

Interpreting The Revelation

Four Major Schools

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The Revelation of Jesus Christ (or from the Greek, the “Apocalypse”) carries with it a long history of serious scholarship and critical thinking of those who have sought to understand its meaning and significance. Penned by the Apostle John, it was written in the traditional form of early Christian letters, but it stands alone as the only prophetic revelation in the New Testament, signed by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.<sup>1</sup> In the first chapter, the author lays out for the reader the intent, outline and expected result for this divine communication from God. This revelation was given to him “to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place,”<sup>2</sup> with a promised blessing to “those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it,”<sup>3</sup> and a three-fold division of the themes about which he was instructed to write.<sup>4</sup> If only all of God’s inspired writings came with such clear details as to how to read, interpret and apply the teaching contained within!

Even though the reader is given specific instruction on handling The Revelation, this precious letter has been subjected to countless interpretations and applications through the ages and continues to be at the center of some of the most heated debates in theological and religious thinking. All of these various schools of thought can be grouped into two major categories and then subdivided into four main perspectives. In regards to *how* to interpret The Revelation, the two camps are allegorical and literal. For those who believe that the writings are to be taken literally, the main question becomes “to *when* do these prophecies refer?” The reader’s answer to that question further categorizes perspectives into near, near-far, and far views. Adherents to an allegorical interpretation would *de facto* hold to an atemporal perspective. Bible scholars have assigned various labels to these schools of interpretation over the years but for the sake of

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 1:1, 2 & 5

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 1:1

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 1:3

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 1:19

clarity and consistency this student will use the terms Idealist (also known as Spiritualist), Preterist (or Praeterist), Historicist (also known as Continuist), and Futurist (also known as Dispensationalist). The following chart summarizes these groups as to the *how* and the *when* of interpreting The Revelation:

	Idealist	Preterist	Historicist	Futurist
How to interpret prophecies:	Allegorical	Literal	Literal	Literal
When prophecies referred to:	Atemporal	Near	Near – Far	Far
When prophecies fulfilled:	No time	Past	Present	Future

It is not realistic to assume that these simple categories encompass all of the various combinations and permutations of beliefs. There are numerous factions within each major school as well as major distinctives regarding the nature and timing of Christ's return and His reign during the Millennial Kingdom. These cannot be neatly sorted into the four groups, but they follow essentially the same pattern of being divided by the questions of *how* and *when*. While some groups hold to a literal and bodily return of Christ to reign over an earthly and physical kingdom at some point in the future, others would interpret either the return or the reign (or both) as merely a spiritual reality. Similarly, while many believe in the imminence of the second coming of Christ and the ushering in of His Kingdom, others believe that we are currently living in the Millennium or even that Christ has already returned.

The three major views with regard to the interpretation of Revelation 20 are amillennialism, postmillennialism and premillennialism. While the former two view no distinction between the rapture and the second coming, nor between Israel and the church, the latter holds that the second coming of Christ signals the end of His dealing with the church, the resuming of his program for Israel, and the ushering in of His millennial kingdom. Even among

this group there are differences in belief regarding the sequence of the tribulation, some adhering to a pre-tribulation “catching up” of the church to escape the outpouring of God’s wrath on the earth during the end times and others believing in a simultaneous rapture and return following the prophesied tribulation. The scope of this paper does not allow for a full critique of these views, but this student believes that a consistent normal, literal, contextual, grammatical hermeneutic leads the reader naturally to a premillennial, pretribulational rapture of the church.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the Idealist view, which takes an allegorical approach, is the ease with which students can approach the text. Spiritualizing the entire book removes the arduous task of sifting through the narrative, studying the context and history and discovering the nuances of word meanings and symbolism. It removes the responsibility to apply a consistent Biblical hermeneutic and opens the door to an attack on the credibility and validity of the whole Bible. Since this perspective reduces all of the elements of the prophecy to a mere spiritual understanding, there is no standard to how to interpret or apply and each reader is left to make up their own mind about the meaning of the text. If the words carry no weight and the interpretation is entirely subjective, the ability of Scripture to divide and judge is lost completely. As Benware notes, “when the literal interpretation of prophecy is abandoned, there is a lessened accountability to the text itself.”<sup>5</sup> The allegorical method is seductive because it appeals to the pride – it leads you to think that you truly understand the real, secret meaning that other people “just don’t get.” While extremely popular among those who eschew the absolute authority of Scripture, this view is unacceptable to the serious student of God’s Word.

Depending on precisely when they affix the dating of Revelation and to whom they ascribe the authorship, Preterists can fall into two major subdivisions. If they accept a less traditional date before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, then they can also

accept the writing as being *predictive* of the events that would happen in the later part of the first century and the immediate period following. However, if they accept the more traditional date around the turn of the first century, then they must accept the writings as being *descriptive* of the events of the early church period. In either case, Preterism views the majority of the narrative as having taken place in the past. The strength of this position is that it synchronizes well with some of the prophecies of Daniel and Jesus, and does not have to account for the missing element of the church age. The weakness, however, lies in the fact that The Revelation describes events for which there is *no* corresponding historical occurrence. It also does not hold to a strictly literal interpretation, as some prophetic elements such as the return of Christ and His thousand-year reign must either be spiritualized or left unfulfilled. According to Walvoord, the Preterist view “tends to destroy any future significance of the book, which becomes a literary curiosity with little prophetic meaning.”<sup>6</sup> For this reader, the ultimate disappointment in the perspective lies in the fact that if all the prophecies in Revelation have already been fulfilled, then our present reality is all the best that we can hope for. Anyone waiting in eager anticipation for a time when Christ will triumphantly conquer sin, sickness and suffering must reject this method of interpretation.

The Historicist approach to interpreting the Revelation solves some of these issues by viewing only a portion of the prophecies as having been fulfilled. By viewing the writing as a symbolic overview of church history, they remove the stumbling blocks of unfulfilled prophecy and lack of relevance to the current state, both of which are death knells to the authenticity and effectiveness of the Word of God. However, in doing so, the majority of adherents have tended toward interpreting the narrative as reaching its prophetic peak during their own generation,

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<sup>5</sup> Benware, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Walvoord, p. 18.

leaving the book open to an infinite number of interpretations. Clearly, if more than one of these proves to be correct, the reader is then relegated back to the allegorical camp where Scripture ultimately means only what it means *to them*. For this reason, the Historicist method of interpretation becomes untenable.

The only method of interpretation that allows for a consistent normal, literal, contextual, grammatical hermeneutic is the Futurist approach. This method holds closely to the “Golden Rule of Interpretation,” which basically asserts that whenever possible one should take every statement in Scripture at face value.<sup>7</sup> While not undermining or ignoring the significance of literary tools such as symbolism and word play, the Futurist perspective places the utmost value on the words of the prophecy, assuming that when God inspired John to “write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things,”<sup>8</sup> He did so for a purpose. This view upholds that the Revelation is truly an unveiling of the person and work of Jesus Christ as He will be literally manifested in the final days. A Futurist interpretation carries with it a great hope for those who are awaiting His coming and a great warning for those anticipating His judgment.

Each of the primary four views on interpreting Revelation has its strengths and weaknesses with regard to Biblical sustainability, logical feasibility and popular likeability.

However, in the end, the reader is compelled to heed the words of the Apostle Peter:

“So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Pentecost, p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Revelation 1:19

<sup>9</sup> II Peter 1:19-22

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(All Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977 by Lockman Foundation.)

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