

# REVELATION: GOD WINS

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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This introduction was written by Robert H. Thune to accompany the teaching series on the book of Revelation. For more information visit [www.cdomaha.com](http://www.cdomaha.com) or email [info@cdomaha.com](mailto:info@cdomaha.com).



# INTRODUCTION

"The art of preaching is not to say *everything*, but to say *something*." And behind the *something* a preacher does say, lies all the things he doesn't say: conclusions about the biblical text rooted in hours (and sometimes years) of diligent study. The purpose of this brief essay is to let the reader in on some of that "background material" – the kind of information that's useful to know, but that the average person may not wade through dozens of commentaries and monographs to find.

## A CONTROVERSIAL BOOK

The book of Revelation is perhaps the most misunderstood book in the Bible. Countless end-times "prophets" prognosticate about the future and claim Revelation as their source material. What is the average faithful Christian to do with all this? Some just avoid the book of Revelation because it seems confusing or obscure. Others adopt a "newspaper-in-hand" reading style, trying to align every event in the news with some biblical prophecy – which quickly breeds skepticism and cynicism among observers (both non-Christian and Christian). Unfortunately, this kind of hypothesizing is not going to go away. The person who perpetually says what's *about to happen* can never be discredited: "Just wait, and you'll see." Meanwhile the word of God is maligned, the gospel is discredited, and people become cynical toward the church in general. Naïve and foolish interpretations of Revelation are a major cause of skepticism and unbelief in our culture.

Therefore, if we are going to live as a gospel-formed people who glorify God and point others to him, we must have some basic understanding of the book of Revelation and how it fits in the greater narrative arc of Scripture.

## HERMENEUTICAL QUESTIONS

Because of the popular "buzz" about Revelation, many readers begin with a list of questions already in mind: Who is the Antichrist? What is the mark of the beast? Is the rapture a biblical idea, and if so, when will it happen? Which millennial view is correct? Though these questions are valid, they are not primary. Rather, we must start by asking ourselves some more basic hermeneutical questions:

- Would the Holy Spirit have given the book of Revelation to *reveal*, or to *conceal*?
- Would the book of Revelation be better understood by a first-century audience, or a twenty-first century audience?
- Would the book of Revelation speak *primarily* of things pertaining to the original audience, or would it speak *primarily* of things in the distant future?
- Would it conclude the narrative of Scripture, or would it unfold new revelation?
- Would it be intended by God to help *all* Christians live faithfully in

an ungodly world, or would it be intended only for those living in the final generation of history?

- Would its message be clear to the average reader, or would it only make sense to seminary graduates and prophecy experts?

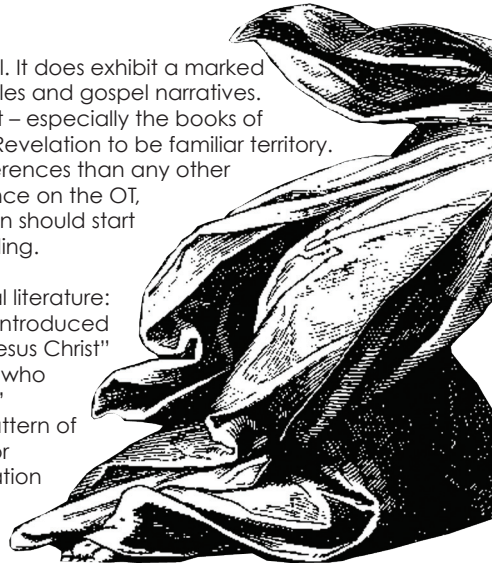
These questions are all getting at a fundamental principle of Bible study: our interpretation must be grounded in what the *original writer* intended to communicate to the *original audience*. The book of Revelation can't mean something *now* that it didn't mean *then*. Keeping this fact squarely in mind will help us avoid error and speculation in our interpretation.

## GENRE

Revelation is a unique book. It's not like Romans or Mark or Psalms. It's filled with imagery, symbols, metaphors, and visions that seem otherworldly and mysterious.

But in reality, Revelation isn't *that* unusual. It does exhibit a marked difference from the New Testament epistles and gospel narratives. But readers who know the Old Testament – especially the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah – will find Revelation to be familiar territory. In fact, Revelation contains more OT references than any other NT book.<sup>1</sup> In light of this heavy dependence on the OT, those who want to understand Revelation should start with a steady diet of Old Testament reading.

Revelation blends three genres of biblical literature: prophecy, apocalyptic, and epistle. It is introduced as "The revelation (Gk. *apocalypse*) of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:1); it promises blessing to the one who "reads aloud the words of this prophecy" (Rev. 1:3); and it follows the epistolary pattern of sending greetings from the human author (John) to the recipients (Rev. 1:4). Revelation should be seen as "a prophecy cast in an apocalyptic mold and written down in letter form."<sup>2</sup> Interpreting Revelation properly will require basic familiarity with all three genres.



## DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING

Revelation was written by the Apostle John during the reign of either Domitian (95 AD) or Nero (68 AD). Most contemporary scholars hold to the later date, though a minority affirms an early date. The strongest evidence in favor of the later date is a quotation from the church father Irenaeus (c. 115 – c. 202 AD): "The Apocalypse... was seen not a very long time since, but almost in our own day, toward the end of Domitian's reign."<sup>3</sup>

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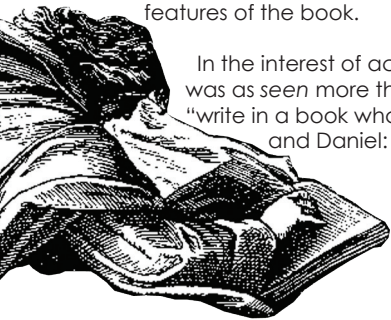
<sup>1</sup> G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 77.

<sup>2</sup> Carson, Moo, and Morris, "Revelation," in *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 479.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1939), 20.

Those scholars who prefer an early date have not put forth strong enough evidence to outweigh Irenaeus' testimony.<sup>4</sup>

John states that he "was on the island called Patmos" (Rev. 1:9) when he saw the visions described in Revelation. Patmos was a Roman prison-island – the Alcatraz of the ancient world. Near the end of the first century, Roman emperors began to require emperor-worship as a sign of faithfulness to the empire. (Though perhaps odd to us, such practices are well-attested in history; see, for example, Daniel 3:1-30). Jewish synagogues were exempted from emperor worship, but Christians were left vulnerable to the charge of treason as they faithfully worshipped Jesus and not the emperor. "During Domitian's reign... forms of persecution for refusal to participate in emperor worship were likely increasing and becoming more systematic... the culture increasingly expected public expressions of loyalty to the imperial cult."<sup>5</sup> This persecution helps to explain why John was imprisoned "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Rev 1:9). It also casts light on some of the unique features of the book.



In the interest of accuracy, we should probably say that Revelation was as seen more than it was *written*. The Spirit instructed John to "write in a book what you see" (Rev. 1:11). This is reminiscent of Ezekiel and Daniel:

*Now it came about in the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, while I was by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. (Eze. 1:1).*

*In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon Daniel saw a dream and visions in his mind as he lay on his bed; then he wrote the dream down and related the following summary of it (Dan. 7:1).*

Acknowledging this "visionary" aspect of Revelation will give us some sympathy toward its more mystifying features. After all, if John really saw the Lord Jesus – if he really was ushered into the throne room of heaven to see "what must take place after these things" (Rev. 4:1) – shouldn't we expect that he'd have a hard time describing what he saw in normal, everyday language? The God upon whom no one can look and live (Ex. 33:20); the God from whom heaven and earth flee away (Rev. 20:11); the God who holds the universe together by his might (Heb. 1:3); the God whom Paul described as speaking "inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak" (2 Cor. 12:4)... would we expect John to describe this God in the same way one describes a tuna fish sandwich? Or might it be fair to assume that John would exhaust the human lexicon looking for words and images to express all that he had seen?

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<sup>4</sup> Dating is a more significant issue in Revelation than in many other biblical books due to the influence on possible interpretation; see the discussion of preterism below.

<sup>5</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 13-14.

# FIVE CRUCIAL FEATURES IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

In order to rightly understand and interpret Revelation, we must take note of five crucial features within it.

## 1. SYMBOLS

Most of us Westerners are linear, logical people. We thrive in the world of facts, hard science, and how-to manuals. It's important to be aware of this "cultural baggage" as we study the Bible. Revelation really isn't that strange; it's just strange to us! We prefer literal, systematic, logical reasoning. But that's not what Revelation gives us. Instead, it ushers us into a symbolic world. "The entire book consists of changing scenes, moving pictures, active symbols."<sup>6</sup> Revelation is an artist's book: right-brained, evocative, and rich in imagery. It's no coincidence that musicians from Handel to U2 to Sufjan Stevens find inspiration in its pages.

What is a symbol, and how does it function? Think of the American flag. To a terrorist, it represents everything he hates and fights against. But to an American college student studying abroad, it may evoke feelings of homesickness or patriotism or comfort. Flags are powerful symbols that *stand for something*: a nation, a way of life, a set of values. The symbols in Revelation function the same way. Thrones, horses, swords, scrolls, seals... these are not merely "set dressing." They are symbols. They *stand for something*. The more familiar you are with your Bible, the more familiar you'll be with the symbols.

For example, Revelation 22 describes a key feature of the New Jerusalem: "On either side of the river was the *tree of life*, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:2). The tree of life is a key biblical symbol that hasn't appeared since Genesis 3:24: "So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life." To be where the tree of life is is to enjoy fellowship and communion with God – just like Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden. The tree of life is synonymous with the presence of God – so much so, in fact, that Revelation 22:14 issues this threat: "If anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book." Having a part in the tree of life means experiencing God's presence in the blessed future that awaits his faithful people.

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<sup>6</sup> Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 50.



## 2. NUMBERS

Commentator Dennis Johnson states it plainly: "Numbers count in Revelation."<sup>7</sup> The numbers four, seven, ten, and twelve are especially prominent. But the use of numbers in Revelation is symbolic and, therefore, flexible. This is clear from the opening benediction: "Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before his throne; and from Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:4-5). Is John trying to replace the Trinity with a Nine-ity – Father, Son, and seven Spirits? No. The number seven is often used in Scripture to connote completeness or perfection (think, for instance, of the seven days of creation). In Revelation 1, then, "The number seven symbolizes the Spirit's fullness and completeness. He is pictured as the seven lamps burning before the One seated on the throne – fully, completely present with the Father in heaven."<sup>8</sup>

The number four has a similar function (think especially of the four points of a compass), as does the number twelve (twelve tribes of Israel, twelve Apostles, twelve months in a year). The fact that numbers are often symbolic in Revelation means that we should be cautious about the conclusions we draw from them.<sup>9</sup> Those who predict Jesus' return based on mathematical calculations from Revelation are committing a foolish and egregious fallacy. Thoughtful readers will avoid such folly.

## 3. OLD TESTAMENT ALLUSIONS

"The Apocalypse contains more OT references than any other book... The OT in general plays such a major role that a proper understanding of its use is necessary for an adequate view of the Apocalypse as a whole."<sup>10</sup> Don't expect to understand Revelation if you don't know your Old Testament. Most of the OT references in Revelation are allusions rather than direct quotations. John was so steeped in the Scriptures that their language and imagery flowed out naturally in his writing. Revelation scholar G.K. Beale observes:

*Perhaps one reason for the high degree of OT influence in the Apocalypse is that the author could think of no better way to describe some of his visions than with the language used by the OT prophets to describe similar visions... for John the Christ-event is the key to understanding the OT ... the New Testament interprets the Old and the Old interprets the New.*

The Bible is one unified story, and Revelation is the concluding chapter in that story. It is not as though God tacked on an end-times instruction manual at the end of the Bible "just in case." Revelation culminates the grand biblical storyline of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation.

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<sup>7</sup> Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> "We cannot insist on a literal meaning for the three and a half years of the tribulation period or the thousand years of the millennium. They could be literal, but the numbers function symbolically in the book and probably signify a lengthy period of time that is under God's control." Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 77.

## 4. CYCLES

Another fruit of our Western education is that we tend to assume a *chronological* order to narrative. Stories are supposed to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. We subconsciously look for such an order as we read.

But this isn't the only way to tell a story. Think of movies like *Memento*, *Inception*, or *Primer*. These films (and countless others) build interest and suspense by playing with chronology. As you watch, it gradually dawns on you that you're not viewing a linear sequence of events! *Memento* is filmed in reverse order, from end to beginning. *Inception* features a layering of dream sequences – a dream inside a dream inside a dream, with a different “time signature” in each. These films are compelling because they confound what our brains expect as normal.

Revelation is a lot like that. It uses a narrative technique called *recapitulation* – “cycling back” to speak of the same events from a different perspective. This technique is as old as Genesis. In Genesis 2:5, we find that “there was no man to cultivate the ground.” But wait, didn't God already create humanity “in his own image... male and female” in Genesis 1:27? Yes. Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis are describing the same event (creation) from two different perspectives. Genesis 1 is the wide-angle view. Genesis 2 zooms in with particular emphasis on God's creation of human beings.

The clearest evidence for recapitulation in Revelation is the fact that final, end-time judgment – the pouring out of the wrath of God – appears to occur in at least five places.

- **Rev. 6:12-17:** <sup>12</sup>When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, <sup>13</sup>and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. <sup>14</sup>The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. <sup>15</sup>Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, <sup>16</sup>calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, <sup>17</sup>for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”
- **Rev. 11:15-19:** <sup>15</sup>Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” <sup>16</sup>And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, <sup>17</sup>saying, “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. <sup>18</sup>The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying



the destroyers of the earth.”<sup>19</sup>Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

- **Rev 16:17-20:** <sup>17</sup>The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, “It is done!”<sup>18</sup>And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake.<sup>19</sup> The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath.<sup>20</sup>And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found.
- **Rev. 19:19-21:** <sup>19</sup>And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army.<sup>20</sup>And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur.<sup>21</sup>And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.
- **Rev. 20:11-15:** <sup>11</sup>Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.<sup>12</sup>And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.<sup>13</sup>And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.<sup>14</sup>Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.<sup>15</sup>And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

In all of these references, there is a sense of finality. The language is climactic and intense. Prophetic de-creation imagery (stars falling from the sky, earth and sky fleeing away, islands and mountains being removed, catastrophic earthquakes) is prevalent. Is it likely that God's wrath is poured out in a final, epic way *five different times*? Or is it more likely that these are five different descriptions of the same final judgment?

The text of Revelation seems to be structured around a cyclical pattern of recapitulation. “The burden of proof rests on those who argue otherwise.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 122.

# 5. GOD WINS

The fact that Revelation often stirs anxiety, fear, and frustration in God's people is a sure sign that it's been misunderstood, misapplied, and poorly taught. This book is a hopeful, joyful celebration of God's victory! It is meant to inspire joy, confidence, worship, obedience, and mission! No one who studies Revelation can miss its core message:

- *Revelation is pervaded with worship songs and scenes because its pervasive theme – despite its gruesome portrait of evil's powers – is the triumph of God through the Lamb. We read this book to hear the King's call to courage and to fall down in adoring worship before him.*<sup>12</sup>
- *It seems clear that the primary theme of the book is the sovereignty of God... the realm of God is the real world, and the temporary "reign" of evil is an illusion. All earthly powers will be destroyed; since God is already on the throne in heaven, his reign will be actualized on earth.*<sup>13</sup>
- *Churches are to read and reread [Revelation] in their assembly so that they may continually be reminded of God's real, new world, which stands in opposition to the old, fallen system in which they presently live. Such a continual reminder will cause them to realize that their home is not in this old world but in the new world... the intended consequence is that believers experience an increasing attitude of worshipful reverence for God, not only in church assemblies, but in bowing to divine sovereignty in every aspect of their lives and in every facet of its outworking.*<sup>14</sup>
- *Jesus the Lamb has already won the decisive victory through his sacrificial death, but his church continues to be assaulted by the dragon... By revealing the spiritual realities lying behind the church's trials and temptations... and by dramatically affirming the certainty of Christ's triumph in the new heaven and earth, the visions granted to John both warn the church and fortify it to endure suffering and to stay pure from the defiling enticements of the present world order.*<sup>15</sup>

God wins. That's the consistent, hopeful message of the book of Revelation. God wants us to know "the rest of the story" so that we can worship Jesus faithfully in the present and rejoice in our glorious future.

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<sup>12</sup> Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 31-33.

<sup>14</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 175-176.

<sup>15</sup> *ESV Study Bible*, "Introduction to Revelation," 2454.

# FOUR (OR FIVE?) INTERPRETIVE APPROACHES TO REVELATION

Understanding the major interpretive approaches to Revelation is crucial for anyone wishing to converse meaningfully about its content.

- **Preterism.** The label "preterist" is taken from the Latin word *praeteritum*, meaning "the thing that is past." The preterist view of Revelation sees the book as a prophecy of things that have already taken place during the early years of the Christian church. Preterists hold that the visions in Revelation refer to either the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 or to the demise of the Roman Empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Most preterists also hold to the early date for Revelation (see above), since the book would have had to be written before AD 70. The weakness of the preterist position is that it seems to mute the book's language. It restricts the dramatic, cosmic descriptions of judgment and the universal referents ("all people, languages, tribes, and nations") to only the Jewish or Roman people. Some extreme forms of preterism also deny the future second coming of Christ, placing them beyond the pale of Christian orthodoxy.
- **Historicism.** The historicist view sees Revelation as a prophecy of successive historical events that span the entire era from the apostolic age to the return of Christ. "Typically this view identifies... the invasions of the Christianized Roman empire by the Goths and the Muslims... the corruptions of the medieval papacy, the reign of Charlemagne, the Protestant Reformation, and the destruction wrought by Napoleon and Hitler"<sup>16</sup> as fulfillments of Revelation's prophecies. A key critique of the historicist approach is that it "tries to identify historical movements too specifically and limits the prophecies of the Apocalypse to Western church history, leaving aside the worldwide church."<sup>17</sup>
- **Futurism.** Futurists typically understand Revelation to be referring to events that are *still to come* in the future. Many of the popular Christian "prophecy experts" (such as Tim Lahaye, author of the *Left Behind* book series) hold to a particular type of futurism called *dispensational futurism*, which holds to a very specific timeline for future events: 1) the restoration of ethnic Israel to its land; 2) the rapture of Christians into heaven; 3) a seven-year tribulation; 4) the antichrist's reign; 5) the assembly of evil nations to fight over Jerusalem; 6) Christ's second coming; 7) Christ's

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<sup>16</sup> Beale, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Beale, 46.

millennial reign; 8) Satan's final defeat; and 9) Christ's final conquest and eternal reign. Dispensational futurism has been so well propagated that many Christians simply take it for granted. However, this point of view is a historical novelty, having existed only since 1850 or so. A less dogmatic strain of futurism, called *modified futurism*, has existed since the early church era; it sees Revelation as referring primarily to future events, but does not hold tightly to a pre-tribulation rapture or the restoration of ethnic Israel to its land. The primary weakness of futurism is that it makes most of Revelation irrelevant to its original audience.

- **Idealism.** The idealist view “agrees with historicism that Revelation’s visions symbolize the conflict between Christ and his church on one hand, and Satan and his evil conspirators on the other, from the apostolic age to Christ’s second coming. Yet idealist interpreters believe that the presence of recapitulation means that the visions’ literary order need not reflect the temporal order of particular historical events. The forces and conflicts symbolized in Revelation’s vision cycles... find expression in the church’s ongoing struggle of persevering faith in the present and foretell a still-future escalation of persecution and divine wrath leading to the return of Christ and the new heaven and earth.”<sup>18</sup> The weakness of idealism is that it can fail to connect Revelation’s prophecies in any meaningful way with actual historical events.
- **Eclecticism.** Many scholars recognize truth in all of the above approaches while also acknowledging that each has limitations. The preterists and historicists are certainly correct in identifying specific historical events as fulfillments of Revelation’s prophecies – as the Apostle John says, “Many antichrists have come” (1 John 2:18). And the futurists are correct as well: some events depicted in Revelation (the return of Christ, final judgment, etc.) are still to come. Meanwhile, the idealist interpretation seems to be the most faithful to the literary aspects of the book (symbolism, recapitulation, etc.), and it sees Revelation as applying to all times, cultures, and situations – not just the first century (like preterism) or the tribulation (like dispensational futurism). As we preach and study through Revelation at Coram Deo, we’ll approach it from this ‘eclectic’ perspective, “allow[ing] the preterist, idealist, and futurist methods to interact in such a way that the strengths are maximized and the weaknesses minimized.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *ESV Study Bible*, “Introduction to Revelation,” 2457.

<sup>19</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 21. Cf. also G.K. Beale, who adopts the eclectic point of view and describes it as “a redemptive-historical form of modified idealism” (Beale 48).

# THE RAPTURE QUESTION

Dispensational futurism places a strong emphasis on the *rapture* of the church. "Pretribulation dispensationalism speaks of a twofold coming of Christ, with a seven-year interval in between. The first phase of the Second Coming is then called the *rapture*, whereas the second phase, at which Christ will set up his millennial kingdom, is called his *return*."<sup>20</sup> The plot line of the *Left Behind* book series – which has sold over 65 million copies – follows those who are supposedly "left behind" after Christians across the world are taken up into heaven. But does the Bible indeed speak of this event? Should we be "rapture ready," as a popular website urges? A number of things deserve to be said about this matter.

- *The rapture is unique to the dispensational futurist view of Revelation.* In other words: only dispensational futurists believe that the *rapture* and the *return* of Christ are *different* events. All other interpretive approaches see *one* coming of Christ at the end of history, when God will reward his saints and pour out his wrath on the repentant.
- *Scriptural evidence for a pretribulation rapture is lacking.* Anthony Hoekema observes: "There is no Scriptural basis for the two-phase Second Coming taught by pretribulationists. The Second Coming of Christ must be thought of as a single event, which occurs after the great tribulation."<sup>21</sup> Respected futurist scholars seem to be agreeing with Hoekema on this point – and leaving the rapture bandwagon behind.<sup>22</sup> The idea of a pretribulation rapture lives on in various segments of the Christian subculture, but has been abandoned *en masse* by serious biblical scholars.
- *Holding to a pretribulation rapture can hinder Christians from working for God's kingdom now.* Though this is not true of all who believe in a pretribulation rapture, it is certainly true of some.<sup>23</sup> If we're going to get whisked out of here and then all hell is going to break loose, why should we work to make the world a better place? Dispensational futurism tends toward a pessimistic view of the world that can mitigate against social involvement and cultural renewal.
- *We must live with a sense of the immanence of Christ's return.* To their credit, those who hold to a pretribulation rapture do tend to appreciate the "any-moment-ness" of Jesus' return. All Christians should emulate this. "Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming... For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will" (Matthew 24:22, 24).

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<sup>20</sup> Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 164.

<sup>21</sup> Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 170.

<sup>22</sup> Hoekema cites George Ladd and Robert Gundry as examples of prominent futurists who "critique the twofold-coming theory."

<sup>23</sup> If you doubt this, type the word "rapture" into your Internet search engine and consider how much time, energy, and expense is devoted to unnecessary banter about the rapture.

# THE MILLENNIAL QUESTION

Revelation 20 speaks of Satan being bound “for a thousand years” (Rev 20:2), during which time Christ reigns. Christians disagree on exactly what this thousand-year period refers to. Three main views are prominent:

- **Premillennialism** holds that Christ will return in glory before (pre-) the thousand years, binding (but not destroying) Satan and reigning on the earth for a thousand years before finally destroying Satan, judging humanity, and ushering in the new heavens and earth. Premillennialism is most common among those who hold to a futurist reading of Revelation.
- **Postmillennialism** holds that the thousand years is a period of glorious spiritual and cultural renewal that has either already begun or will soon begin. During the millennium, Christ is reigning in heaven, not on earth; “[the] fruit of Jesus’ victory will be plain for all to see, as political and legal systems are conformed to God’s righteousness, cultural pursuits such as labor and the arts are redeemed, and increasing quality and length of life are displayed as God’s blessing.”<sup>24</sup> Postmillennialism is most common among those who hold a preterist or historicist view of the book as a whole.
- **Amillennialism** holds that Revelation 20:1-10 is symbolic and describes the whole church age between Christ’s first and second comings. Satan was bound through Christ’s death and resurrection; the “thousand year” vision is intended to prepare God’s people for a long time of mission – which will include both triumph and suffering – between Christ’s first coming to bind Satan and his second coming to destroy Satan. Amillennialism is most common among idealist interpreters.

So which position is correct? Hmm... how should I say this... *it doesn't really matter*. All three positions are well-attested in history and in current scholarship, and all of them are consistent with evangelical Christian orthodoxy. This is one of those open-handed areas of theology where Christians should study to arrive at a personal conviction, but maintain charity and humility toward differing opinions.

It's worth noting that perspectives on the millennium have tended to vary with historical circumstances. For instance, many of the optimistic Puritans who settled New England were postmillennialists – the most prominent being Jonathan Edwards. These settlers saw the chance to build a new society as a clear sign of God’s favor. According to Richard Lovelace, “Edwards [believed] a revived American church would serve as a base for the missionary expansion of the gospel until all the earth was filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”<sup>25</sup> Even a century after Edwards, American Protestants were proclaiming that “a Christian

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<sup>24</sup> *ESV Study Bible*, “Introduction to Revelation,” 2459.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Intervarsity Press, 1979), 41.



millennium was not far away."<sup>26</sup> By contrast, premillennialism began to flourish in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as the First and Second World Wars made Christians everywhere more pessimistic about the state of the world.

# SO, HOW SHOULD I READ REVELATION?

- You should read Revelation *doxologically*. Let it move you to awe and worship and joy and reverence. Engage your emotions and affections. Grow in your love for God and his glory.
- You should read Revelation *canonically* – that is, as the culmination of the biblical storyline. It's not an isolated book. Don't treat it as such.
- You should read Revelation *reflectively*. This book is meant to captivate, to impress, to awaken the senses. Enjoy its imagery. Savor its language. Reflect on its metaphors.
- You should read Revelation *communally*. Read it with other Christians – present and past. Study to see how Christians throughout history have understood it. Ask questions. Have conversations. Argue if you need to. Good theology is always forged in community.
- You should read Revelation *Christologically*. Jesus is the hero of the story. If you find yourself getting fascinated by peripheral things... repent and return. It's about the Lion (Rev 5), the King (Rev 11), the Lamb (Rev 14), the Warrior (Rev 19), the Bridegroom (Rev 21), the Beginning and the End (Rev 22)... it's about Jesus.

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<sup>26</sup> George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 9.

# CONCLUSION: THE KINGDOM OF GOD

We've often said at *Coram Deo* that the theme of *God's kingdom* is the unifying mega-theme of the whole Bible. The Garden of Eden was the beachhead of God's kingdom on earth. From there, Adam and Eve were to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). Their mission was to extend God's rule and reign over the whole earth. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven*" (Matt. 6:10), he wasn't inventing something new. He was restating God's original purpose.

Revelation sees this purpose fulfilled: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ; and he will reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15). "Now the dwelling place of God is with men, and he will dwell among them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be among them" (Rev. 21:3). In fact, according to NT scholar Grant Osborne, "Revelation as a whole can be seen as a fulfillment of the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer: *May your name be made sacred, your kingdom come, and your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*"<sup>27</sup>

By giving us a clear and compelling vision of the future, Revelation helps us live faithfully in the present. That's why John wrote it for the church in his day. And that's why we need it in our day as well.

May reading and studying Revelation help us live *Coram Deo*.

Robert H. Thune  
January 2011

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<sup>27</sup> Osborne, Revelation, 33.

# REVELATION: RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Listed in order from least technical to most technical:

ESV Study Bible. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008

Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible (NIV). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003.

Carson, D.A. & Douglas Moo & Leon Morris. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992.

Hoekema, Anthony. *The Bible and the Future*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.

Johnson, Dennis. *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishers, 2001.

Hendriksen, William. *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970 (first ed. 1939).

Osborne, Grant R. *Revelation*. Baker Evangelical Commentary on the New Testament (BECNT). Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002.

Beale, G.K. *The Book of Revelation*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (NIGTC). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999.







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