

Apocalypse Now? What to make of Revelation

1. Should you care?

The current president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, believes in the return of the “12th Imam,” a Messiah figure whose coming is said to be preceded by apocalyptic chaos and widespread violence. Ahmadinejad is publicly on record referring to the eradication of the state of Israel. In a Q&A session in Cleveland on Mar. 20, 2006, President Bush was asked if he believed “that the war in Iraq and the rise of terrorism are signs of the Apocalypse?” (Bush’s reply, in part, was: “I haven’t really thought of it that way. . . I guess I’m more of a practical fellow.”) In these post-9-11 days, marked by wars and rumors of war in the Middle East, many have adopted an apocalyptic state of mind. *Is history reaching its climax? Are these the last Last Days? Does the book of Revelation offer help to interpret current events? What will you say to anxious, or cynical, people who watch the news, read the Bible, and want to talk?*

2. The Seven Churches

The book of Revelation is an odd hybrid of oracle, vision, poetry, letter and more. Chapters 2 & 3 contain a series of 7 “cover letters,” addressed to 7 churches in western Turkey. Complete the following chart to show the things for which each church was commended and/or condemned, and any elements for which some knowledge of the social / cultural / religious / political setting of the church would help. If nothing comes to mind for a given letter, craft and discuss a specific interpretive question.

Church and Scripture Reference	Commendation / Condemnation	Social / Political References and/or Interpretive Question
Ephesus (2:1-7)		
Smyrna (2:8-11)		
Pergamum (2:12-17)		
Thyatira (2:18-29)		
Sardis (3:1-6)		
Philadelphia (7-13)		
Laodicea (3:14-22)		

Scribe: _____

3. Seals, Trumpet and Bowls

As you'll note on p.319 of the textbook and in chapters 6 to 16 of Revelation, a big chunk of the plot of Revelation unfolds in step with the breaking of seals, the sounding of trumpets and the outpouring of bowls. Construct a chart cataloging the three series by (1) summarizing what happens on each occasion, (2) color-coding, underlining and arrows to show parallels across columns, and (3) highlighting / underlining possible allusions to the Old Testament. (You'll need a Bible with footnotes or marginal references like the NOAB for this. Be sure to *look up* any possible OT references to decide if *you* see a parallel. Use a separate page to explain how the Old Testament parallels work.)

	Seals (6:1 – 8:5)	Trumpets (8:6 – 11:19)	Bowls (15:1 – 16:21)
ONE			
TWO			
THREE			
FOUR			
FIVE			
SIX			
SEVEN			

4. Four Approaches to Revelation

On p. 324, the text lays out “four ways of understanding” Revelation. Note that Ian Paul (the author of this chapter) says these “ways” should emerge *after* reading the text; they should not be adopted *in advance*, based on what we think the book *should* be about. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each of these four ways. Which approach(es) have you encountered (if any) prior to now? (Think about sermons, books, films, conversations, popular culture, etc.) Does any approach seem fundamentally problematic to you? Is anything major at stake here? What difference would it make if someone changed the way she/he conceived of the book?