

WILLIAM HENDRIKSEN'S PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING THE BOOK OF REVELATION

I have been in the pastoral ministry for over twenty years. The doctrine of eschatology and especially the book of Revelation have always intimidated me. How could I ever hope to understand such a complex and unusual book like Revelation? The book poses such a challenge to understand it, that I lived for many years content to know about Revelation, but to keep it at a distance, as an appendix to the more familiar gospels and epistles of the New Testament. Yet I knew enough to know that I needed to study Revelation and I was pulled with hope and expectation by those welcoming words of John: *Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.* (Rev 1:3)

Over the years, I read several commentaries and other books on eschatology in an attempt to solidify my convictions about *the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus* (Tit 2:13). I want to recommend one of the most helpful commentaries that I have read on Revelation: More Than Conquerors, by William Hendriksen, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI. This commentary was originally published in 1940 and then reprinted in 1962 by Tyndale Press, London and then reprinted by Baker in 1982 (ISBN: 0-8010-4026-4).

Hendriksen aligns himself with most conservative interpreters of Revelation and agrees that the apostle John wrote the book. Some assert that John wrote Revelation in the later '60's AD, before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, but Hendriksen, rightly I believe, advocates a later date for the composition of Revelation - in the mid-90's AD. The purpose for the book is to comfort the Christians who were suffering persecution. John also writes to exhort Christians to faithful perseverance and warns against capitulation in the spiritual war which we are fighting in this present age. Indeed, the great theme of Revelation is that of warfare and the certain triumph of the Lamb over Satan and all opposition.

Before Hendriksen expounds the actual text of Revelation, he presents nine principles by which he will interpret the book. I've found these nine principles to be very helpful in gaining an understanding of John's apocalyptic prophecy. I would like to review these principles to you in the hope that they will likewise encourage you to give yourself to study the book of Revelation. There is a unique blessing promised by God to all who read and heed the words of this book. I commend Hendriksen's interpretive principles as aids to helping us experience that blessing as we learn to live for Christ in the light given to us by this wonderful portion of Scripture.

Space limitations will not allow me to cite all the relevant verses in full. But let me encourage you to work through this material with an open Bible, looking up each verse that is mentioned. This article is a guide which will give you some basic introductory instruction on how to read and understand Revelation. Your optimum benefit will be had if you use this material to guide you in a study of Scripture itself. Let me encourage you to look up each verse mentioned. That will require some additional time, but I believe it will be worth your effort. May the Spirit be pleased to use this study to open our eyes to the glory of our exalted Lord Jesus Christ, and may He transform us more and more into His glorious image as we live for Him in the expectant hope of His return. *Amen. Come Lord Jesus!* (Rv 22:20)

The first principle concerns the structure of the book. *Principle #1: The book of Revelation consists of seven sections. They are parallel and each spans the entire new dispensation, from the first to the second coming of Christ.*

The first section concerns "Christ in the Midst of the Lampstands" (1:1 - 3:22). The lampstands represent the seven churches (1:20) which represent the church throughout the present age between Christ's first and second comings. "Thus interpreted, each individual church is, as it were, a type, *not* indicating one definite period in history, but describing conditions which are constantly repeated in the actual life of the various congregations." (Hendriksen, p.16) The first coming of Christ is mentioned in 1:5 and the mention of the second coming is found in 1:7.

The second section concerns "The Vision of Heaven and the Seals" (4:1 - 7:17). This section begins with Christ exalted on His throne opening the scroll with seven seals. The Lamb, having been slain, now rules in glory. History unfolds as a sequence of judgments visited upon mankind which concludes with a depiction of final judgment. This sections begins with events associated with Christ's first coming (5:5,6) and ends with events associated with Christ's second coming (6:17; 7:16,17).

The third section concerns "The Seven Trumpets" (8:1 - 11:19). The trumpets announce judgments upon the world. The church (chpts 10 & 11) continues to bear witness. At the end of this section allusion is again made to final judgment (11:15,18).

The fourth section concerns "The Persecuting Dragon" (12:1 - 14:20). This section encompasses the history of the world from creation to the second coming. Christ's first coming is summarized in 12:5. As Christ is now enthroned, the Dragon makes war against the saints, employing the services of the Beast (13:1), the second beast or false prophet (13:11,12), and the Whore - Babylon (14:8). Christ's second coming in judgment is seen at the end of this section (14:14-16).

The fifth section concerns "The Seven Bowls" (15:1 - 16:21). This section is another description of the judgments of God which concludes with the final judgment in 16:20.

The sixth section concerns "The Fall of Babylon" (17:1 - 19:21). The world system which prevails between the first and second comings of Christ is defeated by Christ as His return is described in 19:11-16.

The seventh section concerns "The Great Consummation" (20:1 - 22:21). Here we meet up with the final demise of Satan. We are told in 20:2,3 of Satan being bound for 1,000 years - a binding which commenced in Christ's first coming (cf. Mt 12:29) and parallels Satan being cast out in 12:9. This 1,000 years is followed by a little season in which Satan is loosed (20:7) but then finally overthrown in 20:10. "The book consists of seven sections, and that these seven sections run parallel to one another. Each of them spans the entire dispensation from the first to the second coming of Christ. This period is viewed now from one aspect, now from another." (Hendriksen, p.18,19)

The second principle delves further into the structure of the book. Having now identified the seven paralleled sections, we learn further: *Principle #2: The seven sections may be grouped into two major divisions. The first division (chpts 1-11) consists of three sections. The second major division (chpts 12-22) consists of four sections. These two major divisions reveal a progress in depth or intensity of spiritual conflict. The first major division (chpts 1-11) reveals the Church, indwelt by Christ, persecuted by the world. But the Church is avenged, protected and victorious. The second major division (chpt 12-22) reveals the deeper spiritual background of this struggle. It is a conflict between the Christ and the Dragon in which the Christ, and therefore His Church, is victorious.*

In the 1st division (chpt 1-11), we see the war as it is waged among men: that is between believers and unbelievers. The church, indwelt by the living Christ, attacks the world as salt and light. The world rejects the message of the church. With hatred the world persecutes the church. At the end of this division we see the church avenged and triumphant. This division has three sections: (1) Christ in the midst of the lampstands (chpts 1-3); (2) the book with the seven seals (chpts 4-7); and (3) the seven trumpets of judgment (chpts 8-11).

In the second division (chpt 12-22), we learn of the invisible spiritual background to this war. The conflict among men is but a manifestation of the Dragon's rage against the Man-child, Jesus. As Satan has failed to defeat Jesus, he now turns his rage upon Jesus' followers. He employs the two Beasts and the Harlot who are, at the end, overthrown. This division has four sections: (1) The woman and the Man-child are persecuted by the Dragon and his helpers: the Beast and the Harlot (chpts 12-14); (2) the seven

bowls of wrath (chpts 15-16); (3) the fall of the great Harlot and of the Beasts (chpts 17-19); and (4) the judgment upon the Dragon followed by the New Heaven and New Earth: New Jerusalem (chpts 20-22).

Having seen the divisions and sections of the book, the third principle presents us with need to appreciate the unity of the book. *Principle #3: The book is one. The principles of human conduct and divine moral government are progressively revealed; the lamp stands give rise to the seals, the seals to the trumpets, etc.*

Although Revelation is structured in sections, it is nonetheless organically and systematically unified. Although the visions are diverse and the events challenging to arrange, the book is nevertheless written with a unified message to the churches. As we move through the several sections of the book, that message progressively builds to arrive at the climax of Christ's return. Each section is united to the other sections.

The first section (chpts 1-3) presents the glorified Jesus as the Head of His church. This same glorified Jesus is then found walking midst the lamp stands (the churches) in chpts 2 & 3. Chpt 1's descriptions of Jesus are repeated in chpts 2 and 3. (Compare 1:16 and 1:13 with 2:1; cf. 1:17,18 with 2:8; cf. 1:16 with 2:12; cf. 1:14,15 with 2:18; cf. 1:4; 1:16 with 3:1; cf. 1:5 & 1:18 with 3:7; cf. 1:5 with 3:14). With Christ indwelling the church, the church emits His light into the darkness of the surrounding world. This is a spiritual attack upon the forces of darkness which instigates intense conflict. The world responds by persecuting the church as it witnesses to Christ. This is described in by John in Jn 3:19-21. The world hates Christ, who is the light which shines from the church. Unable to crucify Him again since He is now exalted in glory, the world, incited by Satan's lies, directs its hatred at the church. The Christ who indwells His church (chpts 1-3) is hated by the world as seen in the next section (chpt 4-7): the vision of heaven and the seals.

Before depicting this age under the image of breaking the seals, Christ positions our perspective from the vantage point of His triumphant throne in heaven (chpt 4 and 5). We are established in the conviction that history runs its course under the sovereign direction of the exalted Lord. Christ governs the world, even in its hatred and war against Him - and He governs the world in the interests of the church. As adverse as we are to persecution and tribulation, we must recognize it as coming from a loving Father who is disciplining us as sons so that we might more perfectly bear His image. We are to understand that the persecution of the world, serves to purify the quality of the light which we, the church, emit into the surrounding darkness. It is in the discipline of affliction and tribulation that believers make progress in sanctification en route to eternal glory. The evil which comes our way comes under the direction of the sovereign Lord who breaks the seals and works to overrule evil for our good. Before we

are brought into the course of history unfolded, we are given sight of the Lord of history. *4:2 Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. (5:5,6)* The entire created order is seen in worshipful subservience to the Lamb upon the throne. Whatever transpires as the seals are opened, transpires under the rule of His who loved us and gave Himself for us. If He directs us into a course of trials, it is because He loves us and designs our good and His glory.

This era is one of conflict which Christ initiated at His first coming (Mt 10:34), but as the exalted Lord, Jesus reigns on the throne having conquered over sin, Satan and death (5:5). Now, enthroned and in the midst of His church, Jesus continues to wage war (6:2) and we wage war with Him in the prospect of the promises given throughout chpts 2 and 3 *to him who overcomes* - i.e. conquers.

Remember that the sequence of the seals depicts the entire age between the first and second comings. With the breaking of the first seal, war has begun by the attacking Christ. With the breaking of the second seal (6:4), the sword is unsheathed. But not only are there persecutions ignited by war, but also trials and afflictions of various kinds visited upon the whole world as it reels under the weight of sin and judgment. We see the church persecuted and the world visited by judgment. The third seal brings economic afflictions. The fourth seal brings famine and pestilence.

The church is not exempted from such trials. How does it fare? How do these trials affect the church? Mt 24:13 *But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved.* The fifth seal shows us those who endured to the end: those in the disembodied state in heaven (6:9-11). In the preceding seals, the believers were in conflict and many were martyred. Others were killed through the course of the effects of the fall, as those effects intensify over the course of this present age leading up to the second coming. They experienced the afflictions of death as well. What of them? They are with Christ in the heavenly temple awaiting the culmination of the age in the resurrection. The sixth seal is opened and we are brought to the events of final judgment (6:12-17). This section ends in chpt 7 emphasizing that the church will be protected through this age (7:1-8) and will come through tribulation to the triumphant glory of the eternal state (7:9-17).

We have just swept over the course of the age between the first and second comings with a focus upon the church in its persecution and affliction. What about the persecutors? The next section answers that question with the cycle of trumpets. Trumpets sound a warning of impending judgment. The dramatic effect of such doom is seen in 8:5. The censer of the altar is filled with the prayers of the saints (5:8, 8:4). The saints prayer is *How long O Lord?* (6:10) - a cry for righteous retribution upon God's enemies. In answer to the prayer of His persecuted people, God sends judgment and vengeance upon those who fight against His church. Revelation couples these two themes: Christians suffering under persecution and persecutors suffering under the judgments of God.

The seventh seal introduces us to this sober theme in 8:1. When it is broken, silence grips heaven. Then the seven angels assemble with seven trumpets. The incense of prayer rises and God responds with thunder, lightning and earthquake - the God of Sinai has come! "In 8:1 the trumpets seem to grow out of the seals. This is indeed true, and yet the two series - seals and trumpets - run parallel. Throughout history seals of persecution always give rise to trumpets of judgment. Hence, both series span the same long period of time, and the trumpets always grow out of the seals. Thus the seventh seal is not given a content of its own but immediately introduces the trumpets." (Hendriksen, p.28) When persecution arises, the vindicating judgment of God is not far behind. Let the saints pray on with encouragement and hope! History is characterized by this dynamic between the seals and the trumpets as a crescendo builds toward the final judgment.

The judgments which visit earth are extensive, but as yet, are warnings (trumpets). They affect the land (8:7); sea (8:8); rivers (8:10); the sun, moon & stars (8:12). In 8:13 an angelic woe is heralded: warning, warning! The fifth trumpet unleashes demonic terror (9:1-11) and another "woe" sounds forth (9:12). The sixth trumpet unleashes further devastation of death impelled by angelic principalities. The judgments are warnings, seen in that they afflict but a third of mankind and are thus not final judgments, but partial. Yet, these repeated warnings go unheeded for the most part (9:20,21). Although visited with gracious warnings from God, most of mankind is impenitent. Judgment does not work repentance, only the gracious work of the Spirit by the gospel works repentance.

As with the conclusion of the sixth seal, we asked "What about the persecutors?", so too after the seventh trumpet we inquire about the saints in this rendition of history. 10:1-11:12 answers that question. The saints are kept safe as we bear witness and bear our cross of persecution. The note of woe sounds (11:13) and with the seventh trumpet, the history of this age is summarized from the perspective of God's judgments (11:17-19).

Thus ends the first major division of the book (chpt 1-11), which depicts the war as it is waged among men: that is between believers and unbelievers. The church attacks the world as salt and light, and the world hates the church. At the end of the first half of Revelation, we see the church avenged and triumphant (11:15,16). Yet there are other questions which Revelation seeks to answer: What is the underlying cause of all this conflict on earth among men? Why such vehement enmity between believers and unbelievers? Why this battleground filled with judgment and death? What is going to happen to those who live their lives in persistent impenitent defiance of God? We know that the believers will be brought through death to be forever with Christ (7:15-17), but what will happen to those image bearers of the Creator who defy Him and embrace idols rather than the true God? The second half of Revelation answers these and other questions as the same course of history is then presented from the vantage point

of heaven, disclosing the angelic and demonic dimensions of this war. The point to remember under this third principle is the unity of the book. Although we see very different apocalyptic pictures, they each depict one and the same course of history, and that course of history gives unity to the book of Revelation. It is a book about the victory of the Lamb in a cosmic war - a war in which we fight, in which must conqueror (be overcomers), in which we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

The second half of the book begins with the fourth cycle (chpt 12-14) which informs us that the experience of the saints on earth is explained by the conflict raging between Christ and Satan. The struggle between the church and the world is the outward manifestation of the struggle that is transpiring in the heavenly realms. Christ is the *male child* (12:5), who is born to *rule all the nations*. Satan is depicted as the Dragon poised to devour the child (12:4). This is the ancient drama which commenced in Gen 3:15. Satan is thwarted in his attempts to destroy the Child, so he directs his rage at the woman (the church) and her offspring (saints) (12:13,17).

Satan, counterfeiting the Trinity, brings forth the Beast out of the sea (13:1-10): anti-Christian political persecution manifest in John's day by the Roman Empire; the Beast out of the land (13:11-18): anti-Christian religious persecution, manifest in John's day by Roman emperor worship. This Second Beast is later identified as "The False Prophet". We are introduced briefly to the Harlot, Babylon (14:8): the anti-Christian seduction of the world which entices the lusts of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life (1 Jn 2:15-17). It is not until the next cycle, as the crescendo intensifies that we are given a more detailed description of Babylon. The unified purpose of the Dragon, the Beasts & the Harlot is to destroy the church. We also meet up with those who receive the *mark of the beast* (13:17,18).

With such enemies arrayed against the church, the Spirit then presents those with the mark of the Lamb (14:1). We are again encouraged with a view of the disembodied martyrs in heaven, singing in worship before the throne (14:1-5). Meanwhile, angelic messengers dart back and forth exclaiming warnings of impending wrath. An angelic gospel summons to worship goes across the globe (14:6,7). An angelic announcement of the fall of Babylon is given (14:8). An angelic threat of eternal wrath against those who worship the beast (14:9-11). The saints are given a word of exhortation and encouragement (14:12,13). The cycle ends with Revelation's fourth depiction of the second coming and final judgment (14:14-20). The *son of man* appears with a sickle in hand and He, with the angelic reapers, harvest the earth and cast the gathered clusters of grape into the winepress of the wrath of God. The five enemies (Dragon, Beast of political persecution, Beast of religious persecution; the Harlot, and the worshippers of the Beast) are all introduced in the fourth cycle. The question which continues to drive the book is: "What ultimately happens to these enemies of the Lamb?" That question is answered in the next three cycles. The seven bowls of wrath (15-16) shows the destruction of the worshippers of the Beast. Chpts

17-19 show the fall of the great Harlot and of the two Beasts. Chpts 20-22 show the judgment upon the Dragon followed by the New Heaven and New Earth: New Jerusalem. Each meet the same destruction. Each cycle ends in the same event of final judgment.

The fifth cycle of the bowls of wrath (15-16) concerns the judgment against the idolaters with the mark of the beast. Plagues are prepared for them (15:1). But before we treat that horror, the church is again consoled with a view of the saints in heaven who are engaged in the worship of the Lamb. Lest they be enticed to worship the Beast, they are reminded of where true worship transpires: in heaven (15:2-4). At the conclusion of their heavenly hymn, the seven angels again emerge and are given seven bowls, each containing divine wrath. This display of divine vengeance is so immense and awesome that the smoke of His presence fills the temple and none can enter until His wrath runs its course (15:5-8). Chpt 16 recounts the outpouring of the seven bowls. This cycle is a reiteration of the events associated with the third cycle: the seven trumpets - warnings of judgment. "This raises the question of what happens when Christ's trumpets of judgment do not result in penitence and conversion. Does the Ruler of the universe permit such impenitence and such hardness of heart to remain unpunished? The answer, according to chpts 15 and 16, is that whenever in the entire history of the world, any individual remains impenitent, and hardens himself against the initial manifestation of God's displeasure in judgments, the final outpouring of divine wrath will follow sooner or later." (Hendriksen, p.31) The trumpets warn of wrath and the bowls pour out wrath. There is a mounting crescendo building as we move through Revelation, even though we are retracing the same period of history repeatedly in parallel sections. The parallel pattern of reiteration also moves in a linear motion from the beginning to the end as Revelation proceeds.

The sixth cycle depicts the overthrow of the great Harlot: Babylon (chpts 17-19). The city of the world, the counterfeit church, is depicted in her sensuality and immorality. The city is filled with internal contention but complies with the Beast in the persecution of the saints (17:13-18). Angels announce that the time for Babylon's destruction has come. God's people are summoned out of her, even as Lot was called out of Sodom. The devastation of the city comes suddenly and extensively. All the kings and merchants mourn her demise (18:9-19), while the people of God rejoice (18:20). Thus Babylonian culture, first spawned by Cain in Gen 4, comes to an end, like a stone cast into the sea (18:21-24). The triumphant rejoicing of heaven is then recorded in chpt 19. The *King of kings and Lord of lords* rides forth in victory (19:11-16), amidst the wedding feast of the Lamb (19:7-10) and the feast of the cursed who are devoured by the birds (19:17-18). The final battle is the Lord's as, along with the Harlot, the two beasts are thrown into the lake of fire while their army is devoured by the birds of prey.

The final, seventh cycle (20-22) answers the question of the one remaining enemy: the Dragon. Here is the greatest enemy. The one first introduced and last destroyed. He has already been bound by

Christ during His first attack against the Kingdom of darkness in His first coming (20:1-3). At the culmination of history, Satan will again be unleashed to deceive the nations and mount his final, but futile, retaliation against the Lamb. But that climatic revolt will end with the Dragon's defeat in the lake of fire (20:7-10). Meanwhile the martyrs are reigning with Christ in heaven (20:4-6). This age of history comes to its conclusion in final judgment (20:11-15): God's people are rewarded and all His enemies, including death and Hades, are thrown into the lake of fire. The final two chapters (21,22) describe the new heavens and new earth with the Lamb triumphant and His people alive forevermore. The book ends with concluding warnings and appeals, as the church longingly awaits the returning King.

Revelation, although constructed out of seven sections which form two major divisions, is yet a unified whole which, in fact, progressively builds to its glorious conclusion. In each section, the moral concerns of human behavior and God's government are the same. The church always functions as the light-bearer by virtue of the indwelling Christ. The world always hates Christ and retaliates against Him by persecuting the church. Behind this human conflict lies the enmity of the Dragon and the Lamb. Powers and principalities move across the battlefield, marshaling the forces of political and religious opposition. The world, like a seductive whore, entices the believer to become dull with sensuality and to turn away from serving the Lamb. But these enemies of the Lamb go down in defeat - they always go down in defeat. All throughout history, in localized microcosms of the ultimate end, the enemies of the Lamb are conquered. The battle rages, but the victory is always ours and final, ultimate victory is just over the horizon.

Having examined the structure of the book, the fourth principle concerns the substance of the book. The themes and concerns of Revelation are progressively developed and come to a climatic conclusion. *Principle #4: The seven sections of the Apocalypse are arranged in ascending, climatic order. There is progress in eschatological emphasis. The final judgment is first announced, then introduced & finally described. Similarly, the new heaven & earth are described more fully in the final section than in those which precede it.* Hendriksen calls this schema "progressive parallelism."

The principles we have seen thus far relate to every church in every age in every location. Revelation thus gives us the Biblical philosophy of history. It reveals the principles by which we can interpret human behavior, as influenced by Satan's murderous deceptions, yet all history sovereignly governed by God with justice and grace. With these perspectives, we can interpret the events of the past and the events of the evening news. We see the two Beasts promoting their world-life-views: religious systems, cultural and social structures - all expressions of their inherent idolatry. We see God patiently warning and calling sinners to repentance through the proclamation of the gospel by His church. We

discern how the bowls of wrath always follow the trumpets of judgment whenever those trumpets are unheeded. Then, the final dismantling of the entire evil system occurs: Babylon falls. History has given us many preliminary examples: Paganism's Rome; Christianity's Byzantium; Islam's Ottoman Turks; the Enlightenment's European Imperialists; Hitler's Nazis; Stalin's Russia; Mao Tse Tung's Revolution; Russia's Communism - all manifestations of the decreed inevitability: Babylon must fall. Babylon's end eventually comes: over years, decades, even centuries. Ultimately God judges and dismantles Satan's ungodly societies. In this we see the paradigm for this entire age: it will end in Final Judgment and the dismantling of the kingdom of darkness.

As we move through the seven cycles of Revelation, although we are retracing our steps over the same period of time between the first and second comings, we see more emphasis given to Final Judgment - a crescendo builds, like the contractions of a woman in labor. "So although all the sections of the Apocalypse run parallel and span the period between the first and second comings of Christ and are rooted in the soil of the old dispensation, yet there is also a degree of progress. The closer we approach the end of the book, the more our attention is directed to the Final Judgment and that which lies beyond it. The seven sections are arranged, as it were, in an ascending, climatic order. The book reveals a gradual progress in eschatological emphasis." (Hendriksen, p.35)

In the first half of Revelation (chpts 1-11) there contains announcements and introductions to Final Judgment. In the first cycle (Christ in the midst of the Lampstands), we have only a mere mention of coming judgment without any description (1:7). In the second cycle (the heavenly King and the breaking of seals), Final Judgment is not merely mentioned, it is now definitely introduced, and we see its horror, but again there is no description (6:12-17). We also get a brief introduction to the eternal state of the saints (7:9-17). In the third cycle (the trumpets of warning), Final Judgment is referred to in a rather general way (11:15-19).

The announcements made in the first half of the book are then developed in second half. In the second half, the tone changes as we encounter actual descriptions of Final Judgment. In the fourth cycle (the rage of the Dragon and the Beasts) the description is symbolic and likened to a harvest (14:13-20). In the fifth cycle (the seven plagues and seven bowls of wrath) Final Judgment is described with greater detail (16:17-21). In the sixth cycle (the Fall of Babylon and the Beasts), Babylon's destruction is described in detail in chpt 17-19 which includes a description of the second coming and the final conflict in which the beasts are thrown into lake of fire (19:11-21). In the seventh cycle (the destruction of the Dragon and the establishment of the new created order), Final Judgment is described without symbolism (20:11-15). The new heavens and earth are then described (21:1-22:5). The book ends with a final exhortations and appeals.

Revelation is a book which is wondrously accessible to our generation which is oriented to visual images. Ancient cultures were more attuned to listening and receiving information through the ear-gate. Our culture is more oriented to receiving information through the eye-gate. We are accustomed to watching movies and seeing the visual images of the television. Revelation is a very visual book.

Principle #5: The fabric of the book consists of moving pictures. The details that pertain to the picture should be interpreted in harmony with its central thought. We should ask two questions: first - what is the entire picture?; second - what is the predominant idea?

Revelation is cinematic. What is revealed is revealed like a movie through pictures and visual images. In each cycle, the stage is set, the characters take their place and the action commences. We are informed at the outset that the content of the book is visual. *The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants... (1:1). To show* means to communicate a divine revelation by means of visions.

The book begins and we see Someone walking in the midst of golden lampstands. Then the camera focuses in on the Christ and we are thus introduced to the main character of the book: the Lamb of God. We then read His letters to the seven churches. Then the scene changes. A throne room is seen and peals of thunder and lightening are heard. The One on the throne has a scroll sealed with seven seals and now Another approaches the throne and He receives the scroll, and then sits upon the throne. Those around the throne immediately bow in worshipful homage and praise to Him: the Lamb. The scene concludes with the songs and combined praise of heaven and earth. Then four horsemen come bolting out of heaven: one white, one red, one black, one pale. As they sweep across earth, we see men slaughtering one another, multitudes of people made destitute in famine and overcome by natural catastrophes. We see those who serve the Lamb martyred and then we see them in a disembodied state in the heavenly temple, crying out for vengeance and given white robes and told to rest until their brethren are also martyred as were they. Then the scene goes black as the sun is darkened, the moon turns blood red, the stars fall from the sky and the earth begins to roll up like a scroll as the mountains and islands are dislodged in the upheaval. Meanwhile, men of all kinds attempt to hide in caves, crying out for the mountains to fall on them and to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb.

"Do you get the picture?" That is the question of Revelation. In order to understand Revelation, we must learn how to see the picture; how to interpret the visual images with their accompanying sounds, voices, and songs. We must learn how to watch an apocalyptic movie.

The first question to ask while watching an apocalyptic movie is, "*What is the entire picture?*" We should not employ the allegorical method which seeks to make every minute detail a symbol of

something. This interpretative method quickly becomes speculative and fanciful. This method was employed by medieval scholars, and applied especially to the parables. The parables, like the visual depictions of Revelation, generally give one central teaching and in order to perceive that main idea, we must take in the entire picture. It is unwise to attempt to symbolize each individual component of the picture. Not every prop on the stage has a spiritual meaning, but is there to contribute to the central concern of the picture.

The second question to ask of an apocalyptic movie is, "*What is the predominant idea?*" We should not attempt to press the details of the visions. Balance is needed, because what is seen in the vision is a revelation and communicates something. Wisdom is needed to interpret. Here is where something of the artistry of Biblical interpretation comes in. We must apply the principles of Biblical interpretation with an artistic sensitivity to Biblical truth. Such artistry is found in a studied and matured understanding of whole of Scripture. John writes at end of the foundational time of apostolic revelation. He concludes Scripture as it stands for the entirety of this age. We need a biblically informed eye in order to see the visual images of Revelation and avoid veering off the Biblical path into the bushes and rabbit trails of an active imagination. Rather we ask: what is the picture taken as a whole and what central meaning is conveyed by the whole picture? The details of any vision should be given significance only when it is recognized that the detail contributes to the central meaning of what is being pictured.

Principle #6: The seals, trumpets, bowls of wrath & similar symbols refer not to specific events, particularly happenings, or details of history, but to principles - of human conduct and of divine moral government - that are operating throughout the history of the world, especially throughout the new dispensation. This principle is asserted contrary to the historicist interpretation which attempts to connect the symbols in Revelation to specific events in the history of the western church. The historicist is too European-centered and fails to give due consideration to the global character of the events depicted in Revelation. We fail to benefit from Revelation if we isolate one or two historical events and identify them as THE meaning of Revelation's symbolism. There are simply too many historical options which serve as examples of how these principles of human conduct and divine government work themselves out in history. Who is authorized to select THE one event and date which thus fulfills Revelation's imagery?

The visual symbols depict abiding and repeated principles and dynamics which operate in throughout history - everywhere: in Europe, China, Africa, Asia and the Americas. They are visual apocalyptic depictions of human behavior, of demonic and angelic activity, and of the mysterious workings of divine sovereignty. The sphere in which these symbolic dynamics operate is extensive, not localized or specific to one historical event. The seals affect a fourth of the world; the trumpets affect a

third of the earth; the plagues and bowls effect the entire earth. These symbolic events affect large portions of mankind: the trumpets concern mankind - not just medieval Europeans arguing with a certain Pope. In fact, there are occasions when the entirety of mankind from its very beginning is envisioned. The symbols represent historical dynamics operative since the fall and especially during this present age between the first and second comings during which the Messiah has been enthroned and presently administers the Kingdom of God.

While asserting that Revelation identifies dynamics which operate throughout history, the seventh principle acknowledges the original historical setting at the time when John wrote the book. *Principle #7: The Apocalypse is rooted in contemporaneous events and circumstances. Its symbols should be interpreted in the light of conditions which prevailed when the book was written.*

Remember that Revelation is not only an apocalyptic prophecy, but also a letter written to specific churches and has relevancy to their respective situations. Revelation was written to those specific seven churches in order to strengthen them in the midst of the warfare which was then raging at the end of the first century in Asia Minor. We must maintain a first century point of reference in order to interpret the symbols and ascertain their meaning.

Christians were experiencing extreme persecution and some were being slain for their testimony for Christ (cf. 6:10; 16:6; 17:6; 19:2) Some were being imprisoned (2:10). Some were suffering from famine (6:8; 7:16). Some had been cast to wild beasts (6:8). Some had been beheaded. At Pergamun, Antipas had been martyred. John had been banished to Patmos. Emperor worship was forced upon people and false teachers troubled the churches. "These believers were not primarily interested in the great events of the future centuries so much as in the struggle between light and darkness, the church and the world, Christ and the dragon, truth and error, which was being waged in their own time. The Apocalypse is an answer to the crying needs of these persecuted, sorely afflicted believers... True, it speaks of forces that are constantly operative in the history of the world, for example, the beast, but it discusses these in terms that are expressive of the contemporaneous form in which these forces manifested themselves - for example Rome." (Hendriksen, p. 45)

John employed images and symbols which had immediate recognition in his day. He used symbolism familiar to the pagan reader of his day. Imperial Roman culture was replete with emperor worship and its own political pageantry and pagan superstitions. The Roman world life view was promoted using images, statues, architecture, festivals and rituals - all of which impacted the first century Christian visually. Revelation presents the Christian with a counter-set of images to displace those imbedded in his mind by the dominant Roman culture. Several of the images in Revelation draw upon the

reader's exposure to contemporary Greco-Roman society. The Serpent is not only an image taken from Genesis 3, but was also used in pagan religions to depict evil. The image of the woman in Revelation 17 at first glance looks like the goddess Roma, who personified the civilization of Rome and was worshipped in many local temples in the Lycos Valley. But John presents her as she really is - a Roman prostitute, seductive and scheming. Thus the imagination is purged and the Christian sees behind the wealth and comforts of Roman worldliness to perceive her true character: she is Solomon's proverbial woman of folly who leads to death.

The symbols of Revelation need to be seen in their historical context and not only transformed into timeless symbols but also anchored in the historical setting in which John wrote. The mention of earthquakes in Revelation was read by people who experienced severe earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. John takes his contemporaries worst fears of war and natural disasters and weaves them into his apocalyptic prophesy, setting them into Biblical perspective.

Nevertheless, as John writes, he dips his pen into the ink of the Old Testament Scriptures. John does not cite the Old Testament as much as he alludes to it with vocabulary and imagery, often very precise but subtle. The images of Revelation have a meaning defined in terms of the Old Testament and its history. Old Testament allusions lie immediately beneath the surface of Revelation and would have been seen by the Biblically informed first century Christian whose churches were yet closely connected to Judaism, in spite of the fact the Christianity was emerging into its own.

The images of Revelation conjure up recollections of the plagues of Egypt; the fall of Jericho; the army of locusts in Joel; the Appearance of God at Sinai; the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra; as well as many other allusions. Thus we come to *Principle #8: The Apocalypse is rooted in the sacred Scriptures. It should be interpreted in harmony with the teachings of the entire Bible.* Revelation grows in the topsoil of the contemporaneous Greco-Roman culture, but it is rooted in the subsoil of Scripture. As with all other Scripture so too with Revelation: Scripture best interprets Scripture. Hendriksen reminds us of a fundamental hermeneutical principle (p.49): "It is wise to proceed from the clearer to the more obscure and never vice versa." For example, Rv 20's millennium (20:2) should be interpreted in view of the Bible's didactic passages which teach about Christ's triumph and government over Satan, rather than first settling on an interpretation of Rv 20 and then reading that back into the clearer passages.

Revelation must be interpreted in relation to Revelation itself. Each passage should be viewed in its immediate context in relation to the preceding and ensuing verses. Then the passage should be viewed within the larger structure of Revelation. We should note its position in its respective cycle and how it runs in parallel relation to the other cycles contained in the book.

Revelation must also be interpreted in relation to the New Testament. Since John wrote both Revelation and the Gospel of John, we can identify similarities between the two documents (Jn 10:18b with Rv 2:27; Jn 1:1 with Rv 19:13; Jn 1:29 with Rv 5:6)

Correspondence is also found with other New Testament passages. (Compare Col 1:18 with Rv 1:5; Mt 24:30 with Rv 1:7; Mt 17:2 with Rv 1:16; Jms 1:12 with Rv 2:10; Act 15:28 with Rv 2:24; Mt 24:42 with Rv 3:3; Mt 10:32 with Rv 3:5; Lk 10:18 with Rv 12:9; 1 Pt 1:19,20 with Rv 13:8; 1 Pt 5:13 with Rv 16:19; 1 Tim 6:15 with Rv 17:14; 2 Cor 6:17 and Eph 5:11 with Rv 18:14; Lk 11:50 with Rv 18:24; 2 Cor 5:17 with Rv 21:4,5; Eph 6:24 with Rv 22:21)

Comparisons with the Old Testament are even more extensive but less obvious in that verses are not quoted but Old Testament terms, analogies and concepts saturate John's writing. Hendriksen points to the extensive Old Testament influence, especially the prophets, upon Revelation. Every chapter of Revelation contains Old Testament material. Chpt 1: a description of the Son of Man (Dan 7:9ff; 10:5,6; Ezek 1:7, 26ff; 43:2); chpt 2: reference to "the tree of life"; "paradise of God"; "Balaam"; "Balak"; "Jezebel"; "rod of iron"; chpt 3: The Book of Life (Ex 32:33; Ps 69:28; Mal 3:16); chpt 4: a throne set in heaven and the Four Living Creatures. (Isa 6:1; Ezek 1:26,28); chpt 5: the scroll and the Lion of Judah (Eze 2:9; Zec 5:1-3; Gn 49:9; Isa 11:10); chpt 6: the horses and riders (Ps 45:3,4; Zec 1:8; 6:3); chpt 7: sealing up the servants of God upon the forehead and the blessedness of the redeemed (Isa 49:10; 25:8; Jer 20:13; 31:16; Eze 34:23); chpt 8 and 9: the trumpets of judgment (Ex 7ff; the plagues); chpt 10: the angel's sworn testimony (Dan 12:7) and the little book (Eze 2:9; 3:3); chpt 11: the measuring reed (Eze 40:3; Zec 2:1ff) and the two witnesses (Zec 4:2ff); chpt 12: the woman, the child and the dragon (Gn 3:15) and the angel Michael (Dan 10:13,21; 12:1); chpt 13: the beast out of the sea (Dan 2:31; 7:3); chpt 14: the white cloud; One like unto a Son of Man (Dan 7:13;10:16) and the wine-press (Isa 63:3); chpt 15: the song of Moses (Ex 15); chpt 16: Har-Magedon (Jdg 5; 2 Chron 35); chpt 17-19: the fall of Babylon (Isa 13; 14; 21; 46; 47; 48; Jer 25; 50; 51; Dan 2; 7; Hab 3. cf. Eze 27 - the fall of Tyre) and the invitation to the birds (Eze 39:17-20); chpt 20: Gog and Magog (Gn 10:2; Exe 38:39) and the Books of Judgment (Dan 7:10; 12:1; Ps 69:28); chpt 21: the New Heaven and Earth (Isa 65:17ff; 66:22ff) and the New Jerusalem (Eze 48:30ff); chpt 22: the river of water of life, the tree of life (Gn 2; Eze 47:1-12).

Revelation stands as the culmination and climax of Biblical prophecy. As such, it draws upon all preceding prophetic images and messages and incorporates them into this final prophetic disclosure. John's employment of Scriptural prophecy is conditioned by the accomplishment of redemption in the cross and resurrection of the Lamb. With the exultation of Christ Jesus to the throne of God, the ancient warfare with the Serpent has moved to a new phase and theater of operations. The prophetic concepts of

the ancient prophets are employed by John, but they are made subject to the triumph of the Lamb and are used now to encourage our expectation of Jesus' impending return and our entrance into eternal glory.

The last principle is a reminder of the divine authorship of Revelation. *Principle #9: The Apocalypse is rooted in the mind and revelation of God, God in Christ is the real Author, and this book contains the purpose of God concerning the history of the Church.*

That Revelation originates in the mind of God is stated explicitly at the outset of the book: Rv 1:1,2 *The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must shortly take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.* We rightly recognize the divine authorship of all Scripture and we have already seen how Revelation is extensively interconnected with all Scripture. Revelation is Scripture. Yet Revelation stands out among the New Testament books as a unique piece of Biblical literature. It is a letter but it is also an apocalyptic prophecy which dazzles the mind with its images and astounds us with its literary beauty. Revelation is a work of astonishing literary complexity. It compels us to bow with the heavenly hosts in worship before the Lamb. It gives us visual images which define our Christian experience as we learn to see life in the light of Biblical prophecy. We realize that we are at war and we begin to discern the movement of the Dragon and his oppressive and seductive diabolical helpers. We are warned and summoned to be alert and vigorous in fighting this good fight. The danger is real and we must be overcomers. But Revelation gives us great hope, for we know that the Lamb has already triumphed and that He reigns over all. He is directing the course of history to its decreed destiny: the revelation of His glory in the final judgment of His enemies and the full salvation of His people. We learn that we are called to fight this war by taking up our cross and going the way of the Lamb. In this world we do have tribulation, but we are of good cheer for the Lamb has overcome this world. We, in Him, likewise overcome. We, in Him, likewise run our race with the hope of eternal joy set before us. In Him, we are more than conquerors.

I hope this survey of William Hendriksen's principles of interpretation encourages you to delve deeper into the book of Revelation. Sadly, too many believers stay aloof from this portion of Scripture and deprive themselves of the rich and unique blessings which are given to those who make the effort to study it and to have its prophetic images condition their Christian experience. Let us be encouraged by John's own appeal given at the beginning of this book: 1:3 *Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.*