



Book of Revelation

VISION TO STRENGTHEN THE SAINTS

Oakland International Fellowship

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Revelation: Different Interpretations

Introduction: The topic we have chosen for this semester is sometimes difficult to discuss without getting people somewhat stirred up. The reason is that there are various differences in the way people have interpreted its content down through the history of the Christian church.

In significant ways, the book of revelation is to the N.T. as the book of Daniel is to the O.T. Both books use highly symbolic and figurative language to unveil the fulfillment of God's historic promises, especially as they relate to the coming of the Messiah, the full consummation of the Kingdom of God and the final judgment. With this in mind, let us take a brief glance at the various ways the church has understood Revelation's message.

1 Preterists ('to be gone, past' – 1st century contemporary historical approach) find that most of the book of revelation's teaching has already been fulfilled in the 1st century, or first few centuries, of Christianity; most pointedly in the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) or in the downfall of Rome (5th century).

Preterist Type A: The prophecy's message concerning salvation and judgment has already been fulfilled by 70 A.D. Thus the message of the Revelation of John (the Apocalypse of John) was intended for the first century church, and the judgment prophecies are mainly concerned with Israel.

*** One major difficulty with this view is that persecuted Christians during Nero's reign would receive comfort from these writings, but to later generations the teaching would be of relatively little importance.

*** The other problem is what to do with the prophecies of final judgment. If they hold that the prophecies are mainly concerned with Israel, then how do they interpret those which allude to Daniel 2 and Daniel 7, clearly concerned with the universal judgment of the nations.

Preterist Type B: This group sees fulfillment in the fall of the Roman Empire, "Babylon the Great", in the 5th century. This is a bit less problematic but still has the same difficulty in dealing with passages of final judgment. Many are forced to conclude that in part John's teaching never happened, and therefore his revelation was mistaken in part.

*** To claim that the visions of Revelation have already been fulfilled in the first century (or centuries), this school of thought basically must neglect or dismiss any of the unfulfilled predictive elements that are found in the book.

2 Historicists see the events of Revelation as unfolding in the course of history. Most who hold this view conceive a chronological order in the course of history in the seals, the trumpets and the bowls. They understand the book to be a detailed account of events covering the whole period from the first coming of Christ to the second. Those holding this conviction view revelation to be almost entirely a prediction of specific historic events. A solid example of this was found during the reformation where the pope and papal power were interpreted to be the two beasts of Rev.13 or as the scarlet beast and the woman who rides her in Rev.17.

*** Ironically, the propensity to limit symbols to specific historic occasions makes it difficult for those who hold this view to agree as to which actual historic events these symbols designate and when they might have been fulfilled in the course of history.

*** The greatest critique of this is that the first century Christians, and even successive generations, would have little understanding of the book if it concerned so many events much later on in the historic process. Thus the bulk of the book would have little or no significance to their day and age.

3 Futurists (common to the dispensational approach) also believe the book to be mostly predictive, but because they expect a more literal fulfillment to its prophecies, they hold that even today the greater part of it, chapters 4-22:5 has not yet come true and immediately precede the end of human history. There are 3 main divisions all represented in 1:19: the past “what you have seen” (1:9-18), the present “what is” (2:1-3:22) and the future “what must happen after these things” (4:1-22:5)

Futurist Type A: Futurists speak largely of Revelation as a prophecy of events still yet to come. In this popular view, the visions in the book represent an order of future events.

For example the content of the message forms into a sequence:

(a) ethnic Israel is restored to its land, (b) there is a heavenly rapture of the church, then (c) a 7 year tribulation, next (d) the rule of the Antichrist, followed by (e) evil nations embroiled in a battle over Jerusalem, then (f) Christ’s second coming to destroy these evil nations, and (g) there is a 1000 year reign, then (h) the final rebellion of Satan and those unbelievers who follow him embattled against Christ and his followers, and finally (i) a new heaven and new earth are established where Christ reigns with the church.

Futurist Type B: A modified form of the futurist understanding uses a less literal approach to the book, and does not insist on following a tight chronological order or even a pre-tribulation rapture. Christians too will pass through the final trials and tribulation;

thus 4:1-8:1 covers from Christ's resurrection to the end of human history, while 8:2-22:5 concerns the period of final tribulation as well as subsequent events. Some versions of this posit 7 successive extended time periods followed by the church being ultimately raptured.

A slight variation of this views chapters 1-6 as having historic application, and chapters 7-22 as representing the future close of human history. In this, the 7 churches represent the whole Christian community and the 7 seals refer to various historic forces that impact humanity preceding the end times and final judgment.

*** The futurist view still continues to be problematic in that it leaves the first century church with application from only chapters 1-3, but little significant understanding of chapters 4-22. The weakness comes from the futurist's insistence that the prophetic focus is upon Christ's return. If the church down through the ages has had to wait for this event to see these prophecies fulfilled, then there will not have been much application for the church down through time.

4 Idealists are very reticent to connect Revelation's symbolism with historical events. Though the material of the book draws upon historic realities, the ideas of time and place are meant to be flexible and not bound to specific events. They focus instead on the church as it faces the struggle between good and evil. Both visions and prophecy provide spiritual principles that demonstrate how Christ and those faithful to him overcome and defeat evil.

Revelation's universal message uses signs, symbols, names and numbers of religious and cultural settings from the Mediterranean Sea and Middle East to convey eternal truth to those who believe. Prophecy is being fulfilled in the process of time but these may be applied to any period of history. The biblical principles in revelation provide believers from each generation with comfort and assurance of God's ever-present involvement in the historic process. These ideals encourage believers to endure as they encounter hardships and spiritual conflict. Thus, the Revelation of John (the Apocalypse of John) is a book that encourages and motivates the faithful because God is in control.

*** This position has been used to undermine a high view of Scripture when principles translate into mere ethical behavior applied to the issues of economics, race or gender. The content of revelation has been used to support Christian cults that so easily distort the message to their own advantage as they lead people astray. The symbolic and figurative language can be used to buttress any kind of theological persuasion that one might hold; for it lends itself to many kinds of interpretation.

*** The consistent idealist, in an attempt to unfetter any and all symbols in the message from historic events, may end up unable to concretely affirm the final consummation of human history or a decisive defeat of manifest evil in final judgment.

5 Eclecticism (A redemptive historical type of modified idealism) seeks to blend these various methods of interpretation into a comprehensive package. There are various combinations possible using this approach, too many to be identified here, but the method of interpretation people use highly influences the way they apply revelation's content to life.

The **preterist** method appropriately confirms that 1st century Christians were able to understand and apply the whole book of revelation to their life situation. The **historicist** method accurately realizes that each epoch of history has the possibility of a fresh application of this prophesy to its current historic circumstance. The **futurist** method properly puts forth the purpose of this book as eschatological in nature, with an end to history and a final victory over evil clearly anticipated within its teaching. The **idealist** correctly understands that spiritual principles flow out of the figurative and symbolic use of language, and that these provide guidance and encouragement to those who seek to be obedient to Christ in every aspect of life, for every generation.

If John was writing for both his contemporaries and the church in successive ages, so that they would have comfort from these visions, the content of this prophetic, apocalyptic message must have application to the entire church from every age.

One of the basic issues that must be settled is whether the message of revelation should be interpreted as a linear historic sequence (a continuum perspective), or as a series of parallel, recurrent messages that overlap in content and application. If the latter is the case, then the series sets forth a recapitulation of human history that encompasses with increasing intensity the salvation and judgment of God as He establishes His Kingdom.

Perspective Points:

- 1) Revelation is the only NT book whose main focus is the consummation of history.
- 2) Revelation reveals what remained hidden in Daniel's day (Dan.12:1-4,9 ; Rev 22:10).
- 3) Revelation intensely describes the glorious and eternal nature of the kingdom of God over against the more subtle introduction of it in the Old and New Testaments.
- 4) Revelation shows the final judgment and lasting glorious victory of good over evil.
- 5) Revelation clearly proclaims that Jesus Christ is divine as the notions of God and the Lamb are gradually interwoven throughout the fabric of its text.
- 6) Revelation reveals how God's purifies and matures the church through persecution and suffering.
- 7) Revelation concludes and completes what was consecrated in Genesis (the beginning) and thus it provides a powerful synthesis of biblical truth.

Discussion Questions:

1. In the 5 major views of interpreting the book of Revelation, with which one are you most familiar or which one are you inclined to support?
2. In considering the 7 perspective points of Revelation, what do you think is the most vital idea of the seven, and why?
3. How do you respond to people who mention that we are close to the big tribulation?