

Approaching the Book of Revelation
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As we start our new message series *Jesus Revelation*, I thought it might be helpful to explain how I approach the book of Revelation. As an evangelical pastor in the Reformed theological tradition, I read the whole Bible as God's unified plan to redeem creation and create a people for himself.¹ The book of Revelation is an important part of this unified plan. Revelation is a precious gift, promising a blessing to all who hear it and take its message to heart (Revelation 1:3).

But the book of Revelation can also be confusing! In it, we find images of dragons and beasts, fallen cities and flying locusts, stars falling from the sky and armies gathered for battle. Jesus is pictured as a Son of Man with wooly white hair (Revelation 1:12-18), a lion who is also a lamb (5:1-14), a child (12:1-11), a groom at a wedding (19:6-9), a temple (21:22-27), and a judge (22:12-13).

Some people avoid Revelation because they find these images frightening. Others avoid it because they find Revelation difficult to understand. The Sixteenth century Reformer John Calvin wrote commentaries on every book of the New Testament...except for Revelation.

However, other people can't seem to get enough of Revelation. This is especially true over the last 100 years here in the U.S. Today books about Revelation and end times are a multi-million-dollar industry.²

What is Revelation?

The book of Revelation is the last book of the Bible.

Who Wrote It?

The author of Revelation identifies himself as John (see 1:1), mostly likely the apostle who also wrote the Gospel of John and the three Letters of John in the New Testament. John wrote Revelation while he was in exile on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea (see 1:9).

¹See Willem VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption: From Creation to New Jerusalem* (Baker 1996). My approach contrasts with some who see the Bible as containing two different stories to create two distinct peoples, Israel and the Church.

²Ann Byn, "In Times of Tribulation, Prophecy Books Multiply," *Publishers Weekly* (8 June 2022).

When Was it Written?

Revelation was probably written in the late first century, perhaps around 95-96 A.D. when Domitian, the eleventh Caesar, was the emperor of Rome.³ Domitian initiated a policy of government sponsored persecution against churches and their leaders throughout the Roman Empire.⁴ This policy led to John's exile on Patmos. Revelation was written for Christians suffering under Roman persecution.

What Kind of Book is it?

Revelation has elements that are characteristic of letters (2:1) and prophecy (1:3; 22:7). However, first and foremost Revelation belongs to a writing style called "apocalyptic." In fact, the first word of Revelation is the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which is translated "the revelation" in English (1:1). (Incidentally, this book is titled Revelation, not the plural Revelations, as some mistakenly call it).

Although this apocalyptic writing style may seem strange to us today, it was very common among ancient Jewish people, especially during times of persecution. Ancient Jewish writings outside of the Bible such as *Enoch*, *The Assumption of Moses*, *IV Ezra*, and *The Apocalypse of Baruch* are examples of Jewish apocalyptic writing. Revelation belongs solidly to this style of writing.⁵ Common characteristics of apocalyptic writing include:

- Sharp dualism between the present age and the age to come.
- Unusual and shocking imagery.
- Visions of heavenly worship.
- Descriptions of cataclysmic events on earth.
- Promises of justice for God's suffering people.

How Should We Interpret Revelation?

Over the last 2,000 years, Christians have interpreted Revelation four primary ways.⁶

³Some Bible scholars argue for an earlier date for Revelation (before 70 A.D.). New Testament scholar G. K. Beale, says, "One can in fact affirm the early date or the late date without the main interpretative approach being affected" (*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Eerdmans, 1999], p. 4). The majority of Bible scholars date Revelation in the 90's.

⁴P. L. Maier, "Chronology," *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments* (InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 187.

⁵See J. J. Collins, "Apocalypticism," *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (InterVarsity Press, 2010), pp. 45-58.

⁶These four ways sometimes overlap with each other. For more, see H. Marvin Tate (et al), *Four Views of the Book of Revelation* (Zondervan, 2010). To see the four views side by side, see Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views, A Parallel Commentary* (Thomas Nelson, 2013).

Past Not Future

According to this approach, the symbols, images, and events of Revelation mostly describe *God's judgment on the Roman Empire for its persecution of the Church*. The *Past Not Future* view claims that most of the events described in Revelation have *already happened*, with the exception of the passages about Christ's return and its aftermath in chapters 19-22.⁷ The technical term for this approach is "preterism." For example, preterists understand the Beast (13:1-11) as referring to the ancient Roman Empire and the fall of Babylon (18:21) as predicting the fall of ancient Rome. To preterists, the key to understanding most of Revelation is to *interpret it in light of ancient history*.

There is a lot to appreciate about the *Past Not Future* view. It seeks to understand Revelation from the vantage point of those who first received it, which is what we try to do when we read other books in the Bible. However, its primary weakness is that it renders most of Revelation as only relevant for those who lived under first century Roman persecution. This view also fails to demonstrate how events from the first century relate to Revelation's description of future events related to Christ's second coming.

Future Not Past

This view interprets the symbols, images, and events of Revelation as prophecies that describe the time right before Jesus returns to the earth. According to this view, the events of Revelation (especially chapters 4-22) are best understood as *prophecies that are not yet fulfilled*. For example, the Beast in chapter 13 is understood to describe a future One World Government. If the *Past Not Future* view looks *back* to ancient history to understand Revelation, this view looks *forward* to trends and current events to understand Revelation. The technical term for this approach is the "futurist" view. This view was not common in the ancient church. However, since the rise of a theology called Dispensationalism⁸ in the 1800s, the futurist view has become increasingly popular today, especially in the United States. This view was popularized by the bestselling book *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (1971) and the *Left Behind* series of novels (1995-2007).

I was first introduced to the *Future Not Past* view as a new Christian attending a nondenominational church in the early 1980's. Since I later attended a Dispensational college (BIOLA University) and seminary (Talbot School of Theology), I was immersed in the *Future Not Past* view during my academic preparation to become a pastor. For a long time, I thought this was the only way to interpret Revelation. During my doctoral studies in the late 1990's, I was surprised to learn that the *Future Not Past* view was not common until about 150 years ago and

⁷I am describing what's sometimes called the "partial preterist" view here. "Full preterists" view the entire book of Revelation as fulfilled in the past, including passages that appear to describe the return of Christ.

⁸For more about the history of Dispensationalism and its impact on the U.S., see Daniel Hummel, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle Over the End Times Shaped a Nation* (Eerdmans, 2023).

that there were other views to consider. One strength I appreciate is that futurists take seriously the connection between Revelation and the Old Testament. However, the primary weakness of the futurist view is that it makes most of Revelation only relevant for believers who are alive right before Christ's second coming. Futurists can also be prone to setting dates for Christ's second coming and embracing an escapist mentality about life.

Past Until Future

According to this third view, the symbols, images, and events in Revelation describe the events of church history written in advance. This view claims that the events of Revelation correspond to *specific historical events* from the first century *until* Christ's future second coming. Proponents of this approach find hidden references in Revelation to Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation, Napoleon and the French Revolution, Hitler and World War II, and so on. Some of the Protestant Reformers embraced this view, interpreting the Beast as the Roman Catholic Church. The technical term for this approach is the "historicist" view. This view is not common today because no two proponents of this approach can agree about which historical events these symbols and images describe.

Past and Future

According to this fourth view, the symbols, images, and events in Revelation describe the Church's experience throughout history in every age and place. The events of Revelation not *only* correspond to specific historic events from the first century (which is how John's first readers would've understood them), but they *also* describe recurrent patterns that repeat themselves throughout history that will culminate in Christ's second coming. For example, the Beast *does* describe the ancient Roman Empire (as the *Past Not Future* view claims), but it also describes any government attempt to destroy the Church. Every generation of the Church potentially faces a "Beast," culminating in a final "Beast" before Jesus comes again. This view leaves room for multiple fulfillments of prophecy, much like Daniel's prophecy about the "abomination that causes desolation" in Daniel 7:27 and 11:31 had more than one fulfillment.⁹ This view seeks to take the best of the first and second views, without limiting itself exclusively to the past or future. This view treats the book of Revelation as relevant for Christians of every

⁹In Daniel's context, the "abomination that causes desolation" predicted the Syrian General Antiochus IV setting up an altar to Zeus and sacrificing a pig in the Jewish temple in the second century before Christ. However, in Mark 13:14, Jesus (and Mark) indicates that there is further fulfillment of this prophecy, pointing to the time when the Roman general Titus would desecrate the Jewish temple in 70 A.D. and an additional fulfillment before Jesus comes again. See D. F. Watson, "Antichrist," *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments* (InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 50-53.

generation. The technical term for this approach is the “idealist” view.¹⁰ Idealists treat Revelation as a “book is for all times because it is about all time.”¹¹

I approach Revelation from this fourth perspective, the idealist view. When reading Revelation, I believe the best place to start is its first century historical context, to read it through the eyes of first century Christians living under Roman persecution. However, I also believe that Revelation describes events related to the future second coming of Christ as futurists believe. Finally, I believe Revelation describes recurrent patterns that occur in every generation as the Church seeks to be faithful to the Lordship of Jesus, proclaim the gospel message, and respond to the call to follow Jesus amid suffering. This approach will characterize how I teach through Revelation during *Jesus Revelation*.

How is Revelation Structured?

Revelation starts with an initial vision of Jesus (1:1-20). Then Jesus dictates letters to seven different churches (chapters 2-3). These were real churches that existed in ancient Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), and they were all experiencing unique challenges as they coped with Roman persecution.

Historicists interpret these seven letters as predicting seven sequential stages of church history. Preterists and futurists interpret these letters as written to actual historical churches in the first century. Idealists agree with preterists and futurists; however, they also point out that word seven is significant. Occurring 54 times in Revelation, the number seven indicates fullness or completeness in Revelation. This suggests that the seven churches, in addition to being literal first century churches, also represent *the entire Church* throughout history and around the world from Christ’s first coming until his second coming.¹² What was true of these seven churches in first century Asia Minor is also true of congregations throughout Church history. The temptations, patterns, and difficulties these seven churches faced repeat themselves.

Following the seven letters, we find a series of visions (chapters 4-22), some of things happening on earth and others of things happening in heaven. Futurists interpret chapters 4-22 as sequential, starting shortly before Christ returns to earth and culminating in his second coming (chapter 19), 1000-year reign of Christ (chapter 20), and new creation (chapter 21-22).¹³ This approach sees these chapters as following a linear pattern.

¹⁰Some Idealists don’t see any correspondence between Revelation and actual historical events. This is *not* my view. The variety of Idealism I am describing is sometimes called the “eclectic” view, because it combines the preterist and futurist views, while also opening the possibility to multiple fulfillments of specific events.

¹¹Scot McKnight, *Revelation for the Rest of Us: A Prophetic Call to Follow Jesus as a Dissident Disciple* (Zondervan, 2023), 11.

¹²William Hendrickson, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Baker, 1967), p. 52.

¹³See John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Moody Press, 2010).

Preterists and idealists see chapters 4-22 as a spiral or series of seven intensifying visions (there's that word seven again!). Each vision starts with Christ's first coming and culminates in his second coming. Just as the prophet Daniel had more than one vision about the same events (Daniel 2, 7, 10), John's seven visions *each* picture the entire Church age from Christ's first coming to his second coming in their own unique way.

What Should our Posture Be?

We should be humble in our interpretation of Revelation. Christians get themselves into trouble when they become overly speculative or dogmatic about their interpretation of Revelation.

At times, people's interpretation of the book of Revelation has led to disastrous consequences. For example, the German Peasant Revolt in 1524-25 was fueled in part by Melchior Hoffmann's commentary on Revelation. Believing that they were fulfilling the prophecies of Revelation, peasants without weapons rose up in violent rebellion against German landowners believing that God would fight for them. More than 1000 of them were killed. Similarly, the brutal murders carried out by Charles Manson's followers in Los Angeles in 1969 were inspired by Manson's interpretation of Revelation chapter 9. And the Branch Davidian's armed confrontation with the federal government in 1993 was inspired by David Koresh's interpretation of the Beast in Revelation 13 and 17.¹⁴

Christians have also been prone to speculate and set dates based on their interpretation of Revelation. For example, Christopher Columbus predicted that Christ would return in 1654 based on his interpretation of Revelation.¹⁵ Eighteenth century Presbyterian pastor Charles Finney believed Christ would return within three years of his lifetime from his interpretation of Revelation.¹⁶ And Hal Lindsey, author of the bestselling *Late, Great Planet Earth*, speculated that Christ would return in 1981 or 1982.¹⁷ Obviously all these predictions were wrong. Such failed predictions hurt the Church's witness in the world.

Instead, we should remember that first and foremost, the book of Revelation is a revelation of Jesus: an unveiling of him as Lord over history, the promised coming King, and the one will make all things new. If Revelation causes us to see Christ's glory more clearly, anticipate Christ's return more passionately, and engage in Christ's mission in the world more faithfully, then Revelation has done its work in our lives.

¹⁴These three examples are described in John Thomas and Frank Macchia, *Revelation: Two Horizons Bible Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2016), pp. 45- 48.

¹⁵Richard Abanes, *End-Times Visions: The Doomsday Obsession* (Broadman and Holman, 1999), p. 338.

¹⁶Richard Kyle, *The Last Days are Here Again: A History of the End Times* (Baker Books, 1998), p. 87.

¹⁷Hal Lindsey, *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon* (Bantam Books, 1981).

How Can I Learn More?

To study further, here are the academic resources I've consulted to prepare for the *Jesus Revelation* series. I have limited this list to books written by scholars who have thorough expertise in the original languages and the first century historical context. I've indicated how each commentary interprets Revelation and put an * next to the ones that I think are the best from each perspective.¹⁸

Aune, David. *Revelation*, Word Biblical Commentary Series. Zondervan, 1997. *Past Not Future*

Beale, G. K. *Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Text Commentary. Eerdmans, 1999. *Past Not Future*

*Beale, G. K. *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*. Eerdmans Publishing, 2015. This is one of the best *Past Not Future* commentaries for people who don't read the original languages. It is written by a Presbyterian pastor and professor from Reformed Theological Seminary.

*Hendrickson, William. *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*. Baker Books, 1967. This is a classic presentation of the *Past and Future* view written by a Reformed scholar who taught for many years at Calvin College. Although I don't agree with everything in this commentary, it is one of my favorites.

Johnson, Darrell. *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey Through the Book of Revelation*. Canadian Church Leaders Network, 2021. *Past and Future*

Keener, Craig. *Revelation*. New International Application Commentary. Zondervan, 2000. *Past and Future*

*Ladd, George E. *A Commentary on Revelation*. Eerdmans, 1972. This is a presentation of the *Future Not Past* view written from a Non-Dispensational perspective. Ladd is a Baptist New Testament scholar who taught for many years at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Mangina, Joseph. *Revelation*. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. Baker Books, 2010. *Past and Future*

McKnight, Scot, *Revelation for the Rest of Us: A Prophetic Call to Follow Jesus as a Dissident Disciple*. Zondervan, 2023. *Past and Future*

Morris, Leon. *Revelation: Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Commentary Series. InterVarsity Press, 1987. *Past and Future*

Mounce, Robert. *The Book of Revelation*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Eerdmans, 1997. *Past Not Future*

¹⁸I don't include any commentaries from the historicist perspective since it is so rare today.

Osborne, Grant. *Revelation*. Baker Exegetical Commentary. Baker Books, 2002. *Future Not Past*

Phillips, Richard. *Revelation*. Reformed Expository Commentary. Presbyterian and Reformed, 2017. *Past Not Future*

Thomas, John Christopher and Frank Maccia. *Revelation*. Two Horizons Commentary Series. Eerdmans, 2016. *Past and Future*

Thomas, Robert. *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary*. Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary Series. Moody, 2016. *Future Not Past*

Wall, Robert. *Revelation*. Understanding the Bible Commentary Series. Baker Books, 1991. *Past and Future*

*Walvoord, John. *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. Moody Press, 1989. This is a Dispensational presentation of the *Future Not Past* view written by the former president of Dallas Theological Seminary. This was my primary textbook on Revelation in college and seminary.

Wilcock, Michael. *The Message of Revelation*. The Bible Speaks Today Series. InterVarsity, 1975. *Past and Future*

Wright, N. T. *Revelation for Everyone*. Westminster/John Knox Press, 2011. *Past Not Future*