

*"There is no fear in love;
but perfect love casteth out fear." – 1 John 4:18*

From Fear To Love

Transforming Revelation

David Brubaker

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This book is a revolutionary explanation of the book of Revelation as a serious resource for spiritual growth, not a book of doomsday predictions. The God of love is not plotting doomsday!

A story of past, present, and future ("the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter" - Rev. 1:19), Revelation is an epic of our growing spiritual consciousness.

Revelation explores big spiritual questions such as the nature of God, the human situation, our relationship with God, and our destiny. The answers to those questions change as the story progresses. Early in the story, God is up in the sky, aloof, distant, and fearsome, sending out thunder and lightning. By the end of the story, God is here on earth, lovingly involved with people, giving the water of life. Revelation tells how the Judeo-Christian tradition has grown from its ancient origins and how it must grow further still.

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Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations are from the King James Version.

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1 Ears to Hear

Armageddon is a truth to end war, not a war to end war.

In Revelation's story of Armageddon, the “weapon” that Jesus uses to defeat all the armies of the earth is a two-edged sword coming out of the mouth of the Word of God (Rev. 1:16 and 19:15). This would be a strange and inappropriate symbol for the military might of the great conquering war hero Jesus, if it meant that. A war hero doesn't go into battle carrying his weapon in his mouth. If it meant military might to achieve military victory on the battlefield, the sword would be in the right hand of the Power of God or perhaps of the Wrath of God.

Coming out of the mouth of the Word of God, however, it presents a strange, even bizarre, image. Try to imagine Jesus riding through the battlefield, waging war using a sword coming out of His mouth.

As a symbol for military might, this two-edged sword coming out of the mouth of the Word of God doesn't make sense. What then could it sensibly mean?

Perhaps a hint will help. The counterpoint in the Armageddon story to what comes out of the mouth of the Word of God to defeat the armies of the world is “unclean spirits” which come out of the mouths of three satanic entities (the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet) to call the world to war (16:13–16). Now, what would you think comes out of the mouth of the Word of God, and what contrasting thing comes out of the mouths of Satan's partners? Proverbs has the answer: “For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding” (Proverbs 2:6). What things come out of mouths? Words. Words of wisdom. Words of folly. Words of truth. Words of falsehood.

The two-edged sword coming out of the mouth of the Word of God is simply the most common symbolic and metaphorical meaning of a two-edged sword: “Truth is a two-edged sword.” The two-edged sword of truth is not a modern metaphor. It is as old as the Bible. For example, “For the

word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged¹ sword” (Hebrews 4:12).

This *two-edged sword* coming *out of the mouth* of the *Word* of God is a clear symbol for God's truth, the one thing that is powerful enough to overcome all the armies of the earth and to overcome war itself. As we look more deeply into Revelation, it will become clear that a predominant theme is God's truth in contrast to satanic falsehood and deception. The truth indeed will set us free. Now if you go to your Bible to read the whole story of Armageddon (16:12–16 and 19:11–21), you will find that there is still more to explain about Armageddon. We'll look at the rest when we've developed more of the context of the story.

Incidentally, this explanation of Armageddon also reveals the meaning of the strange name Armageddon, which has puzzled scholars and theologians for centuries. There is no place in physical reality named Armageddon. The name means, depending on the translator, something like “the mountain above Megiddo,” “the heights above Megiddo,” or simply “above Megiddo.” Megiddo was a city in ancient Israel where several historically important battles were fought. However, there are no mountains or heights above Megiddo, so the name seems quite odd.

Here is the meaning of the name Armageddon: This “battle” of Armageddon, where God's truth triumphs over war and armies, occurs on a higher level—the intellectual, moral, and spiritual levels—than the physical level of Megiddo's battlefields. It happens on a higher level than Megiddo, “above Megiddo.”

Now that we've deciphered the meaning of the two-edged sword coming out of the mouth of the Word of God, it seems fairly obvious. How could such an obvious meaning elude so many people for so long? We see, hear, and understand things through filters of our own expectations, beliefs, and desires. If we read something cryptic or ambiguous, our minds try to make sense of it through what we already know or believe.

John of Patmos, the author of Revelation, says many cryptic and ambiguous things in Revelation, giving us plenty of opportunity to hear what we want to hear or expect to hear. If he says something ambiguous, we hear whichever possible meaning suits us, and often we don't even notice

1. In modern English, “two-edged” (hyphenated) is more natural than “twoedged” as a single word. However, the King James Version uses the single word form. Other than when quoting the KJV, I will use the hyphenated form.

that there is another way to read it. When we read a passage of Revelation, instead of asking ourselves, “What did John of Patmos say here?” we ask, either consciously or unconsciously, “What part of my doctrine or beliefs might John be talking about?”

So it is that everyone was fooled for so long by the two-edged sword coming out of the mouth of the Word of God. War holds a combination of dread (of the consequences) and fascination (with the power displays, the heroism, and the glory). When dread and fascination focus our attention on war, it is easy for our mental filters to distort or ignore the details.

It is as if John wrote, “**Armageddon! War! War**, waged with a two-edged sword in His mouth.” We hear, “War!” and we don’t pay attention to the details. How many people ever even asked themselves, “What could a two-edged sword coming out of the mouth of the Word of God mean?” To understand John’s symbolism, we have to pay close attention. John’s symbols are quite sensible and meaningful, and sometimes marvelously brilliant as you will see. They are also cryptic enough to let us jump to erroneous conclusions and miss the symbols’ real meanings.

When we listen through distorting filters and see through distorting lenses, we get erroneous insights. We will even see cases when John says something clearly, plainly, and straightforwardly, using neither any symbolism nor any cryptic, hidden meaning, and yet people conclude something that completely contradicts what John said. Their conclusion matches their desires and expectations rather than matching what John said.

Take, for example, the most basic “fact” that everybody “knows” about Revelation: It is a book of predictions. John says outright that this “fact” is not true.

In John’s vision, the Son of Man gives John this instruction to write the book of Revelation: “Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter” (1:19). Could he say any more clearly that his book is about the past, present, and future? Obviously the “things which shall be hereafter” are the future, and the “things which are” are John’s present. The “things which thou hast seen” are the past. Viewed through a distorting lens that expects a prophet to be a predictor of the future rather than a teacher, that verse seems to say, “Write the things [blah blah blah, blah blah blah, blah] which shall be hereafter.”

By the way, in case you think that “the things which thou hast seen” is an odd way to say “the past,” you are correct. The reason for the odd expression is that it has an additional meaning, which we will find later.

The odd expression covers both meanings.

Revelation includes past, present, and future, from the point of view of John's time in the late first century CE or early in the second century. Thus, for example, when John writes obviously about the Roman Empire, he means the real Roman Empire, not the popularized twentieth century notion of the European Common Market as a "revived" Roman Empire that was, in fact, neither Roman nor Empire.

Revelation is a serious spiritual resource, not a fortune-teller's book of predictions and not a timetable for doomsday. It looks seriously at our human situation—past, present, and future—and at how we can get to a beautiful future. The story is very organized and structured, and the organization, structure, and sequence have meaning and make sense. Everything happens at the right time and place in the story. It is so organized that in some parts of Revelation even the literary style and structure mimic Biblical sources that are perfectly appropriate to that part of John's story, as you will see.

Let's begin now to look at some of the sequence and structure of the story. It will give you some sense of how the story is organized and of where we're going.

The main action part of the Revelation story (after some introductory material and messages to seven churches) begins with a description of heaven (all of chapter 4) and ends with another description of heaven (21:1–22:5). The two descriptions of heaven are completely different from each other! They have almost nothing in common and are very nearly opposites of each other. Even the two descriptions of God are almost complete opposites.

In the first description of heaven, God sits anthropomorphically on a throne up in the sky, surrounded by a sea of glass which separates God from everyone else. Out of God's throne come scary things such as thunder and lightning. The only people there are 24 elders, about whom John tells us almost nothing. There are also four strange creatures, which bear partial resemblances to various Biblical creatures such as seraphim and the creatures of Ezekiel's visions in the Old Testament. No one else is there. (When the story moves on to chapter 5, many angels also appear but that is in the transition to the next episode, not part of the description of the first heaven.) The elders and the creatures praise God continually by falling down before Him and reciting words of praise.

Now compare that first heaven to the scene of heaven at the end of the

story, which John calls “New Jerusalem.” The final heaven is down here on earth instead of up in the sky. Rather than being isolated on His throne in the sky and separated from people by the sea of glass, God lives among His many people and they see His face. There is no sea of glass. Out of God's throne comes, instead of thunder and lightning, a river of the water of life, which nourishes the tree of life which provides fruits for every season and leaves for the healing of the nations. Along with the streets of gold and adornment of all sorts of precious stones, this bountiful and beautiful scene is quite a contrast to the barren first heaven where there is nothing but thrones, crowns, and the sea of glass. There are even more differences, which we will look at in depth later.

When viewed in contrast to the final scene of heaven, the first heaven is, quite frankly, not very heavenly. There is nothing of beauty, love, joy, nature, or bountiful living. There is hardly anybody there, and nobody who is there ever does anything interesting, fun, or useful. All the elders do through all eternity is to fall down on their knees and praise God with fancy words and increasingly long streams of words. In return, God completely ignores them and gives no response or acknowledgement at all. The only things for which they praise God are his power and glory. There is not even a hint of “God is love” or “The Lord is my shepherd” in this first heaven. In contrast, the God of New Jerusalem is very lovingly involved with His people and provides all sorts of wonderful benefits.

What do these two completely different views of God and heaven mean? The first heaven shows the most primitive views of God and religion, based on humanity's oldest beliefs from the middle and late Bronze Age, possibly even earlier. The scary-old-angry-guy-in-the-sky God is an ancient Bronze Age idea. New Jerusalem is the culmination of changing and evolving ideas of God and religion, from Moses and the prophets of Israel through the teachings of Jesus and His disciples and even into the future. As a story of past, present, and future, from the distant past to the distant future, Revelation is an epic of the human experience on earth, with focus on our growing and changing spiritual consciousness.

Everything in Revelation between the first heaven and the final heaven tells the story of how religion has changed, is changing, and will change from a Bronze Age fear-based religion of fearing a remote and fearsome God to a future age love-based religion of loving God (who *is* love), other people, God's creation, and ourselves. In the Revelation story, you will see that there are literally dozens of transitional elements that show the change

from the religion of the first heaven to the religion of the second one. Let's look at just two of those transitional elements now.

I've already mentioned the sea of glass that separates God from people in the first heaven and the fact that in the second heaven there is no sea of glass and God lives among His people and they see His face. With these two scenes, John dramatizes Paul's statement, "Now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Now we see God darkly and imperfectly, looking through or across the sea of glass which separates us from Him, but when we see His face in New Jerusalem, we will see Him face to face. (In the Greek texts, the words of Paul and John that are translated in English as "glass" are two different Greek words. John makes many Biblical allusions, but he almost never uses the exact words of scripture. Rather, he uses paraphrases and similar words. In this case, it is only a fluke of English translation that makes it so easy to see this paraphrased allusion to "glass.")

In the middle of the story between the two heavens, there is a very short and very odd scene (15:2–4) in which people who are victorious over the beast (one of numerous antichrist figures in Revelation) have harps of God and are standing on a sea of glass that is mingled with fire. This scene is so short, so odd, and so mysterious that most commentators on Revelation either ignore it completely or focus their attention only on the songs of praise that these people sing.

However, this short and simple scene is wonderfully rich with meaning. First, it is a transitional scene—these people are crossing the sea of glass that separates God from people in the first heaven. These are the people who want so much to be with God that they cross that sea of glass to get to Him, even going through fire to get to Him. We will see many examples of how people get closer to God and also how God gets closer to people as the story moves along from the separation of the first heaven to the closeness of New Jerusalem. (In fact, God is and always was close. It is in our perceptions, understanding, and beliefs as they change through time that He seems to get closer.)

Second, this scene raises an important question: Why are these people who are victorious over antichrist standing in the midst of fire? Isn't fire supposed to be for punishment of the damned in Revelation? It's too early in our study to answer that question now, but it seems to suggest that fire might not always mean what you probably thought it meant in Revelation. If the people who are victorious over antichrist are getting the fire

treatment, then it seems that fire isn't only punishment for the damned. What else could it mean? We will find out.

Third, although the endpoints of this little drama demonstrate that John agrees with Paul's point about not seeing clearly now but eventually seeing God face to face, this transitional image of people moving progressively across the sea of glass toward God shows that John doesn't agree with Paul that our transformation will happen suddenly and solely by God's action. Paul says, "we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Corinthians 15:51–52). However, John shows that he sees our transformation as an ongoing process which requires our active participation. We will learn much more about it as the Revelation story progresses. We will see that John agrees with Paul on many things, but he disagrees on a few things, sometimes rather adamantly.

At this point in our understanding, this strange transitional episode with fire and the sea of glass would make sense anywhere in the story between the first heaven and New Jerusalem. However, when we look at that episode in more detail later, after we've developed more of the context of the story, you will see that it is exactly where it should be in the story and that that place in the story is the only place that makes sense. Even the songs of praise that they sing match perfectly with the theology of that part of the story. John's story is meticulously organized.

Let's look at another simpler example of transition between the first heaven and New Jerusalem. In the first heaven, thunder, lightning, and voices come out of God's throne. In New Jerusalem, the river of the water of life comes out of God's throne. In a brief scene in the midst of the story (14:2), John hears a "voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder." This brief statement shows another transition between the scary first heaven of thunder and lightning and the loving final heaven of the water of life. At 14:2's intermediate point in the story, the voices and the thunder from God's throne in the first heaven are still there, but the lightning has been replaced by many waters, which are the river of the water of life in New Jerusalem. At this midway point in the story, John is hearing a mixture of sounds from the first heaven and sounds from New Jerusalem. There are several additional incidents and cryptic complications in this series of transitions, which we will examine more closely as we proceed.

The whole grand theme of the Revelation story is the change from the fear-based, Bronze Age religion of the first heaven to the love-based, future

age religion of New Jerusalem, the fulfillment of Jesus's teachings of love.

Along our way to finding that story, here are some of the other mysteries, puzzles, and riddles of Revelation about which you will learn in the rest of this book:

- How John addresses the big questions of spiritual life, rather than laying out a timetable for doomsday. In fact, there is no doomsday in Revelation, as you may have already guessed because of the re-interpretation of the idea of Armageddon.
- Why the martyrs “slain for the word of God” do such a seemingly un-Christian thing as crying out for revenge (6:9–10).
- Why every generation thinks that their generation is the one when everything in Revelation will be fulfilled.
- How marvelous and brilliant some of John's symbols are. For example, his description of the beast from the sea reads like a page of gibberish and nonsense, but after you know the meaning, the gibberish transforms into smoothly flowing and sensible prose.
- How clever some of John's paraphrases of Biblical and other sources are, so that people don't even notice some of them. Although it is well-known that Revelation contains many allusions to other parts of scripture, you will learn about even more Biblical allusions than are generally recognized. The most cleverly disguised paraphrases sometimes reveal the deepest meanings. As I already mentioned, there are even places where John quite appropriately mimics the literary style and structure of other parts of scripture, but no one notices.
- How John makes several very important Biblical allusions that are subdivided across several parts of his story and are not usually noticed. The subtle reference to Paul's statement about seeing in a glass darkly and then seeing face-to-face is one example.
- How John knew that the second coming of Christ was not soon going to interrupt the flow of history, in contrast to nearly all other early Christians who believed that the second coming would be “any day now.” Of course, this point requires learning how we can tell that John knew that, since he doesn't say it plainly and directly.
- The meanings and identities of all six antichrist figures. Yes, that's right—six. Although the word antichrist doesn't even appear in

Revelation, there are six different characters that are antichrist-like: Satan himself, the dragon, the beast from the sea, the beast from the land, Babylon, and the false prophet. Whenever anyone tells you that they know who *the* antichrist is, you should probably ask which antichrist they mean.

- Why John sometimes tells the same story multiple times. It isn't just to confuse you and make the meaning hard to figure out. You will see that when John tells the same story again, he tells it in a different way, from a different point of view, and each re-telling is perfectly appropriate for its place within the larger story of the transition from the first heaven to New Jerusalem.
- The influence of Greek culture on Revelation and how John tailors parts of his message for his Greek audience. John wrote Revelation in the Greek language. Patmos and the seven cities of Asia, to which Revelation addresses seven messages, were all in the Greek world, so it should be no surprise that Greek culture influences Revelation. Unlike some modern Christians who dismiss all non-Christians as primitive Satan-worshippers, John shows respect for Greek culture, pointing out where there are similarities between Christianity and the Greeks' beliefs and where there are differences. John even takes one important scene of Revelation directly from the Greek philosopher Plato, making small changes to Christianize the words and the story and to say to his Greek readers, "Here is how my Christian God is better than the Greek gods." Although John shows respect for Plato, he also disagrees with him on various issues, just as he agrees with Paul on some issues and disagrees on others.

In the next chapter, we'll look at how John raises several serious and important questions about religion and spirituality, questions to which he will give more and more mature and advanced answers as the story moves along from the first heaven to New Jerusalem.