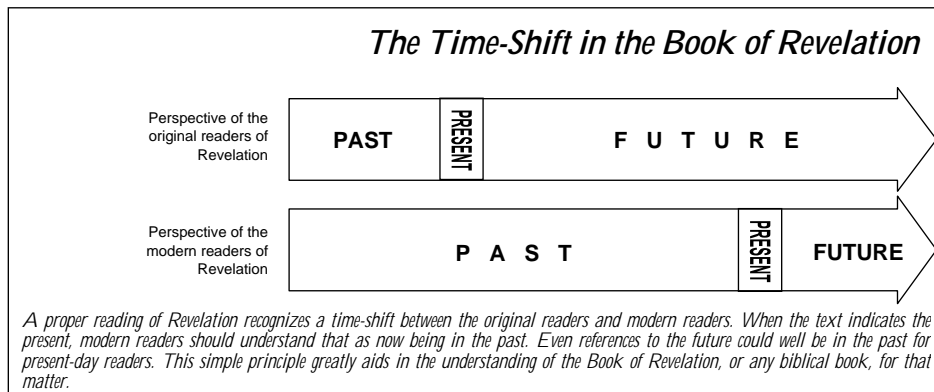
**4. The Time-Frame Hermeneutic** – We must take seriously the time references in the book, rather than ignoring them or explaining them away.

At the beginning and the end of Revelation are carefully worded statements regarding when the predictive prophecy will be fulfilled. Recognizing these as part of an explanation section (see Special Rule 1), we should take these time frames literally. Assuming that Revelation is genuine prophecy inspired by the Holy Spirit, we should look to its fulfillment “soon” after the predictions were made.

In addition to the time frames at the beginning and the end of the prophecy, John also uses verb tenses (past, present, and future) as he explains what the visions mean. These tenses should be understood

from the perspective of the original readers, not from a modern reader’s perspective, for we have undergone a time shift compared to them. Their past is in our remote past. Their present is in our past. Even a great deal of their future is in our more recent past.

If we disregard the time-frame hermeneutic, then we will assume that no shift has taken place: things described in the present tense we would understand as being present for us, while things described using the future tense we would interpret as still future for us. This hermeneutical error wreaks havoc on the interpretation of the Book of Revelation.



Note that the time-frame hermeneutic, as regarding verb tenses and time references, applies only to the explanation sections of the book. In the vision sections, past, present, and future tenses occur with reference to what the apostle saw in his vision (with the past tense predominating). These tenses do not necessarily correspond to what is in real time the past, the present, or the future, either for the original readers or for the modern reader.

**5. *The Old Testament Background Hermeneutic*** – When choosing between two interpretations, the interpretation should be preferred which depends on the Old Testament for its symbolism or meaning.

This hermeneutic is based on rules 2 and 3, for the Old Testament was an outstanding component in the mindset of both the author and his original readers. In fact, the Old Testament is the most important source for the symbolism found in the Book of Revelation. In fact, the Old Testament provides the key to Revelation's numerology, its symbolic colors, as well as symbolism based on the Jewish cultus, the Exodus, and the prophetic symbolism found in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, and Zechariah (see below: "Sources of the Symbolism of Revelation").

**6. *The Historical Background Hermeneutic*** – In a way similar to Special Rule 4, when choosing between two interpretations, the interpretation should be preferred which depends on the historical background for its symbolism or meaning.

This rule is reasonable because the author and his original readers share a knowledge of history, perhaps obscure to most modern readers, which influences both what the author states and what the readers understand.

**7. *The Modern Application Hermeneutic*** – Once we have determined the meaning of the text for the original readers, we can identify the significance of the text of Revelation for modern readers. The modern relevance depends on whether a particular prophecy has been fulfilled in the years since Revelation was first written. If it remains unfulfilled, we must sort through the alternative explanations available to us (see my section entitled, "Understanding Biblical Predictive Prophecy"). If we determine that the prophetic prediction still awaits fulfillment in our future, then the application for us is the same as for the original readers.

If, however, the prophecy has already been fulfilled, then the meaning for us depends on how successful we are at drawing valid analogies between the situation of the original readers and our own.<sup>9</sup> The resultant significance for modern readers tends to consist of general, time-transcendent principles rather than specific, one-for-one correspondences.

For instance, the "mark of the beast" of Rev. 13 apparently found fulfillment in the immediate future for the Christians of the first-century Roman province of Asia: they could not buy or sell without confronting the blasphemy of the Roman emperor, for His divine claims were embossed on their coins. By analogy, modern Christians face a similar challenge of reconciling their need to earn a living with the pervasive corruption of business and government. Like first-century Christians, we sometimes have to make hard choices, even sometimes sacrifice career advancement for the sake of personal integrity. Revelation reassures us that God appreciates such sacrifices and rewards His servants who make them.

As we go through the text of the Apocalypse, I will point out such analogous situations and the principles we can derive from them. With the approach to Revelation that I am convinced is the correct one, these spiritual principles constitute the primary, practical value for studying the book.



## 2. Internal Contexts

At the beginning of the study of such a difficult book, it can only help to examine what is involved in studying the context. In doing so, we will begin with a sentence a “bite-sized” lexical unit,<sup>10</sup> moving ever outward in widening spirals.

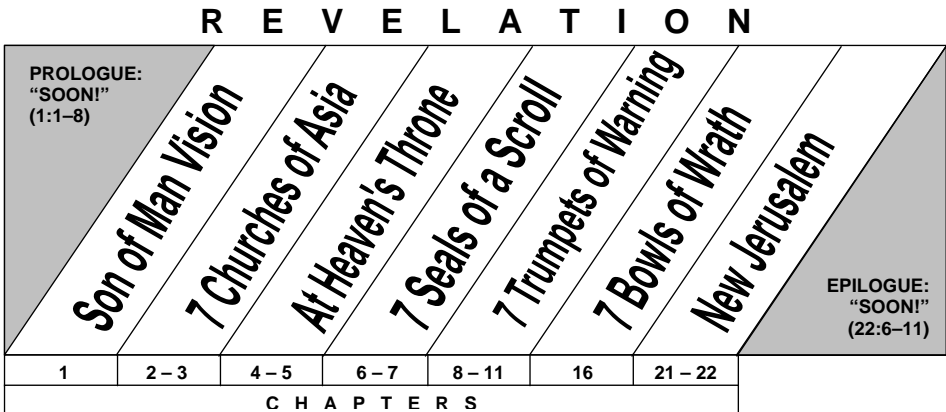
### *Immediate Context – Sentence, Paragraph, Book*

Look for the punctuation that begins and ends the sentence, trying to understand what the sentence means isolated from the sentences around it. Then recognize this sentence as a part of a paragraph. Here it really helps to have a Bible that does not make each individual verse its own paragraph but divides the text into paragraphs according to sense.

Watch out for the chapter divisions. They sometimes interrupt the flow of thought, sometimes breaking up a paragraph. (At Rev. 13:1, for example, the chapter break should have been one verse later.) The main function of chapter divisions is to break up the text into chunks of roughly equal size so that we may find passages more readily.

One of the best ways to catch the flow of thought of a book is to read through it rapidly—several times, if you can. You will start to get an overview, seeing the entire forest rather than just examining the bark of an individual tree. Once you have a clear understanding of the book as a whole, the individual chapters and verses will fall into place.

A rapid reading of Revelation uncovers a definite structure to the book, the main blocks of which we can diagram as follows:



A closer look discloses that two large sections of the book are missing from this outline—chapters 12 through 15 and chapters 17 through 20. If you re-read these two sections, you will find they seem to be as important to the book as they are mysterious. We will look at them in detail later. Also, a closer look will reveal a pattern with the seals/trumpets/bowls sequence: the first six follow one another in rapid order, but there is a pause before the seventh finally makes its entrance. This pause has the effect of heightening the suspense as we await the final seal, the final trumpet, and the final bowl. It also serves to give a strong emphasis on the thing done during the pause. This sequence of 1-2-3-4-5-6-Pause-7, 1-2-3... serves to interlock the sections like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

### **Remote Contexts – Author’s Other Writings, New Testament**

Assuming that the Apostle John is the author of Revelation (see below on “Authorship”), what does Revelation have in common with John’s other writings—Gospel of John and the John’s Epistles? The chart below summarizes the main points.

#### ***Revelation and John’s Other Writings***<sup>1</sup>

Topic	Book of Revelation	Fourth Gospel/Epistles of John
Christ as “The Word”	19:13	John 1:1, 14; 1 John 1:1
Christ as “The Lamb”	5:6, 8, 12–13; 6:1, 16; etc.	John 1:28, 35
Christ as Shepherd	7:17	John 10:1; 21:25ff
Figures of Speech:		
water, springs	7:17; 21:6	John 4:10ff; 7:38
manna	2:17	John 6:31ff
light vs. darkness	21:23–25	John 1:4; 3:19–20; 1 John 1:5–7; 2:8–11
true vs. false	3:14, 17; etc.	John 1:14, 17; 1 John 2:21; etc.
No need for temple	21:22	John 4:21
Use of Seven in Series	churches, seals, trumpets	7 days at opening of ministry, 7 signs to inspire faith, 7 days of the Passion

*Despite some differences in grammar, vocabulary, and theme, Revelation has remarkable resemblances to John’s other writings. They help provide a background for understanding the Book of Revelation.*

The similarity between Revelation and the rest of the New Testament centers mainly on passages involving God’s wrath (e.g. Mark 13 and parallels, 2 Thess. 1:8–10; 2 Peter 3). See also passages concerning resurrection (e.g. 1 Cor. 15; 1 Thess. 4 – 5). These and other parallels will become evident as we go through Revelation verse by verse.

## Main Old Testament Backgrounds for the Book of Revelation

Revelation	Exodus	Psalms	Isaiah	Jeremiah	Ezekiel	Daniel	Joel	Zechariah
1:4–8	3:14; 19:6	89:27, 37	44:6			7:13		12:10–14
1:9–20			49:2; 48:12		3:12; 43:2	7:9, 13; 10:5–12		
2:1–7								
2:8–11						1:12, 14		
2:12–17			62:2					
2:18–29		2:7–9		11:20				
3:1–6	32:32–33	69:28						
3:7–13			22:2; 60:14; 43:4		48:35			
3:14–22			65:16					
chap. 4		29:1; 96:7	6:1–5; 24:23			7:9–10; 4:34		4:2, 10
chap. 5	20:4	141:2	11:1–2, 4, 10; 53:7		2:9–10	4:13–14; 7:10		4:10
6:1–8					14:21			1:8–11; 6:1–8
6:9–11								1:12
6:12–17		2:2	13:10; 34:4; 2:10, 19				2:31	
7:1–8					9:4–6			6:5
7:9–17			49:10; 25:8					
8:1–6					10:2		2:1	
8:7–13	9:23–26;			9:15			2:30	
9:1–12	10:12–15						1:6–7, 15; 2:1–11	
9:13–21		115:4–5, 7				5:23		
chap. 10				1:10	2:8; 3:1–3	10:5–6; 12:7; 8:26; 12:4, 9		
11:1–2					40:3		3:1–2	
11:3–13					37:10	7:21		4:2–3, 11–14
11:14–19		2:1, 5; 115:13						
12:1–4			66:7–8			7:7; 8:10		
12:4–12		2:9		51:34		10:13		
12:13–18	19:4							
13:1–10				15:2		7:2–8, 20–21, 25; 11:36		
13:11–18						3:5–6		
14:1–5							3:13	
14:6–13	20:11		21:9; 51:7; 34:10	51:7–8; 25:15		4:30		
14:14–20			63:3, 6			7:13	3:12–13	
chap. 15	15:1; 40:35	86:9	6:4	10:7	10:4	10:5		
16:1–9	9:8; 7:20–21							
16:10–11	10:21–22							
16:12–16	8:5–6							
16:17–21	9:23–24					12:1		
17:1–6				51:6–9, 12–13				
17:7–18		136:3			16:39–41; 23:25–29	7:24; 2:47		
18:1–8			21:9; 13:19–22; 40:2	51:8; 50:39	43:2			
18:9–10				51:6, 45; 50:15, 29	26:16–17			
18:11–17a					27:2–3, 12–13, 22			
18:17b–19					27:28–36			
18:20–24			24:8; 23:8	51:63–64; 25:10	26:13			
19:1–10		115:13	34:10			8:17		
19:11–21		2:9	11:3–5; 63:1–3		1:1; 39:17–20			
20:1–6						7:9, 21–22, 26		
20:7–10					38:2, 14–16, 18, 21–22			
20:11–15						7:9–10; 12:1		
21:1–8			65:17–19; 43:18–19; 55:1		37:27			8:8
21:9–27			54:11–12; 60:1–5, 11, 19–20; 52:1		40:1–3, 5; 48:30–35; 48:16			
22:1–5					47:1, 6–7, 12			14:7
22:6–21			40:10; 55:1					

*These are by no means all of the allusions the Book of Revelation makes to the Old Testament. Consult the notes for more.*



The parallels with Revelation are striking. In fact, so many sections line up with each other that it would be nearly impossible to deny some kind of literary dependence. Consult the chart below and note that with only two exceptions (marked with shading) the sequences are in chapter-and-verse order for both Ezekiel and the Book of Revelation:

### *The Parallels Between Ezekiel and the Book of Revelation<sup>2</sup>*

EZEKIEL	REVELATION
Throne vision (1:4–28)	Throne vision (4:1–11)
Scroll (2:9–10)	Scroll (5:1–5)
Four plagues (5:12–17)	First four seals (6:1–8)
Slain by altars (6:4, 13)	Fifth seal: martyrs (6:9–11)
Wrath come (7:2, 5–6, 27)	Sixth seal: earthquake (6:12–7:1)
Foreheads marked (9:4)	144,000 sealed (7:2–8)
Throne again (10:1)	Multitude before throne (7:9–17)
Coals scattered (10:2,6–7)	Seventh seal: coals thrown on earth (8:1–5)
No more delay (12:25)	No more delay (10:1–7)
Scroll eaten (2:9–3:9)	Scroll eaten (10:8–11)
Cup of wrath (23:30–35)	Cup of wrath (14:6–12)
Jerusalem the whore (chap. 23)	Babylon the whore (17:1–6)
Laments for Tyre (26:15–27:36)	Laments for Babylon (18:9–24)
Supper for birds & animals (32:4–6)	Supper for birds (19:17–21)
Dry bones “resurrection” (chap. 37)	First “resurrection” (20:1–6)
Gog from Magog (chap. 38)	Gog and Magog (20:7–10)
Judgment (39:21)	Judgment (20:11–15)
Temple vision (chap. 40)	New Jerusalem (21:1–8)
Temple walls and gates (chap. 40)	City gates and walls (21:9–21)
God’s glory returns to the temple (43:1–6)	God’s glory in new Jerusalem (21:22–23)
Ever-deepening river (chap. 47)	River of life (21:22–22:5)

**2. Daniel** – Daniel is the second most important Old Testament book for the understanding of Revelation. Like Ezekiel, Daniel’s prophetic ministry took place away from the promised land during the Babylonian Exile period (about 597 to 539 B.C.). Daniel served as a government official, first for the Babylonians and then for the Persians, while steadfastly continuing his devotion to the Lord. He set a sterling example of how to maintain faithfulness despite being under the political domination of wicked overlords. The situation in his day was similar to what the Christians of the Roman province of Asia faced in the first century.

The first half of Daniel’s book (chapters 1–6) is a biography of Daniel with two glimpses as three of his friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, better known by the Babylonian names, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They faced one test after another, all aimed at making them give up their loyalty to God for the sake of career advancement or personal safety. They met every challenge with a rock-solid determination to serve the Lord alone, refusing to compromise with idolatry.

Interspersed among these narratives are three predictive prophecies: Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a statue composed of four metals (chapter 2), his dream of the great tree cut down (chapter 4), and the writing on the wall during Belshazzar’s feast (chapter 5). Although the first prophecy is the most significant, predicting as it does world history for hundreds of years into Daniel’s future, the theme of all three prophecies is the same: God is the ruler over the kings of the earth (2:47; 4:3,17, 25–26, 32, 34–35; 5:18, 21). In fact this message recurs in every one of the first six chapters of Daniel (1:2; 3:26, 28–29; 6:26–27),