

## Revelation: A Survey of Interpretive Frameworks

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The book of Revelation is not an easy read. But such difficulty is no excuse for not studying this fascinating final book of the NT. There is a reason why the Spirit has chosen to give us a revelation of Christ in such apocalyptic imagery and prophetic utterance found in no other book in history. Revelation is full of apocalyptic accounts. It is a prophecy. It is pastoral, laying down his concerns for all believers. Like an epistle, John addresses it to the seven first century churches in Asia.

Revelation has been interpreted in different ways throughout church history. In this essay, I will map a survey and critique of each of the five main interpretive frameworks for reading Revelation. Each approach largely depends on a starting assumption of the genre of Revelation, whether predominantly apocalyptic or principally prophetic.

### Historicist

In what is known as the historic Protestant interpretation of Revelation adopted from a Catholic monastic, Joachim of Floris, the historicist approach sees the book as “symbolic prophecy” of the entire record of history from the time of John to the eschatological consummation of the world.<sup>1</sup> The whole course of history therefore is an ongoing process of fulfillment of what is written in Revelation. The seals, trumpets, and bowls are seen as matching historical movements and unfolding in historical sequence. Revelation is a sweeping projection of the whole of human history, esp. the history of Western Europe.

A glaring weakness in this view is that it assumes that the second coming has been fulfilled in 70 C. E., even though it did not.<sup>2</sup> It gives no justice to the prophecy of a personal, visible appearance of Christ on earth (19:11-16).

Another fatal flaw is the myriad of allegorical interpretations it spawns, which may make it no different from the idealist approach. There are three gratuitous consequences. (1) The allegorical approach may be forced, just so to fit the selected historical highlight.<sup>3</sup> (2) With many world-changing developments in the course of history, historicist views are change continually along with the historic changes. This shows the relativity and tentativeness of historicist interpretations. It is subject to change *after* historic notice.

(3) The prophecies can be applied to this historical development or that event, depending on who is talking. There are simply no set parameters as to which historical movement is meant, resulting to hermeneutical confusion.<sup>4</sup> The tendency for the historical interpreter is to apply it to one’s own setting. Thus, the historical interpretation of the sixteenth century interpreter would vastly differ from that of the twenty first

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<sup>1</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 11.

<sup>2</sup> B. D. Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance* (Fort Worth: Dominion, 1987), 63-64.

<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Ladd, *A Commentary*, 11.

century historicist. That Babylon is no longer equated with papal Rome today by some interpreters is one example. Another example is the limited application of historicist interpretation to the events of Western Europe only, leaving the rest of the world outside its scope. We could surmise that a far eastern Asian historicist interpretation would differ markedly.

Perhaps an obvious flaw in this system is the interpretation of the visions as a projection of the whole of human history—but only up to the time of the interpreter. If so, then it has little connection with the consummation of the world order. Following A. Y. Collins, it would seem then that a purely historicist hermeneutic can no longer allow for a notion of an interfering God, which John shows prominently in Revelation.<sup>5</sup>

### Preterist

The preterist view starts with the historical situation of the church and revolves around it. It arises out of the *sitz im leben* of the hearers of Revelation. With the inroad of historical-critical investigation, this approach seeks to study the book as a historical text that could open a door to its own time and setting. W. G. Kummel notes that Revelation, like the epistles, is written out of its time and for its time and not beyond its time.<sup>6</sup> It considers the prophecies of Revelation as having been fulfilled not long after the time of the writer. From the writer's point of view, the prophecies were about to be fulfilled in the immediate future. From our point of view today, it was already fulfilled in the past.

There are three preterist views of the second coming. One holds that Revelation is a prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C. E. (It thus dates the book before 70 C.E.) Babylon is apostate Israel, which colludes with Rome in persecuting Christians. The book is written to encourage Christians that God shall judge their Jewish persecutors.

The other preterist view holds that Revelation is a prophecy of the fall of Babylon, which is the Roman Empire in the 5 C. E. (It then dates the book after 70 C.E.) The purpose of the book is to call believers to endure in view of the judgment and to steer clear of the influence of the Roman system.<sup>7</sup>

A third more interesting view takes the eschatology of Revelation as a reconstruction of the present conditions. The transcendent other-wordly picture painted in Revelation is a kind of analogy to the present world, calling on the reader to choose the eternal rule of God over the transient rule of the satanic world system.<sup>8</sup> In either case, by not consigning Revelation to the far future, the warnings and exhortations to the church are thus treated with immediate significance.

Every careful exegete should not ignore the crucial significance of the historical setting of Revelation. But even if we take the fulfillment of the prophecies in the first century or the fifth century, the question arises as to why the text takes up more about the world that is not the present world of the writer, than his present world itself. It raises the issue of why the text talks of things and events that have not yet occurred in the time of writing, than with the things and events of the present world. Another concern is why the

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<sup>5</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, "Reading the Book of Revelation in the Twentieth Century," *Int* 40:3 (July 1986): 229-269.

<sup>6</sup> Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1969), 17.

<sup>7</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 44-45.

<sup>8</sup> C. Osiek, "Apocalyptic Eschatology," *Bible Today* 34 (1996):341-345; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (BECNT; ed. Moises Silva; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 19.

text may not be also applicable to the centuries beyond the first six centuries. On what exegetical grounds would the prophecies be irrelevant to churches and the world in the succeeding centuries? The lack of applicability and relevance to believers of the future militates against this view.

At issue is the extent Revelation follows the apocalyptic genre at the point of history.<sup>9</sup> If John follows the normal Jewish apocalyptic that relates the symbols to its current historical realities, then the preterist is correct. But how about texts that negates this assumption (chapters 13, 17)? If the prophecies were fulfilled in 70 C. E. with apostate Israel, what about the prophecies concerning the rest of the anti-God coalition of nations, wherein Daniel and John foresaw final universal judgment?<sup>10</sup> If many of the prophecies of the final judgment have been fulfilled in the fall of the Roman Empire in 5 C. E., then this preterist view is reductionist, in that it reduces the many prophecies into one fulfillment with one empire.

Given the majestic outline of the decisive victory of the Lamb over all evil forces that would usurp the rule of God on earth, it appears that such a victory will never happen, if we take the preterist view. Such a massive overthrow of the present world order, the whole satanic kingdom, and the final elimination of all evil, to be replaced by the final coming of the new heaven and new earth, would seem to take minimal space in the view of the preterist. If John put so much space and emphasis in such a climactic development in human history and even beyond history, then he would not be a preterist today.

### **Idealist/Spiritual/Symbolical**

The idealist/spiritual view sees the visions in the Revelation as having symbolical meaning, giving timeless truths and transcendent spiritual significance. It resists seeking detailed fulfillments of the prophecies in history, whether at the time of writing or after that. W. Milligan posits that while Revelation includes the whole of the Christian age, it sets down governing principles for the church and the world, and not specific special events. The idealist approach is not so much concerned with the situation of the church at the time of writing, or with the church in the last days. It seeks instead to draw out meaningful lessons and significant spiritual ideas throughout history.<sup>11</sup> This view sees the prophecies as fulfilled entirely spiritually or allegorically throughout the ages of human history. It sees them as applying to all believers in all ages.

The modified idealist/spiritualist perspective admits a future final consummation of salvation and judgment. But it sees no specific fulfillment of the prophecies in historical events. A few exceptions would include imminent prophecies in the churches of Smyrna, Thyatira, and Philadelphia. The prophecies of the Revelation are viewed as symbolic and allegorical throughout history. The events from Christ's first coming to his second coming (church age, latter days, or inter-advent age) are taken "as one narrative or symbol." Most of the symbols in the book are applicable to events throughout history. Thus, it takes the historicist view without the specific, historical event in view. It takes the Roman version of the preterist view, and also the futurist approach in certain

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<sup>9</sup> Alan F. Johnson, *Revelation* (EBC 12; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 410.

<sup>10</sup> Beale, *The Book*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> Morris, *The Revelation*, 18.

prophecies of Revelation. The crucial task is to determine through careful exegesis which texts pertain to past, present, and future.<sup>12</sup>

There is much to commend the view of the modified idealist approach, in that it seeks to ascertain through careful exegesis which texts are located in the timeline of history. Yet if this view disallows the dominance of prophecy in Revelation, will it not create hermeneutical confusion in the end? It would unwittingly dismiss the details of the text as irrelevant to a historical scheme (e.g. details of the locust plague;<sup>13</sup> and the first trumpet as nothing but “a passionate and poetic spirit”<sup>14</sup>); thereby overlooking what may be critical to the prophetic message.<sup>15</sup> The key issue, I think, lies in the treatment of the historicity or the lack of it, in the text, as we shall argue below.

Perhaps a probable tendency of both schools is to backslide to the allegorical mode of Clement and Origen in the medieval period, whose interpretations threw the grammatical-historical method out of the window. It is amazing to see competent scholars use the historical-grammatical method throughout all the books of the Bible, only to find them suspending it when they get to large portions of the last book, because they want to see something spiritual in it. Whatever happened to the exegetical and hermeneutical dictum of finding out what the text meant then and what it means now? Significance cannot take precedence over meaning. Yet, the spiritualist/symbolical approach risks giving up the then for the sake of the now. If we surrender the historical-grammatical method of exegesis in Revelation, we open ourselves to the danger of over-contextualizing its message to our present world. Thus, the liberation theologians find in Revelation redemption from the bonds of oppression. Feminist theologians now find in it “rhetorical function and impact” from the symbolic language regarding women.<sup>16</sup>

The idealist view correctly directs its readers to see divine principles operating in the text. It stands out in its refusal to identify the prophetic symbols with the specific historical and future events. Yet what is bothersome is that it assumes a solely apocalyptic genre for Revelation, while inadvertently doing an injustice to its prophetic thrust. In this light, it is inadequate in dealing with the prophetic side of Revelation. Then again, if it assumes an apocalyptic genre, it has been pointed out that apocalyptic symbols link with historical events,<sup>17</sup> making the idealist/spiritual interpretation incongruous.

The symbolic view is credited rightly for stressing the timeless truths of the victory of the kingdom of Christ over the kingdom of Satan. Symbol in Revelation is a major literary tool. But perhaps its major defect is just that—a consistent refusal to admit any relevance for the specific details of the prophecies as well as their historical fulfillment. The question arises as to what point the modified/idealist interpreter would determine that certain texts are merely emotive of John, and which are to be taken literally and historically. If John was concerned about specifying the prophetic detail, what exegetical basis do we have to just dismiss it as part of his dream world?

A related concern is at what point in history will there be the consummation of the world order, as John envisioned it. To deny the question as irrelevant to the scheme is to

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<sup>12</sup> Beale, *The Book*, 48-49.

<sup>13</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 157.

<sup>14</sup> Morris, *The Revelation*, 123.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 35.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 199.

<sup>17</sup> Ladd, *A Commentary*, 12.

go into circular reasoning with no end in sight. If Christ shall come again visibly and physically, then it is fixated in time and space in the future. If the idealist/spiritualist view affirms this, then it is not totally spiritual, but historical at some points. At what point then will the allegorical interpreter jump from the spiritual to the literal? The modified/idealist approach seems to border on subjective opinion than on objective exegesis.<sup>18</sup>

If the pure idealist rules out any consummation of the world order, then history gives us no basis for any hope or optimism that John would like us to have. If history is no basis for that hope and present endurance in the idealist mindset, then where does an expectation of Christ's ultimate victory rest? If it rests on the transcendent spiritual realities that can be gained from such an approach, then we are asking all readers of Revelation to rest on timeless truths that bear no connection or representation to what will occur in history. So long as there is human history, so long as Jesus pointed to history as an endpoint itself (e.g. Olivet discourse), and so long as there is the eschatological end of human history and the spiritual reality of the forces of evil as John presents it, it is cogent to connect the symbols with the historical reality yet to unfold.

### **Literary Critical**

This approach seeks to identify the various sources of the book of Revelation, and then analyze the interpolations. What is a common weakness of this approach is that it is so preoccupied with such source-critical endeavours that it fails to interpret the meaning of John's prophecies for all believers in all times. A literary critical commentary on Revelation would take up more pages about its sources than it would take up meaning and significance to the first hearers and readers of Revelation. There is also the tendency to reconstruct the text without taking into consideration the finality of the form of the canonical text. That it is hard to imagine first century hearers knocking their brains out for the sources of the material in the midst of suffering and persecution makes this approach irrelevant not only for them, but also for the rest of the non-scholarly believers of all ages. It thus limits its importance only to hobby-horse scholars who would eat, drink, sleep, and spend the rest of their lives in the library.

### **Futurist/Literal**

The futurist/literal view sees John seeing the future and the far future for him and for readers today. It considers the visions from 4-22:5 as yet future, to be fulfilled immediately before the end of the world. It is a forecast of the end of days. There are two forms. One is the dispensational futurist view. It interprets Revelation in the normal, literal sense (some would say, very literally!), but allowing for symbolism where it is justified by careful exegesis. It sees the successive chapters in Revelation as representing a sequential order of historical events in the future, based on the key verse, 1:19. It looks at chapter 4-22 as occurring immediately before the end of the world, but following the second coming. The beasts in chapter 13 and 17 refer to the future Antichrist. The purpose of God for Israel is distinct from the church. It interprets the OT using a literal hermeneutic, and anticipating the OT prophecies concerning Israel to be fulfilled literally. The church then is not the true Israel, but a new entity began at Pentecost composed of Jewish and Gentile believers. Thus, following this view, Israel shall be restored to the

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 35.

land prior to the events in 4:1 and the church by then shall be caught up into heaven, given that the church is no longer in view in 4:1-22:5.

The other non-dispensational, predominantly historical premillennialist futurist view is the opposite. It does not apply strictly a literal hermeneutic. It does not read the chapters as a chronological order of future events. It believes that the church is the true Israel. She will not be caught up into heaven before the tribulation, but shall undergo it. Some hold that 4:1-8:1 covers the period from the resurrection to the end of days. Rev. 8:2-22:5 cover the future tribulation period and the events following. Others think that the seals, trumpets, and bowls cover sequential periods of the tribulation.<sup>19</sup>

In what I call a variant present/future approach, the seemingly allegorical descriptions in Revelation are considered not as simple allegories, but as defining present apocalyptic imagery in eschatological outlook. In what may look like a modified preterist/futurist view, it holds that the symbols are meant to help the churches to comprehend their present situations in light of an underlying eschatological development. In this framework, John's imagery of Jerusalem as Sodom or Egypt, where the Lord was crucified refers to historical Jerusalem as a persecutor of God's prophets and of Jesus, but making it also as the model or paradigmatic of every city in history that persecutes God's witnesses. The historical referent thus functions as a medium of eschatological insight.<sup>20</sup>

It appears that the futurist approach is the only approach that gives justice to the prophetic weight of Revelation. The dispensational hermeneutic applies the normal, plain, literal hermeneutic consistently to Revelation, coupled with the same hermeneutic in Daniel. It assumes a literal interpretation of the symbols unless otherwise indicated in the text (e.g. the 144,000 is taken literally, while Sodom and Egypt are affirmed spiritually, because the text tells it so—7:4; 11:8). Relating Daniel with Revelation in this hermeneutic, the interpretation presents a logical futurist point of view. The literal approach also avoids looking for hidden meanings in the symbols. In that some OT prophecies have been fulfilled literally in history thus far, it is not unreasonable to apply a literal hermeneutic as to the future fulfillment of the prophecies of Revelation.

In determining its genre, Revelation has been compared to prophecy, apocalyptic, epistle, and edict. Classifying it is no less difficult and unclear.<sup>21</sup> Revelation is an apocalypse or a revelation of Jesus Christ. But unlike Jewish apocalypses with pseudonymic writers, the writer of Revelation identifies himself as John. There is epistolary reference (1:4-5; 2:21). Revelation refers to itself as an apocalypse only once. But it calls its message a prophecy no less than five times (2:5, 16, 21; 3:3, 19).<sup>22</sup> Revelation then is a prophetic book, and like all prophetic genres, includes a futurist outlook.

Such a futurist outlook is never shifting, compared to the historicist view. When historic events do not match John's view, it could always be said that such prophesied events have not yet occurred. In addition, whatever the time and situation the ancient or modern readers belong, they face the same issues, promises, warnings, exhortations,

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<sup>19</sup> Beale, *The Book*, 47.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 172-173. Similarly, Ladd, *A Commentary*, 12-14.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation of John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 7-8; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 23.

<sup>22</sup> Michaels, *Revelation*, 15.

forecasts, and hope that the first century readers faced,<sup>23</sup> making it relevant to all believers in all times and places

The futurist view sees the final judgment and the second coming in physical space and time in clear literal and futurist terms. This means that Revelation still encourages believers of every age and in every place to endure in the midst of persecution for their testimony, as well as to warn them against acquiescing to a present satanic world system, and to proclaim the testimony of Jesus in the midst of hostility. That Christ's coming is imminent makes it relevant for both first century and twenty first century readers. The older view of the seven churches as representing seven sequential time periods of history has been largely abandoned. Many dispensational interpreters now hold that they may represent actual first century churches, with trans-temporal applications to all churches of all times and all places throughout human history.

The present/future approach may fit the dispensational or historical premillennial system without violating the nature of apocalyptic and prophetic genre. If the character of apocalyptic imagery refers to present events or situations with an underlying eschatological insight, then this approach is in keeping with the nature of apocalyptic. If the character of prophecy is to bring the future in the present, this method facilitates it.

The futurist/literal approach has its weaknesses. The literal view may go overboard in a literalistic manner. It may take everything John saw as predictive of the future. Texts that may not necessarily be explicit predictions may be taken otherwise. Worse, some take the yahoo news approach, finding certain prophecies fulfilled in current events. There is thus a need for "moderated literalism" through careful exegesis. By this is meant that not every prediction of John should be taken as predictive. It must be borne in mind that Revelation is John's vision, not ours. For the qualified literalist, there is no explicit mention in Revelation that every vision shall occur in specific time periods on the earth.<sup>24</sup>

Although the second coming of Christ is considered imminent by the early church and now by dispensational interpreters, the objection has been raised with regards to the belief of the rapture. If it is a pre-tribulation rapture, and the second coming is post-tribulation, then the second coming is no longer imminent, but calculated in history. Revelation then becomes a literal timetable fit for chart-fixated lovers, like what we see happening today. However, the dispensational futurist may reply that the rapture is still imminent, like a thief in the night, from the viewpoint of the believers. The second coming will still be imminent to the people on the earth at the end of the tribulation.

A common objection to the futurist view is that after chapter 4, the rest of Revelation no longer has any bearing to its original and present recipients. For the first century believers, the view of the future would give less comfort to their current crisis. However, many futurist interpreters hold that the seals symbolize events that are applicable throughout human history. The OT itself is full of prophecies which have not yet been fulfilled. Are we to assume that these OT prophecies are also irrelevant to the church in every age?

If we are to adopt the historic premillennial futurist view, Revelation is no longer seen as a chronological chart of the future, but as a picture of eschatological fulfillment for the present. The imminent judgment in history is now seen as a prelude to an

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<sup>23</sup> Michaels, *Revelation*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Michaels, *Revelation*, 25-26.

eschatological judgment as well. The beast is both Rome in the immediate present and the Antichrist in the eschatological future. The imminent judgment on Rome is now viewed as an eschatological judgment of a revived Roman empire. This futurist view is hence relevant to both first century and present day readers, in that the persecution the first century churches have received from Rome is the crisis the churches in every age shall face,<sup>25</sup> but their eschatological victory is assured.

### **Conclusion**

Since Revelation is the picture of the future for the church of the present, the church of every age can therefore identify with the church at the end of the age. This is what makes the futurist view compelling. It shares the same futurist outlook of John. The overall outlook of Revelation is an imminent expectation of the second coming, fervent hope of the ultimate triumph of the Lamb, and the complete replacement of the old order with the new.

At the end of the day, I think that what matters is to keep in mind John's purpose in writing this prophecy. It is to call believers to live for Christ against all opposing evil forces and to endure in him to the end, while anticipating the final eschatological victory of the Lamb. It is to challenge compromising believers to resist the satanic world system powered by seducing spirits. Finally, John's design is to caution those falling away from Christ in view of imminent divine judgment against apostasy. To this, all historicist, preterist, idealist, and futurist interpreters would agree.

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<sup>25</sup> Ladd, *A Commentary*, 14.



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