

Ministry of Grace

The Book of Revelation

Introductory Notes

Few books in the Bible garner as much attention and speculation as Revelation. Of all the New Testament books it is the most enigmatic and seemingly obscure. No book contains as much symbolism, imagery, and mystery, and at the same time no book has as many interpretations as the New Testament book of Revelation. Before we get started, though, we need to take a look at the various ways of interpreting this book. There are basically four schools of thought regarding the interpretation of Revelation. They are:

- The Idealist View
- The Historicist View
- The Preterist View
- The Futurist View

Here is a brief description of each of these views.

Idealist View (or Spiritual View)

This view uses the allegorical method to interpret the Book of Revelation. All other books of the New Testament are to be interpreted literally, but Revelation is to be interpreted allegorically. According to Idealists, the events of Revelation are not tied to specific historical events. The imagery of the book symbolically presents the ongoing struggle throughout the ages of God against Satan and good against evil. In this struggle, the saints are persecuted and martyred by the forces of evil but will one day receive their vindication. In the end, God is victorious, and His sovereignty is displayed throughout the ages.

This view is the position taken by the Roman Catholic Church and some “mainline” protestant denominations. It was first developed by Origin (an early Christian Theologian) around the beginning of the 3rd century and made prominent by Augustine around the beginning of the 5th century. It is an Amillennial view, meaning that Idealists don’t believe in a literal 1000 year reign of Christ. Rather, they understand the 100 years as representing a very long time.

Since the visions of Revelation aren’t to be understood as real historical events, either past or future, the idealist interpretations of these visions vary from interpreter to interpreter. This has led to the problem of idealist commentators not having any agreement among themselves on the visions. It has also led to each of their individual interpretations and idealism itself losing credibility.

Historicist View

This view was the predominant position of the Reformers in the 16th and 17th centuries, but has almost entirely died out over the past 100 years. Historicism teaches that Revelation is a symbolic representation of the course of history from the Apostle John’s life through the end of the age. According to this viewpoint, the symbols in the apocalypse correspond to events in the history of Western Europe including various popes, the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, and rulers such as Charlemagne and Mussolini. Most interpreters place the events of their day in the later chapters of Revelation. The biggest problem with this method of

interpreting Revelation is that, like the Idealist View, it leads to endless speculation and subjectivity in its interpretation.

Many adherents of this position view chapters 2 & 3 as seven periods in church history. The breaking of the seals in chapters 4-7 symbolizes the fall of the Roman Empire. The Trumpet judgments in chapters 8-10 represent the invasions of the Roman Empire by the Vandals, Huns, Saracens, and Turks. Among Protestant historicists of the Reformation, the antichrist in Revelation was believed to be the office of the Pope. Chapters 11-13 in Revelation represent the true church in its struggle against Roman Catholicism. The bowl judgments of Revelation 14-16 represent God's judgment on the Catholic Church, culminating in the future overthrow of Catholicism depicted in chapters 17-19.

Preterist View

The name for this view is derived from the Latin word *preter*, meaning "past." This view began in the late 16th or early 17th century and continues on today in many liberal churches. Those who hold the Preterist view believe that everything in the Book of Revelation is already past; it's already been fulfilled. This may have been prophecy when it was written but it's all behind us now. The preterist interpretation of Scripture regards the book of Revelation as a symbolic picture of early church conflicts, not a description of what will occur in the end times. Preterism denies the future prophetic quality of most of the book of Revelation.

Adherents to the Preterist View believe that Israel has been replaced by the church as the "spiritual" children of Abraham and that this book is talking about the battles between Christians and the forces of evil. Preterism is postmillennial, meaning they don't believe in a literal 1000 year reign of Christ. For them, the millennium is just a way of saying a long period of time in which the church becomes increasingly influential and will eventually overcome all other religions and institutions on the earth. Once the world has been Christianized, Jesus will come again to reward his church. Some Preterist interpreters believe that we are now living in the eternal state, the new heavens and the new earth.

The Preterist view is similar to the Historical View but differs in one specific point; it sees most of Revelation as being fulfilled in a very short period of time. The preterist viewpoint essentially believes that all the end-times prophecies of the New Testament were fulfilled and came to a climax in AD 70 when the Romans attacked and destroyed Jerusalem and Israel.

If the Preterist view is correct that the book of Revelation was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem, then this book would have been written by John before AD 70. However, we are told that John received his vision while on the island of Patmos where he had been exiled by the Roman Emperor Domitian. That didn't happen until about AD 90-95, twenty or so years after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans.

Futurist View (or literal view)

This is the view that we adhere to in this study of Revelation. It regards the Book of Revelation as being a prophecy of events regarding the End Times, and that most of the book has yet to be fulfilled. Adherents to this view understand the Millennial reign of Christ (Chapter 20) as literal and that the Second Coming of Christ occurs before the 1000 year reign. This is referred to as the "Premillennial" position. Futurists divide the book of Revelation into three sections as indicated in **Revelation 1:19**:

- the things you have seen
- those that are
- those that are to take place after this.

Chapter 1 describes the past from John's point of view ("the things you have seen"), chapters 2 and 3 describe the present time for John ("those that are"), and the rest of the book describes future events from John's viewpoint ("those that are to take place after this").

Futurists apply a literal approach to interpreting Revelation. Chapters 4-19 refer to a period known as the seven-year tribulation (also known as Daniel's 70th week). During this time, God's judgments are executed upon mankind as they are revealed in the seals, trumpets, and bowls. Chapter 13 describes a literal future world empire headed by a political and religious leader represented by the two beasts. Chapter 17 pictures a harlot who represents the church in apostasy. Chapter 19 refers to Christ's second coming and the battle of Armageddon followed by a literal thousand-year rule of Christ upon the earth written about in chapter 20. Chapters 21-22 are events that follow the millennium: the creation of a new heaven and a new earth and the arrival of the heavenly city, Jerusalem, to the earth.

Futurists argue that a consistently literal or plain interpretation is to be applied in understanding the book of Revelation. Literal interpretation of the Bible means to explain the original sense, or meaning, of the Bible according to the normal customary usage of its language. This is done by applying the normal rules of grammar and by staying consistent with the historical framework and context of the writing. A literal interpretation does not discount figurative or symbolic language. Futurists teach that prophecies using symbolic language are also to be normally interpreted according to the laws of language. When figurative language is used, one must look at the context to find the meaning, however; figurative language does not justify wild, allegorical interpretation.

Three things to take note of as we study the book of The Revelation:

- **Expect the unusual and unexpected.** This book, unlike the prophetic books of the Old Testament, is almost entirely prophetic. It contains symbols and descriptions of things unlike anything we encounter in our everyday lives. Many believe that it was written in this manner so that it would be completely unintelligible to unbelievers, while at the same time communicating future events to those with "spiritual understanding." As you read and study the book of Revelation, if you come across things that you don't understand, "Welcome to the club! You are in good company."
- **Try to restrain your imagination.** Some symbols are explained (e.g. John's vision of the Lord standing in the midst of seven golden lampstands), while others are not (e.g. the four horsemen of the apocalypse). Note especially the use of the words *like* and *as*. There is nothing wrong with trying to identify the meaning of the unexplained symbols. I will discuss what I believe these things represent. I will try to identify them as my opinion based on good scholarship. I recognize that my opinion is no more inspired than anyone else's. But, keep in mind that we don't really know what they represent for certain. If we are to err, let it be on the side of interpretive restraint, rather than on the side of interpretive excess.
- **Ask three questions:**
 - What does it say? Do not try to make it say more, or less, than what it actually says. As we do, let's focus on what it says in the context of the day it was written.
 - What does it mean? Understand that this is a question of interpretation. Ideally, we want to ask what it meant to the people in the day that it was written.
 - What does it mean to me? This is a question of application. Let the Holy Spirit apply this to our lives today and to our understanding of, and relationship to, God.

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