

IN DEPTH: THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST TO JOHN / SESSION ONE

The Four Traditional Views

Revelation: A Covenantal View

Four basic views of the Revelation have each dominated the discussion of the book at one or more periods of Christian history. Each of these views has been held by persons with a high view of Scripture, by people who claim Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. Each has been convinced in their time that they held to the best possible view of this difficult book. Adherents to these four views today feel strongly that they have it right. It is impossible for all four views to be correct in their details. It is possible, even probable that all four views have pieces of the “best” view. We will seek to find that best view together, based on the important covenant theme that speaks with prophetic power throughout the Scriptures. This adventurous attempt must be entered into with humility and grace. At times I will state my views forcefully and unequivocally throughout this material. This is so because I am sure as I can be that I am on the right track. It is, however, done in the knowledge that all work such as this is *not* the truth. It is rather that which seeks “with eager, yet faltering footsteps” to find out about the Truth who has found and loved me.

Where to Start: The Four Main Views — Because of its complex imagery and symbolism, the Revelation of St. John is the most difficult New Testament book to interpret. Arguably, no book of the Bible has been the subject of more conjecture and speculation than John’s Revelation. Over the centuries every manner of wild and fantastic theory has been advanced. Otherwise cautious and sober scholars have come to this last book of the Bible and have thrown all caution to the winds of speculation. When one gazes at the panorama of opinion one could easily assume that all is chaos. It is not. Among those who hold to the integrity of the message of the Bible, there have been four basic views of the Revelation that have been held over the centuries. Each of these views has dominated some segment of the church in whole or in part for large periods of its history. In order to examine the Revelation, there are valuable lessons to be learned from a brief review of this history of interpretation.

The Four Basic Approaches

1) Historicism

The historicist view approaches Revelation as an allegorical panorama of the history of the church from the first century, AD, to a future, physical return of Jesus to the earth. This view usually begins with a discussion of the Roman Empire's persecution of the Christian church, circa., AD 95. Most historicists view the millennium as the period of the church age, the new covenant. Historicism has been in evidence since very early in the church. It became unpopular after the fourth century, but experienced a revival during and after the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Martin Luther and most of the leaders of the Reformation held a historicist approach. This view is not widely held today, though many European evangelicals, especially in the United Kingdom, hold this view. Sir Isaac Newton was a historicist. A key insight of this view is that the Bishop of Rome, the Roman Catholic Pope, is the harlot of Babylon (Ch. 17 & 18), and thus the anti-christ. This view still fuels anti-Catholic views of many in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

Historicists seek to see the symbolic language of the Revelation as pertaining to specific, chronological events, covering the whole epic of the church era. Reading the Revelation as an historicist, a person has a sense of the immediate relevance of everything in the text: this is historicism's great strength. God has been at work, God is at work now and God will be at work in actual human history in the future. Every image of the book is about something that God has sovereignly designed or controlled. God either intervened directly or God allowed each event to happen for his sovereign purpose and for the ultimate sake of his people and Bride, the Body of Christ.

The relating of the visions to events in history is also a weakness for historicism for the obvious reason that eventually one generation's relevant history is another generation's forgotten detail. Eventually, every historical interpretation of the book outlives its times. Martin Luther lived shortly after the end of the Byzantine Empire. The Turks, who had been eating away at Byzantine territory for centuries, had finally overwhelmed Constantinople in 1453. The Turks didn't stop there. They began to systematically conquer Europe, beginning in the Balkans. In Luther's day, there were many who believed it was just a matter of time before the Turks conquered all of Europe.

Luther believed this and it is reflected in his historicist/futurist commentary of the Revelation. However, no one today believes that the people of Turkey are soon to engage in a program of world conquest. Historicist commentaries eventually become more valuable for understanding the thoughts and attitudes of people who lived in a given century than they are for revealing many insights into the Revelation. Historicist commentaries have always eventually become obsolete as a guide to the text because, in each generation, the historical expositors have seen the events of *their own time* as central to the unfolding visions of the book, hence, there has been little consistency within this view beyond their starting point with the Roman persecution. And since history continues to develop, each historical exposition has faded into quaint obscurity as the signal events of the expositor's time fade into the past. Again, for the historicist, Martin Luther, the locust-lion-demon army of chapter 9 was identified with the Turks who were invading Europe during his lifetime. No historicist today would imagine the long-collapsed Ottoman Empire as the fulfillment of that vision.

2) Preterism

The preterist view (the Latin word *preter* means "before" or "past") seeks to understand the book in relation to events in the first century, AD, shortly after the time of its writing. Some preterists view the book (as do historicists and most futurists) as having been written in AD 94-5 and as addressing Roman persecution. Most preterists,

however, understand the Revelation as predicting God's solution to the struggle between the Jews of the Roman Empire and the fledgling Christian church. This view understands the book as a proclamation of the end of God's covenant with Israel, culminating in the Jewish War, AD 66-70. Preterists disagree as to how much, if any of the book, concerns the history of the church and/or the future. Although Preterism has had adherents since the early centuries, it was first systematically put forth in the 16th century by a Catholic Jesuit scholar. The view became pre-eminent in the 19th century in continental Europe and in the United Kingdom. It was advanced by evangelicals who were not only looking hard at the literal text of Scripture but who wished to defend against the charge by the (then) new negative critical scholarship that Jesus had predicted his return in his own generation but failed to materialize. Although preterism is not widely held today there has been a resurgence of this view as dissatisfaction with other views has grown in recent decades.

The strength of the preterist position is its recognition of the frequent declarations in the writings of the New Testament (more than twenty, by ten different writers) that the *parousia* or appearing of Jesus, was soon to occur. Preterists take these many statements both seriously and literally. This view is also strong because of its extensive reliance on Old Testament Scripture and because of its relevance to the people to whom it would have been addressed.

Its weakness, like the other side of a coin, is in the tendency of preterists to limit the scope of John's visions to the period of the writing (7th decade, 1st century, AD). This limitation holds that the "coming (or revealing) of Jesus Christ" in the Revelation only concerns the events of that time, in spite of many indications, both in the text of Scripture and in the pattern of redemptive history, that Jesus has yet to return. Why do preterists not see that Jesus can have "come in power" and judgment against the law-breakers of the last generation of the old covenant and still "come again" in the flesh at the end of this present age? Because they read prophecy as though it were narrative, which means that each prophecy can only be fulfilled once. So, for example, from a full preterist viewpoint, the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21), which Jesus directed (say preterists, to their credit) at the time of the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem (AD 66-70), could not, say the full preterists, also be heard by every generation of the church since, as pertaining to Christ's return in the flesh. Yet it has been read as such, and appropriately so by centuries of Christians. Indeed, a needless tug-of-war exists between futurists who can only see the Olivet Discourse as a prophecy of the yet future second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, and preterists who only see it in its original context as information and instructions about what Jewish Christians in the land were to do when Jesus came into power in heaven and destroyed apostate Jerusalem and its corrupt temple. Yet if prophecy is allowed to be prophecy and not forced to be narrative, both can be true (see the discussion of prophecy in session 2). It was the stubborn insistence on the part of some 19th century preterists on this reading of the text that eventually caused their view to lose favor. The preterists were insisting that Jesus had already done all the coming back he was going to do. They made their point, but the world of Christian thinking turned its collective back on them.

3) Futurism

Everything after Chapter Three of the Revelation awaits fulfillment in the future, according to most adherents of this view. Some form of futurism was held by some early Christians, including, apparently, the church father Justin Martyr. Then, futurism virtually disappeared after the 4th century until the Middle Ages, when various sects, known as chiliasts, began to interpret the images of the Revelation as belonging to their immediate future, now our long past. Some Catholic theologians during the period of the Reformation (16th century) took up the futurist approach as an argument against Luther and other Protestant (historicist) reformers who viewed the Pope as the antichrist/harlot of Babylon. They said, in effect, 'No, no, the Pope cannot be the harlot; all that is future!'

Post-millennial Futurism — Modern futurism is very different from the 17th through early 19th century futurism known as post-millennialism (see below). Post-millennial futurists have seen the millennial reign of Christ as a culmination of the work of the church before the return of Christ, hence, *post*-millennialism (a thousand years, *before* Jesus comes back to earth). Most futurists today see the millennium as the reign of Christ in the flesh on the earth before a final battle with Satan and a final judgment, thus, *pre*-millennialism (a thousand years, *after* Jesus returns to earth). Post-millennial futurism gained a foothold in Europe during the 17th century in Protestant circles, replacing the more pessimistic historicism of the reformers. Isaac Watts, the famous hymn writer was a post-millennialist. Many early pastors and evangelists in the U.S., including Jonathan Edwards and Charles G. Finney, believed that they were laying the foundation for a thousand-year Christian nation in North America, after which Christ would return. The 19th Century notion of manifest (U.S.) destiny was a secularization of this viewpoint. When then presidential candidate Ronald Reagan made his frequent references to the U.S. as a “city set on a hill,” “a light to the rest of the nations,” he was borrowing biblical language from the American post-millennialists. When Adolph Hitler promised to “make Germany great for a thousand years,” he was borrowing from the German post-millennialists.

The strength of post-millennial futurism is the strong role it sees for the church in living out a transforming vision for dedicated service to God in all of life throughout the world. If the post-millennialists are right, Jesus won’t come back until the church actually takes the great commission seriously and disciples *nations* until all the world has acknowledged, at least nominally, the lordship of Jesus, the King. The weakness of post-millennialism is that its adherents easily fall into “cultural optimism” and forget that hard things cannot be done apart from prayer, fasting, and the Spirit of God and that anything worthwhile may require years of sacrifice with little or no discernible, visible progress; not a popular view today.

Pre-millennial futurism — This view was never widely held in the early centuries of the church. However, this form of futurism got a new lease on life in England during the early nineteenth century with the development of John Nelson Darby’s dispensational theology.¹ Although never more than a minority view in Europe, pre-millennial futurism swept into the U.S. through the prophecy conference movement in the middle 19th century and through the “helpful” textual comments of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, published in 1909. Pre-millennial futurism is easily the dominant view in North America today. In its dispensational form, it has taken residence in schools like Dallas Theological Seminary and in many less prestigious evangelical seminaries and Bible colleges. Many modern evangelicals, like evangelist Billy Graham and scholar, George Alan Ladd, are pre-millennial futurists without being dispensational in their view of Scripture. Others, like Chuck Swindoll, call themselves “new dispensationalists,” claiming to have so revised the earlier viewpoint as to have mitigated its more objectionable aspects.

According to the pre-millennial futurist view, the primary context and subject of the Revelation is the future second advent of Christ, who will physically return in power and glory as the judge of all who have rejected his offer of salvation over the centuries. These futurists attempt to discern the literal events behind the symbolism of the Revelation whenever this is possible in a given projected future context. Frequently, but not always, futurists look to the Old Testament, especially to Daniel and Ezekiel, to discern the meanings of difficult texts. This is a strength of the view, a habit which they share with the preterists.

¹ A distinctive insight of dispensationalism was that many promises to Israel in the Old Testament had not been fulfilled prior to the coming of the Christ. Darby and the dispensationalists argued the fulfillment of those promises had only been postponed and not denied; that these promises would be fulfilled after the end of the present age of the church. Thus Israel would inherit the land at the close of the church age in a millennial kingdom while the Christian church went to or stayed in heaven. A futurist interpretation of the Revelation fit well from the beginning with this view.

The strength of pre-millennial futurism is its insistence on an actual space-time relationship between the texts and a specific set of expected events, and on taking seriously and literally the role of the Jews and the centrality of Jerusalem in the Revelation. Neither symbolism (see comments below) nor historicism usually recognizes this vital connection. Pre-millennial futurism looks to the Old Testament for much more interpretive material than do the historicists, and this is to their credit. Most pre-millennial futurists also somehow insist that the Roman Empire plays a role in the book.

On the down side, just as the historicists are plagued with a continually changing present, futurists must deal with a continually changing future. Having skated around the insistent teaching of the New Testament writers that the “coming” of Jesus will be soon, during the generation of the disciples, futurists cast the prophecies adrift into a future that always begins with the futurist expositor’s own generation. However, time marches on. Time and again, futurists have seen their “futures” disappear into the past without the second coming of Jesus.

Most recent among these failed prophetic interpretations was that of dispensational futurist Hal Lindsey² (author of *The Late Great Planet Earth* and a nearly endless and repetitive series of sequels) who expected to see the return of Christ before the end of the generation that founded the modern state of Israel in 1948. Over fifty years later, of the founders of Israel only one or two remain alive and construction of “the third temple” (so vital to Lindsay’s prophetic timetable) is still no more than a dream in the wild eyes of a few radical Zionists and Christian fundamentalists. Lindsay, meanwhile, in a vain attempt to salvage his interpretation, has shifted from a forty-year to a one hundred-year definition of a generation! Regardless of the difficulties of this view, it dominates the conservative and evangelical wing of the church in the U.S. at this time.

4) Symbolism

Those who hold the symbolic (or mystical or spiritual) view maintain that the Revelation is not a forth-telling or proclaiming prophecy into any space-time situation, nor a foretelling, a prediction of any near or far events-to-happen, but rather a symbolic portrait of the cosmic conflict of spiritual principles, a kind of ancient *Pilgrim’s Progress*, describing the difficulties of the church and the victories of her Lord, in any and every age. In this view, the book should be understood exclusively in the realm of transcendent motifs, recurrent themes and divine principles which are likely to apply to any number of situations in any and every time. This view holds that the Revelation was never meant to describe a specific time or series of events, but to declare the pre-eminence of the Lord Jesus Christ over all times, situations and histories. Most symbolists hold that there is/will be no historical millennium, but that the thousand years is either a symbol for the final Day of Judgment or is symbolic of the power of God throughout all time.

The great fourth century western theologian, Augustine of Hippo, is often credited with the development of the symbolist view. Many expositors since the time of Augustine have held it. Symbolism became the dominant view in the western church from the 5th century until the Reformation (16th century), when Martin Luther and others revived historicism. It is the dominant view in mainline Protestant churches in the U.S. today. Many devout Christians in North America, in Europe and throughout the world today are symbolists.

This view has the advantage of no entanglements with the details of actual history, which leaves its proponents free to look carefully at the text in its historical and Biblical contexts. Symbolism helps us to understand the symbols themselves as symbols.

² Written from this perspective, the Lindsay books and the LaHaye/Jenkins’ “*Left Behind*” book series have continued to stimulate interest in a dispensational brand of futurism into the early days of this twenty-first century.

Symbolism's great strength is also its greatest weakness: the Revelation continually gives the impression of being "about a *something* at a *some time*." Rarely if ever in ancient literature is there an analogy, a metaphor, a simile, which is not directed to real, space-time meaning. Art for art's sake is a modern concept. The ancients tended to write fanciful stories that represented what they believed to be concrete realities. In the Bible, the only books which are devoted to "wise things in general" are Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and in a lyrical way, the *Song of Songs*. The Revelation is clearly apocalyptic *prophecy*, not apocalyptic *proverb*.

One would think that symbolist expositors would have the easiest job in unpacking the text of the Revelation. After all, they are not wedded to any historical setting as are historicists and preterists. They must be at least as free to use their own imaginations, as are the futurists, when explaining a text. Symbolism, however, has its own set of problems for the one who wants to interpret. For instance, a problem everyone encounters in reading the Revelation is with knowing whether a given scene or vision describes "*our side*" or "the *other side*." For example, are the four horsemen of Revelation 6 "good guys" or "bad guys?" If there is no original historical context that serves as an anchor, how does one know whether to cheer or boo when these "four winds" repeatedly come on the scene? Because it does not ground itself in any historical situation, symbolism has a hard time answering this sort of question. Like futurists, symbolists are somewhat more at the mercy of their own fantasies and personal preferences when looking at a text.

Moreover, again, a reading of the Revelation gives the strong sense that a specific situation was originally in the mind of the author that he intended to quite forcefully convey to his contemporary audience. The whole of the Revelation seems first of all to be a heavenly, symbolic look at an actual earthly situation. Knowing what that situation was, what scholars call the occasion which called forth the writing of the book, would make it much easier to hear what it might symbolically mean in the present as well as in the future.

Millennial Views — It seems that everyone with a view of the Revelation has a corresponding view of the passage in Chapter 20 which describes the reign of Christ in terms of a period of one thousand years. Post-millennialists, as futurists, believe that the spread of the gospel will lead, by the power of the Holy Spirit and through the agency of an obedient church, to a golden age of righteousness, justice and peace on earth, *followed* by the return of Christ. Many A-millennialists believe that Christ has been seated in authority and power ever since the events described in Revelation, chapter 5, that we therefore live in Christ's millennial reign right now. Most A-millennialists believe that the expansion and saving influence of the Church throughout history, empowered because of its heavenly position in the Lord Jesus Christ, is the true "millennium." Thus, the Kingdom of God is an earthly kingdom but without Christ present in the flesh. Pre-millennialists believe that the "thousand years" (20:2-7) are to be taken literally as the duration of an earthly kingdom that Christ will establish between Jesus' bodily return to earth and the creation of the New Heavens and New Earth. Generally speaking, proponents of the historicist view are *a-millennial*, while preterists are either *post-millennial* or *a-millennial*, and most futurists are *pre-millennial* or *post-millennial*. Symbolists are by definition *a-millennial*: no actual thousand years for the symbolists.

Examples of Different Treatments of Scripture by the Different Views³

Revelation 6: The Scroll with Seven Seals and the breaking of the first four seals.

Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, “Come!” I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.

When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, “Come!” And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword.

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, “Come!” I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts of barley for a day’s pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!”

When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, “Come!” I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth. — Revelation 6:1-8

	Historicist	Preterist	Futurist	Symbolist
Who are the horsemen?	Invading barbarian armies	Angels of God’s destruction, actualized as the Roman armies	The Anti-Christ, war, famine and death	Political upheavals at all times
What do they represent?	The beginning of the fall of the Roman Empire	The beginning of the final judgment of God against his former people	After the rapture of the church, the beginning of the great tribulation	An expression of God’s dealings with humankind in any age
When do they occur?	AD 96 and thereafter	AD 67-70	Some time in our future	No specific time, but at any time

³ These three examples are adapted from Gregg, Steve, ed., *Revelation, Four Views, A Parallel Commentary*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 1997. An easy to use primer on the Revelation. One can use it to thumb through the entire book, reading parallel statements on the text by dozens proponents of each of the four main views.

Revelation 7: The 144 Thousands

“Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads.”

And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel. — Revelation 7:3-4

	Historicist	Preterist	Futurist	Symbolist
Who are the 144 Thousands and what do they represent?	All the Christians in the time of the Roman Empire who survive the persecutions of the Romans (the great tribulation)	All those Jews in Palestine who have believed in Jesus and flee from the wrath of God which will come upon Jews who have rejected Jesus.	Converted, post-rapture Jews on the earth who will be protected from the plagues that are coming upon the rest of humankind.	Symbolic of the entire church or of the church as true and spiritual Israel (Gal. 6:16)
When do they occur?	Prior to the edict of toleration in AD 313	October, AD 66	Some time in the future	In all times

Revelation 12 & 13: The Beast from the Sea

Then the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore. And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear’s, and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. They worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?”

— Revelation 12:13-13:1

	Historicist	Preterist	Futurist	Symbolist
Who is the Beast from the Sea?	The Bishop of Rome (The Pope)	The Roman Empire under Nero and his successors	The Gentile nations, ruled by one who co-opts the U.N. and creates a world government in the near future	Any governmental system that opposes the kingdom of God
What is the meaning?	Satan is using the Pope to persecute true believers	Satan, having failed to destroy the fledgling church using the Jews, now summons Rome to help destroy the Bride of the Lamb	The one-world government will do everything it can to destroy the post-rapture Christians and believing Jews	Any and every time nations forget their place and imagine themselves as “little gods” the beast rises from the sea
When does it happen?	AD 533-1793	Nov. AD 64–June, AD 68	Soon!	At any time

The Traditional Views, In Summary

The four traditional views of the Revelation share many common elements, but they each hold many assumptions that are not held by the other views. For example, Historicists, Futurists generally assume that the text must be read as a narrative, that just as one vision follows another in the sequence of the book, so the events to which they refer follow chronologically in space and time. This assumption is based on a Greco-Roman view of story-telling. Symbolism and Preterism recognize the oriental roots of the text and in most cases do not expect the text to be a narrative at all. The problem of chronology is similar to the issue of “literal versus figurative” interpretation of the text. All views except pre-millennial futurism recognize that the imagery of the book must be understood figuratively. Only symbolism assumes there is no one original historical fulfillment of these visions. Historicism alone imagines that the visions refer to all the centuries of the church, in chronological order. Only the most extreme Preterism sees the book as having its fulfillment all in one decade. Here is the point: no matter how many insights the four basic views may share along the way, the critical decisions are made before the book is opened. This is true for everyone, for each viewpoint. The first step taken will determine all the rest if one commits oneself to one traditional view or another. It is my intention in my treatment of this text to hold no single traditional view too tightly, but to do my utmost to let what I see as the covenantal message come through the text. Adherents of all the traditional views have been overstating their respective cases long enough. Please come on this blessed adventure with me!