Seeing With New Eyes

Our Shared Journey into Revelation

Setting the Scene: Our Starting Point

This booklet is a reflection of our study group's shared journey into the Book of Revelation. Our discussions began in a spirit of fellowship, framed by prayer, as we embarked on a collective spiritual endeavor. Together, we traced the conversation's path as it moved through the complex world of apocalyptic literature, shifting dynamically between understanding its original historical context and exploring its deeply personal meaning for our lives today.

Our facilitator shared a personal goal: to help us see the book with new eyes. He explained how his own perspective had evolved over time, saying, "As a kid, I grew up with a very... futuristic [view]... it's helped me to see it with different eyes and in part through the eyes of the original reader." This personal story helped ground the text in its historical soil, giving us the shared task of imagining "how an original reader may have read some of these symbols." This reflection captures the key themes we built together, from decoding ancient symbols like "Babylon" to finding modern parallels to Roman imperial power, as we worked to discover the text's enduring relevance for our faith and life.

Hearing the Message as They Did

Strategically, we began our exploration by putting on a historical lens. This was a crucial first step that moved our conversation away from abstract theology toward the real world of the first-century reader. We aimed to understand the text not as a detached document, but as a powerful piece of communication received in a specific and often dangerous social context.

A key insight emerged when one of us pointed out that this book was meant to be publicly *heard*, not privately *read*. For communities with low literacy, this "performed delivery"—which we likened to a "musical performance" or even "theater"—was a moment of shared discovery. "And that's very very different... that's a totally different point of view, I think," one person remarked. This meant the book's impact was designed to be immediate, visceral, and communal, relying on shared symbols and powerful images. Our facilitator reinforced this by defining our task as an exercise in historical empathy: to understand how an "original reader may have read some of these symbols." This set the stage for our first deep dive into a specific and powerful symbol: Babylon.

Decoding "Babylon" as a Portrait of Empire

Our first major interpretive exercise centered on the symbol of "Babylon the Great." This analysis was pivotal, serving as our primary anchor for connecting the ancient text's apocalyptic imagery to the political reality of the Roman Empire. By decoding this symbol, we began to build a bridge between the text's world and our own.

Our interpretation of "Babylon" was multi-layered. We immediately identified it as a place of "exile and persecution," tapping into a deep historical trauma within the Jewish tradition. We also characterized Babylon as a "place of excess," highlighting the stark division between the "haves and the have nots." We then explicitly linked this historical archetype to the Roman Empire, noting both parallels and a key distinction: while both were oppressive empires, under Babylon the Jewish people were in forced exile, whereas under Rome they were occupied *within their own land*.

One participant deepened the discussion by introducing the Babylonian creation myth of Marduk slaying the chaos-dragon Tiamat. Pausing to define "myth" as "a kind of archetypal story that embodies... the spirit of a place," he argued that the violent imagery—a city founded on a "carcass"—pointed to an "essential violence" at the very foundation of the Babylonian (and, by extension, Roman) worldview. Having established this robust connection between Babylon and Rome, our group was ready to pivot from ancient history to our own time.

Finding "Babylon" in Our World Today

The conversation took its first major turn toward modern application when the facilitator asked if we could "identify a modern-day archetype of Babylon." The response was immediate and unanimous, with several people affirming, "Are we not living in it?" We went on to identify several manifestations of a modern "Babylon":

- **Political Systems:** One person named "Washington DC," connecting it to a perceived erosion of "civil rights."
- **Socio-Economic Structures:** The theme of the divide between the "haves and the have nots" was cited as a primary characteristic of our modern context.
- **Global Scope:** Our critique wasn't limited to one country. We expanded it to include oligarchies and wealth disparities worldwide, framing the "Babylonian" system as a global phenomenon.

When asked, "what can we do?", our group proposed actionable Christian responses: the ethical imperatives to "stand up for justice" and "practice kindness," the cognitive call to "be aware," and the spiritual discipline of avoiding being "heart blind" to suffering. This surfaced a healthy tension between separating from the world and working to transform it, a tension we navigated by remembering our call for God's kingdom "on earth."

The Pressure to Bow: Faith in a Demanding World

To ground our critique, we shifted back from modern analogies to the tangible, daily pressures faced by early Christians. We looked at how Revelation describes "seven mountains on which the woman is seated," which we quickly identified as a direct and unmistakable reference to Rome, the "city on seven hills." This coded language both grounded the vision in a real place and, as one person noted, provided for the "safety of the reader" in a context where "spies in the room" could be present.

We then turned to the Imperial Cult, which we saw as the direct reference for the "worship of the beast." Our facilitator explained that this involved the "mandated worship of the emperor." A key historical point was raised about Roman "guilds," which were essential for trade. To participate in guild meetings, one had to engage in idolatry. For an early Christian, refusing meant not just social isolation but the potential loss of one's entire livelihood. This helped us understand that the declaration "Jesus is Lord" was not just a statement of personal piety. In a world that mandated worship of Caesar as Lord, this simple phrase was a deeply political and subversive act—a "direct affront to the imperial cult" for which many Christians lost their lives.

Navigating Today's "Imperial Cults"

In our second major modern application, we drew direct analogies between the pressures of the Roman Imperial Cult and the social, political, and professional challenges we face today. This part of the conversation resonated deeply with our own experiences.

We built several pointed parallels, noting the perceived prohibition against criticizing leadership, which prompted one person's wry observation, "Sounds familiar." We discussed the professional danger of expressing dissenting views, where refusing to conform can result in being "toast." This led to the insight that we, too, often find it necessary to "code" our language for self-preservation. This created a powerful synthesis: we recognized our own strategy for self-preservation as a direct parallel to the apocalyptic genre of Revelation itself, which used coded language for the safety of its persecuted audience.

We then turned this lens inward, asking, "What do you do right here at our church?" when navigating opposing political views. Our facilitator affirmed his role in creating a "safe place" for dialogue and proposed a method for these challenges: grounding conversations in shared scriptural values like "caring for the poor" and maintaining our primary "allegiance to Christ and not to a government or to an ideology."

Our Path Forward: What We Learned & Where We're Going

This discussion shows how dynamic and sophisticated our engagement with a difficult biblical text can be. As a group, we successfully navigated Revelation's complex imagery by moving fluidly between historical analysis and personal, contemporary application. This approach allowed the ancient text to speak with relevance and power into our modern lives without being disconnected from its original setting.

The central tension that animated our conversation was the pull between two fundamental questions: "what did it mean to the seven churches then" versus "what does it mean to us today." Instead of treating these as a conflict, we held them in a dynamic balance. The historical inquiry gave substance to our modern application, while the search for contemporary meaning provided the urgency for the historical work. This interplay enriched our discussion, allowing for a more holistic and integrated interpretation.

We concluded by charting a clear future direction. Our next step will be to begin a focused study of the letters to the seven churches. This plan reflects our shared commitment to continue grounding our understanding of Revelation in the specific, concrete circumstances of its original audience, ensuring that our quest for modern relevance remains firmly rooted in the biblical text.