

Patterns, Patterns, Patterns

He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted. Job 9:10 NIV

On my first day in medical school, Dr. Roberts addressed the eighty would-be doctors in my class. “When Dr. Taylor and I instruct you in anatomy, we will first tell you what we are going to tell you. Then we will tell you what we said we were going to tell you. And when we are done, we will tell you what we have told you.”¹

This is what the book of Revelation does. First, it tells us where we are going. John starts as a prisoner on the island of Patmos (Rev 1:9) because he wouldn’t stop telling the good news of Christ. Along the way, he tells the story of the gospel a number of different ways. He ends in the New Jerusalem (Rev 21-22), which is so wonderful that words can’t adequately describe it.

The simplest tool John uses is repetition. He wasn’t given a simple script for future history. In vision God showed him important features of his plan of salvation from different angles. For example, the Seals and Trumpets (Rev 6-11) generally cover the same periods of salvation history.² The Seals look at it from the viewpoint of those who answer God’s call of grace, while the Trumpets warn of troubles ahead if we reject God. The two witnesses of chapter 11 give us one view of the church in times of trouble, while the woman fleeing into the wilderness (Rev 12) shows another.

Don’t throw this book away! Right here let me say one very important thing. The paragraph you have just read may not agree with what you’ve heard before. It will be very easy to say, “This guy is crazy!”³ and close the book. Please don’t do that. We can agree that the Bible is the word of God. The Bible is understandable for anyone willing to study and allow God to lead. So open *your* Bible. Gather whatever tools and helps you can find,⁴ and read what God has said. Write down questions. Compare passage with passage, and allow Scripture to interpret itself.⁵ Don’t accept anyone’s ideas as truth until they have been fully investigated, not even those in this book. And never take your eyes off of Christ. If you will do that, I think you will find that the things I have to say agree with Scripture. By the way, don’t always read just the verse I list. Read the verses before and after it. Those verses will give you a better feel for what I’m saying. Then you will see why the verse I picked is important.

Returning to our discussion, God didn’t just repeat the story two or three times, and then move on. Inside the Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls are “interludes.” These are “picture-in-picture” sections that tell us more about the story. And some of these “telescope” inside each other. When

¹ My wife Nancy says that this is as confusing as the book of Revelation. Hopefully, by the time we are done, you will understand Revelation better than most scholars.

² All of the things I am introducing here will be discussed later in the book.

³ One caller on a radio show recently said exactly that about me.

⁴ “Helps” is a general term for books such as Bible dictionaries, concordances, lexicons, and commentaries. Each of them contains things that help us understand the Bible.

⁵ Some people think the idea that Scripture interprets itself is nonsense. When we are done, I think you will agree that the Bible *does* give us the tools to interpret itself.

we're done, it will almost seem like a set of those Russian dolls where each doll has another one inside.

Theologians love to discuss the way the book of Revelation is put together. They have lots to play with, since the book has many unique features. There are so many "sevens" that they are almost impossible to count.⁶ Some say it was written in the form of a "chiasm," with many smaller chiasms inside it.⁷ Unfortunately, scholars tend to disagree on the places where the main chiasm is divided, leaving us to wonder if they really know what they are talking about. (Or is the chiasm even real?) We could go on for a while, listing details that entertain "experts," but most of us would go to sleep. So, let's focus on key patterns that will help *us* to understand what is going on.

The opening of the book gives us one key. We see Jesus walking among seven candlesticks (Rev 1:12-13). This priestly activity places our view in the outer apartment of the temple. The original tabernacle only had a single lampstand (Exod 25:31). Solomon's temple had ten lampstands (2 Chron 4:7). Nebuchadnezzar destroyed that temple in 586 BC. When the Jews returned to Jerusalem after the exile in Babylon they built another temple, but we don't know how many candlesticks were in it. All we know is that the "utensils for the service of the house of your God" (Ezra 7:19) were returned. It's unlikely that there were *ever* seven lampstands. So, what's going on?

The vision takes a common Old Testament image and re-molds it.⁸ We'll see this quite a bit. In chapter 12 there is a beast with seven heads and ten horns. This beast comes from Daniel's vision in Daniel 7 by way of re-molding. Daniel saw a lion, a bear, a leopard with four heads, and a strange beast with ten horns. If we add all this up, we get seven heads and ten horns. Knowing that the Revelation 12 beast is a composite of Daniel's beasts will help us understand the imagery in Revelation. This way of combining Old Testament images happens more than once. In the fifth and sixth trumpets there are some very strange demonic beasts. These monsters are also combinations of other Hebrew images. For now, let's go back to the lampstands and leave those details for later.

The lampstands in chapter 1 tell us what this scene is about. "Seven" symbolizes perfection, holiness, and completion. We are looking at a perfect temple, with a perfect priest.⁹ He is walking among the candlesticks (Rev 1:13), tending them (Rev 2:5). This tells us that God wants us to see the daily sanctuary ministry in this scene.

As we go through the book, the sanctuary pattern will come up again and again. In fact, we'll see it move in sequence from the daily ministry through Passover, Pentecost and the entire festival calendar. The sanctuary appears almost everywhere in the book in one form or another. Sometimes there are scenes that are set in the heavenly sanctuary. Other times there are small items that remind us of the sanctuary. But there is very little of the book that does not owe its very existence to the Old Testament sanctuary pattern.

Another pattern in the book is John's use of key words or phrases. The righteous are pictured as living in heaven (13:6) while the wicked are referred to as **living on the earth**. Various forms of this include **those who dwell on the earth** (3:10, 6:10, etc.), **the kings of the earth** (1:5,

⁶ Some that come to mind are candlesticks, churches, Spirits of God, seals, trumpets, and bowls. Theologians have listed as many as forty or fifty, depending on how the count is limited.

⁷ A chiasm is a literary form where parallel thoughts are presented forward in the first half, then reversed in order in the second. When diagrammed, it looks like the left half of the Greek letter Chi (X). The middle item is the most important.

⁸ Most theologians will say, "John took the Old Testament images and recast them" or something to that general effect. But John did no such thing! John is simply reporting the vision given by God. God took the original imagery and changed it to add meaning. I'll try to avoid saying that "John did" this or that. Credit must be given to the God who reveals Himself in the book.

⁹ The book of Hebrews says that Jesus is a "better" priest in a "better" tabernacle. (Heb 8:6; 9:11)

6:15, etc.), and **the whole earth** (13:3). Each time this phrase shows up, we know that the vision is referring to wicked people.

Another key phrase is **that great city** (11:8, 16:19, etc.). It's another name for **Babylon** (14:8, 17:5, etc.), and **Babylon** is another name for the **Harlot** (17:1, 5, etc.). In the Old Testament, almost every time God's people went into idolatry, it's called "playing the harlot." So any time we see any one of these names, we know that it refers to apostate religion. This imagery is also important because it shows us another pattern.

The book of Revelation plays opposites against each other. **Babylon** is a corrupt city. Its opposite is the **New Jerusalem**, the pure **bride** of Christ (21:2). We know from 19:7-8 that the **bride** is really the saints, or the church. So if the saints are **Jerusalem**, then the wicked are **Babylon**. The contrast doesn't stop here. In 17:1-6, Babylon is described as a **woman, the great harlot**. This woman stands opposite to the pure **woman** of 12:1-6 who is persecuted by the **red dragon** (12:3-6). Because of the pattern we see developing, we may confidently say that the pure woman represents the true followers of Christ, while the **harlot** is the followers of Satan.

We have just confirmed what I said two paragraphs ago, this time from another angle. And this is what good Bible study does. It shows us the same thing again and again, as the Bible interprets itself from many angles. And this set of examples shows us yet *another* pattern.

1:1 says that the revelation was given to John "by way of symbols." The Greek word *semaino* used here comes from *sema*, which means "a sign." The discussion we just went through about **Babylon** shows that it is symbolic. It does not mean a physical city, any more than the **New Jerusalem** means a physical city.

The fact that something is used as a symbol doesn't mean that it doesn't have any physical reality. A symbol is a real, physical image that points to something real, but bigger than the symbol. Augustine of Hippo, in his classic works *The City of God* and *The City of Man*, uses exactly this same imagery, although he does not use the names **Babylon** and **Jerusalem**.¹⁰

Other key words or phrases will pop up from time to time. Because we know about patterns in the book, we'll have no trouble using them to help us figure out what a passage means.

The way the story is told shows us another pattern. In chapter 5, John is told that he'll see the **Lion of the tribe of Judah** (5:5). But instead of a lion, he actually sees a **lamb standing as if slain** (5:6). This tells us that there is an important symbolic meaning attached to both descriptions. This pattern is repeated in the sealing of the saints (chapter 7) and the New Jerusalem (chapter 21).

Another pattern that helps us out is parody. This happens when a picture is *almost* the right one. But when we look closely, we see that it is really a fake. In 17:4 there is a woman **clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a gold cup**. This whore is a pitiful imitation of the true bride of Christ, who is described in chapter 21 as the New Jerusalem. The bride also has gold (golden streets), precious stones (foundations), and pearls (gates). This parody is more direct in the contrast of names: Babylon vs. Jerusalem. Many other parodies will pop up as we go through the book. Each time the good and righteous is real, while the parody is a sick impersonation.

¹⁰ While I will not generally take the time to address critics of the position presented in this book, I must make one general comment here. Dispensationalists (those who promote the "seven-year Great Tribulation" of Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* series) will argue that identifying symbols in the bulk of Revelation is "allegorizing." That is, they say that we are taking the "reality" out of the book. This accusation is not true. Using symbols, as you will see, actually enriches the understanding of the book, and allows us to get a larger picture of the real issues being discussed.

God's Problem

There's a war on! Satan wants to destroy God. First, he wanted to *be* God so he would be worshipped (Ezek 28:2). Basically, he decided that it was unfair that Yahweh¹¹ was the only God. So he led a rebellion in heaven, and one-third of the angels joined him (12:4, 9). God threw him out of heaven with his angels. On earth he continues to attack God. When God forgives our sins and we receive his righteousness, Satan calls this arbitrary and unfair (Zech 3). He accuses God of bribery (Job 1:9-11). And the list goes on.

We could suggest that God should have destroyed Satan and any angels who followed him before man was created. Then there would be no one to tempt Adam and Eve. But that wouldn't really solve the problem. Someone else could come up with the same objections to God's rule that Satan makes. Then God would have to destroy this rebel, and the next, and the next... Sin can't be destroyed this way.

The real problem is that God wants everyone to love him unconditionally. But to be able to love, we have to be able to choose *not* to love him. That's what Satan did. God could prevent sin by not giving us the ability to choose, but that would make us robots, and that would defeat his purpose. He has to find a different way.

There's only one way that God can remove sin from the universe *permanently*. He has to let the drama of sin play out to its end. Then, when everyone has made a final decision either for or against God, he can end it. But this gives him a new problem. We can't see things the way God does. And we don't have all the facts. God has to open the books (Rev 20:12). He has to show every living being that everyone got every chance to be saved. In other words, everyone has to be totally convinced that God did it right. He can't leave any doubt anywhere. This isn't a case of no reasonable doubt. This requires *absolutely no doubt*.

Once everyone is totally convinced that the wicked have to be destroyed, then God can deal with them. He can't allow them to suffer forever. He would be a tyrant for imposing a penalty far out of proportion to the crime, and a liar because he said, "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). Burning forever in Hell is *not* death. As long as he keeps the wicked burning, sin is still present. Therefore, God must destroy the wicked completely, leaving "neither root nor branch" (Mal 4:1).

God has to allow the war to go on to its end. If he didn't, there would always be doubters. But if he lets the drama play out to the last act, then the sin question will reach final closure. This is the big picture.¹²

The Big (Literary) Picture

Revelation 1:1 says that the book is **the revealing of Jesus Christ**. Why should it be necessary to reveal Jesus? Didn't he get pretty well revealed during his ministry? Certainly the gospels tell a lot about him. And on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:27), Jesus told the disciples a lot. But apparently there is more that was hidden.

In Romans 16:25 the Apostle Paul says that his preaching of Jesus Christ is related to the mystery. In Ephesians 5:32 he says that the mystery is *Christ and the church* (cf. Col 2:2). A few verses later (Eph 6:19) he gets a bit more direct. The mystery is the *gospel*. It seems pretty clear that the things about Christ that were hidden were nothing more than what we preach every day without the book of Revelation: the gospel. And that doesn't make much sense. The gospel is pretty clear. How can it be the mystery? Let's look at the some details in Revelation to figure this one out.

¹¹ Yahweh is the name of the one true God in Hebrew. In the Old Testament it's usually translated "Lord."

¹² The "big picture" is called a "cosmic metanarrative" by theologians. That means that all the little stories (narratives) in the Bible get assembled into one giant story. The big story leaves out a lot of details, but shows us why God lets sin continue.

There is one thing that about Revelation that almost all scholars agree on. If you take the first three chapters and add a few verses at the end of the book (22:12-21), you would have a pretty nice apostolic letter. It begins (1:4) with **John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace.** This is almost identical to the greeting used by Paul and Peter in all their letters. It closes with **The grace of the LORD Jesus be with all. Amen.** (22:21). Paul uses this closing blessing in most of his letters, and Peter uses it once. So if we didn't have all that symbolic stuff in the middle, the Revelation would be pretty simple.

When we look a little closer at the epistle, there are some clues to what's going on. First, the actual letter begins in verse 10. There John says, "**I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet.**" We know that the trumpet was used for a number of occasions in ancient Israel. Each time they called Israel to assemble.

When John turns around, he sees Jesus walking among the lampstands in the holy place of the temple. The voice like a trumpet had been the voice of God! And this is our clue.

The only time before this that God's voice sounded like a trumpet was at Mount Sinai. There, when the children of Israel camped, God's voice was heard (Exod 19:16-19) as a trumpet and thunder. This is where God gave his covenant to them (Exod 19:5; 24:4-7). We can call this event *The Covenant Delivered*. If the epistle part of Revelation is related to covenant, we may have a pattern. While the details of the epistle will have to wait until another chapter, we can look at enough to see the outline.

Ancient Uses of Trumpets

- They announced the beginning and end of all Temple services. (Num 10:9-10)
- They were a call to battle (Neh 4:20)
- They announced victory (1 Sam 6:15)
- They were used to announce the anointing of a king. (1 Kgs 1:34,39)
- They announced the anointing of the Temple (2 Chron 29:26-28)
- They announced the restoration of the Ark to the Jews (2 Sam 6:16)

After a few preliminaries, Jesus dictates the letters to the churches. Each of the seven follows the same general form. They are covenants.

Theologians have identified the covenant formula in a number of places. It looks just like a modern contract. The parties present themselves. Each party tells why he's able to do the deal. Next come the terms of the agreement. If you do your side, you'll get the payoff. If you don't do your part, you'll be in breach, and you'll suffer the penalties. Finally, witnesses authenticate the deal.

Each of these parts is in the messages to the churches.¹³ God identifies himself by using parts of his description from chapter 1. This description reminds us of things that God has done for us, so they establish his bona fides.¹⁴ Next God tells each church what they are doing and what they must do. Finally, every listener is called to **hear** the contract, authenticating it. Jesus as the **faithful and true witness** completes the contract.

This sets up a pattern. At Sinai we had *The Covenant Delivered*. Here the contracts are spelled out in legal form, so we can call them *The Covenant Described*. The symbolic part of Revelation is going to complete this pattern.

Sinai began with a **voice like a trumpet**. The letter in Revelation began with a **voice like a trumpet**. The symbolic part of Revelation also begins with a **voice like a trumpet**.

After these things I looked, and behold, a door *standing open in heaven*, and the first voice which I had heard, like *the sound of a trumpet speaking with me*, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things. 4:1

This time I'll give the answer up front. The symbolic part of Revelation is *The Covenant Displayed*. It tells the story of how God carries out his side of the covenant. Let's look at the outline.

The Covenant Displayed

We just saw that the first part of a covenant requires God to identify himself. Revelation 4-5 is a heavenly throne room scene. Seated on the throne is God the Father (4:2-3). As we get to chapter 5, we see Jesus' coronation as our heavenly king.¹⁵ The book of the law, which contains the covenant (5:1) is ready to be opened. He's declared **worthy to open the book and break its seals**

Letter Outline	
<i>Letter</i>	<i>Covenant Formula</i>
1. "I am God."	1. Preamble
2. "I know who you are and what you are doing." "I have done good things in the past (implied)."	2. Historical Prologue
3. "Here is what you need to do."	3. Stipulations
4. "If you do well, you will be rewarded. If you do badly you will be cursed."	4. Blessings and Cursings
5. "He who has an ear, let him hear." "I am the faithful and true witness."	5. Witnesses

¹³ I don't want to go through all the details here, since I will be covering this in more detail in the chapter on the messages to the churches. I just want to do enough to show that the covenant form is present.

¹⁴ "Bona fides" is a Latin term that means "good faith." It means that God's been faithful in the past. Because he was faithful before, we can count on him being faithful again.

¹⁵ You will have to trust me for now. All of the details that lead to this conclusion will be explored when we study this section in depth.

(5:2) because he has **overcome** (5:5). His death on the cross gives him the right to make the covenant with us.

It's not good enough to say, "This is the covenant, keep it!" God has his part to do as well. First, he says that he will draw all men to him (John 12:31). This is the call of grace. Because some will not listen when God calls, he must warn them of the judgment to come (Mark 16:16). Finally, when everyone has made up his mind, God must claim his saints (Matt 24:31) and pour out the covenant curses on the wicked (Heb 10:26-31). Then this sinful age will end. As we go through the book, we will find that this story extends from chapter 6 to chapter 16.

We talked a bit ago about Satan's false accusations. In the millennium we get to look at the books. Every redeemed saint and every heavenly being who has heard the charges will be shown the record of what was in the heart of every person who rejected God. When every case has been checked out, we will be able to sing "**Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God; because His judgments are true and righteous**" (Rev 19:1-2).

The easy thing for God to do now would be to declare that sin is over. He could make the earth into a new Eden, and we'd move in. But God doesn't do things that way. He has an orderly way of dealing with mankind. He won't destroy anyone without first showing them why.

So God will resurrect the wicked. As a final demonstration, he will allow Satan to organize them for a final attack against the saints. As God blocks the attack, every wicked person will see his own guilt. Then God will destroy them.

Notice that I did not say, "throw them into hell." The conventional idea of hell is a place where the wicked are tormented forever. But that's not what the Bible says. The wicked die the "second death" (Rev 20:14).¹⁶ And then they'll be gone.

Once there is no more wickedness, God can make the earth into a new Eden. We'll move into our wonderful new home, and Christ will live with us, just like he did with Adam and Eve in the original Garden of Eden. This is the final blessing of the covenant.

The Outline, Once More:

The *Covenant Displayed* looks like this.

A: The Inauguration of the Worthy King who wants us with him.

B: The story of the covenant in this age.

B': The story of the covenant in the millennial age.

A': The Consummation of the Worthy King who has us with him.

Now that's an awfully short outline. The book has a lot more details to fill in. Just to keep us oriented as we go through all those details, let's set up a graphic.

The Covenant Displayed



¹⁶ I will discuss this in depth when we study the texts that deal with it. In particular, the Hebrew concept of "forever and ever" will be fun.

This graphic is very simple. But it will be our roadmap to the symbolic part of the book. As we explore a section of the book, we will point out where we are in this map, and then expand that map section to match the discussion. That way you'll always know just where we are. You'll also see how everything fits together.

Jesus wants us to be with him. When he revealed himself in Revelation, he began by outlining the rules by which we can be with him. These rules are in the letter in chapters 2-3. Then he showed the way that the story would play out. Every step is in good order with good reason. Nothing is arbitrary. All of it is designed to allow him to permanently remove sin from the universe. His blessings can then flow forever to all.

And he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. And on either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve *kinds of* fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His bond-servants shall serve Him; and they shall see His face, and His name *shall be* on their foreheads. And there shall no longer be *any* night; and they shall not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God shall illumine them; and they shall reign forever and ever. Rev 22:1-5