

OVERVIEW OF OUR JOURNEY WITHIN REVELATION

WHY REVELATION?

To begin, we must first answer the question, *why the Revelation of Jesus given to John?* Why spend time in a book that is notoriously confusing, controversial, and seemingly disconnected from our everyday world?

The answer is threefold:

- 1) While the Revelation is often perceived as the rubrics cube of the end times, when you immerse yourself within it, when you listen to the Spirit in, amongst, and through the words, images, and numbers, you discover a well-designed, comprehensive and stimulating *story*. My hope for our time in the Revelation is not that we will be able to answer all the questions that arise, which often spring up *not* from the text itself but rather from historical and contemporary interpretations; instead, my hope is that we will better appreciate the beauty and vividness of the Revelation of Jesus given to John.
- 2) Yes, the Revelation is controversial. It continues to spark debate and even divisions within the church today. There is passion on every side as the very fabric of our future hope and how we live today seems to be at stake. Yet, the reality of the Revelation's nature is that it should awaken in us cosmic visions of the world in which we work, marry, have hobbies, serve the needy, and participate in community. *It should expand our view of reality*. And, as those who recognize our limitations to know the things of God, it should *increase our humility*. We must approach the Revelation not aiming to land in one particular spot. In doing so, we might be able in the Spirit to sharpen one another, learn from one another and challenge one another. But more so, we will build one another up in the love of and life with Jesus who is revealed and reveling.
- 3) Perhaps that is why we should study the Revelation; because it is not merely a book telling the future, it is a book about Jesus, from Jesus. It is a book that allows us to glimpse Jesus as he is, ruling and reigning over all of history, over every broken aspect of the world, and restoring through sacrificial judgment and mercy. Only when we recognize the Jesus we meet in the Revelation can we live like and for that Jesus today.

So, then the question arises, but *why the Revelation now?* Why use the Revelation for a letter to encourage God's people today, in a world of flesh and blood, and to dragons and scrolls? Why not an epistle of Paul's or one of the Gospels? Here too, the answer is layered:

- 1) G.K. Chesterton commented that "...though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators."¹ Perhaps much of the reason for the gross extremities of interpreting the Revelation stems from the often overlooked fact that our author John was a pastor. If together we read the Revelation in a pastoral context, we can read it in a

¹ Chesterton, G.K., *Orthodoxy*. (New York, NY: John Lane Co., 1908), 29.

context that remains familiar to us even if first-century Christianity does not. And in doing so, we might just discover as another pastor has that,

“...this book does not primarily call for decipherment, as if it were written in code, but that it evokes wonder, releasing metaphors that resonate meanings and refract insights in the praying imagination.”²

We will certainly try and answer some of the questions presented in the Revelation of Jesus, to understand its context in history and the biblical story. Yet, it is essential for us who are and desire to follow Jesus as our Chief Shepherd, to be refined by the work of pastorally reading Revelation.

- 2) Additionally, we are people whom Jesus calls “priests,” women and men desirous and designed to explain and proclaim the things of God for the repentance of the world and the building up of God’s family. There is perhaps no other singular book in Scripture that forces us into the entire biblical narrative through Jesus than does the Revelation. As one commentary argues,

“By one count, the four hundred and four verses in Revelation divulge some five hundred allusions to the Old Testament... John alludes to nearly every book in the Old Testament canon. Most of the references come from the Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel... John alludes to the New Testament in every chapter of his book... We do not expect that in exile on Patmos, John had access to all the scrolls of biblical and extrabiblical literature. Nor do we expect that John rolled and unrolled a particular scroll to find passages for the writing of his Revelation. Instead, we infer from his allusions and incomplete quotations in the Apocalypse that he relied on his memory for the teachings of the Scriptures. *From beginning to end, the entire fabric of Revelation is laced with thoughts and expressions taken from God’s written Word... We conclude that Revelation is truly the capstone of the entire canon of Scripture.* As such, the book must be seen in the light of the rest of the Bible.”³ (emphasis added)

Revelation will stretch our imagination *and* our biblical knowledge as we immerse ourselves in the words of Jesus revealed to John. Like John, we too will find ourselves connecting the dots of history and Scripture with increasing wonder and awe at the final ruling and reigning Jesus! Thus ones who will neither add to nor take away from the words written as we say with our brother, “Come Lord Jesus!”

² Peterson, Eugene. *Reverse Thunder: the revelation of John & the praying imagination*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1988), xiii.

³ Kistemaker, S. J., & Hendriksen, W., *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*. Vol. 20. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 17-18.

GROUND RULES FOR THE JOURNEY

Once we answer the why question, then we can answer *how*? In what manner are we going to walk through the world of the Revelation? What are the ground rules for our travel and expectation of our expedition?

Our manner will be that of **humble learners**. None of us—myself included—are experts. We all have much to learn along our journey: from one another and the Spirit. Likewise, there is no expectation for anyone to be a master of this or any other Scripture. We will all make comments and contributions that may not be “accurate” or on-point from time to time, but don’t let your limitations keep you from participating fully. Be more concerned about the building up of the community in Jesus than your status within the community.

Three rules will supplement our spirit of humility when we meet:

- 1) **Expect Differences.** We will certainly not all agree on every aspect of the Revelation. Yet, if we walk in a spirit of humility, our differences can sharpen us rather than divide. So, expect people to disagree, and that disagreement in a loving community is not rejection but rather an opportunity to be refined and deepen a relationship.
- 2) **Be Prepared.** Arrive each meeting having prayerfully read and meditated on the passage under discussion. Write down questions, thoughts, and observations in an organized way to contribute to the conversation. Do not show up with just “ideas” in your head!
- 3) **Live It.** In Revelation 10, John is told to “eat this book,” to digest what he is observing in a manner that he might “keep the words of this book” (22:7,9). We are told not to seal up this book but rather to let this prophecy help us live well and be holy (22:10-11). Remember that the Revelation is written to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, that we might remain steadfast to the life God has given us to live together in Jesus.

THE PATH

We will meet 11 times over the next several months. Before each meeting, you will be asked to read, pray, and think through a particular section of the Revelation. **For our first meeting, you'll be asked to work through this overview and read the entire book of the Revelation of Jesus.** Below are the dates we will meet and the specific passages we will be processing through together.

As you immerse yourself in the text, I suggest using the following ***questions to help you organize your observations.***

- 1) *What other biblical stories, metaphors, images, commands, etc., does this passage immediately bring to mind?*
 - a) *Secondarily, what connections does your Bible or commentators note?*
- 2) *How does this passage fit within the context of the singular story that the author is writing?*
 - a) *What comes before and after it?*
 - b) *How does it connect to both?*
 - c) *Do we see the parts or even the entirety of this passage again later in the story?*
- 3) *What emotions, ideas, and behaviors does this passage evoke within you?*
 - a) *In what way are you participating in the story?*
 - b) *How are you drawn into the metaphors and images?*
 - c) *How do they confuse you?*
- 4) *What questions are you left with from this passage?*

Now that we understand why we are immersing ourselves in the Revelation together and how we will go about it, let's see if we can find a common place to start our journey.

FINDING A STARTING PLACE

Again, the Revelation has met no limitations of interpretation throughout history. None of us are immune to the influences of any number of ways of thinking about the Revelation, regardless of if we can articulate a particular framework or not. To begin our journey together, we will need to establish a common footing from which to launch. There is no expectation that you hold with deep conviction every premise of our starting point. Still, we must start our conversations with an articulated framework for the journey.

AUTHORSHIP & STORY

While there are some that argue that the author of the Revelation was not the same John who authored the Gospel so named, we are going to work from the premise that the author of the Gospel and Revelation are indeed the same person. G.R. Osborne provides a concise argument for why,

“The problems of the authorship of Revelation are indeed formidable, for the author makes no explicit identification of himself with John, the apostle, and there are distinct differences between it and the Fourth Gospel (the authorship of which is also widely debated). Yet, there are good reasons for upholding the viability of Revelation as penned by the apostle John and for downplaying the differences between it and the Fourth Gospel. **First**, there is sufficient evidence of acceptance from the early church fathers (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria) to support apostolic authorship. **Second**, the similarities between the Gospel and the Apocalypse are sufficient to support that decision. The only two books in the NT to argue for the deity of Christ based on the ‘oneness motif’ between God and Jesus are John and the Apocalypse...Also, there is a similar mission theme between them, as God seeks to bring the world to repentance. Mounce (1998: 14) mentions that Zech. 12:10 is quoted in John 19:37 and Rev. 1:7 ‘using the same Greek verb (*ekkenteō*), which in turn is not used by the LXX [the Septuagint] and is found nowhere else in the NT.’ Ozanne (1965) finds a series of terms common to John and the Apocalypse: ‘conquer,’ ‘keep the word,’ ‘keep the commandments,’ ‘dwell,’ ‘sign,’ ‘witness,’ ‘true’; and Swete (1911: cxxx) concludes that the linguistic and grammatical data support a close affinity between John’s Gospel and the Apocalypse. In short, **the internal evidence supports the external witness of the earliest fathers**; and of the options... Johannine authorship makes the best sense.”⁴

Also, it is helpful to note the state of John’s authorship. If we understand *how* John constructed the Revelation, it will help us to more clearly recognize the single narrative that connects the often confusing layout of his vision letter. Here Trifton’s commentary is most helpful,

“There are passages in Revelation that seem to suggest John recorded his visions as they happened. Two initial commands for John to ‘write’ what he sees (1:11, 19) are followed, seven times, by a command to write a message to one of the seven churches (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). One can easily get the impression from chapters 2 and 3 that John is simply taking down dictation. Similar dictation is found in the beatitudes of 14:13 and 19:9. That John is writing during his actual visionary experience seems to be confirmed in 10:4, where he is about to write what the seven thunders said but is prohibited from doing so by a voice from heaven. A final command to write (21:5) seems to repeat the initial commands. We can imagine a situation, then, in which John, on the island of Patmos, entered into a visionary experience throughout which he was constantly writing—sometimes simply recording

⁴ Osborne, G. R., *Revelation*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 5-6.

dictation and at other times describing what he saw and heard. When the experience was over, the book was complete.

This rather simple and indeed obvious approach to the composition of the book does not explain everything, however. Minimally, the first eight verses of the book—*before* John begins to recount his experience—must have been written *after* his experience. Furthermore, when he does recount his experience, the verbs are in the *past* (Greek aorist) tense: ‘I was ... I was ... I heard ... I turned ... I saw ...’ (1:9, 10, 12), indicating that John recorded the circumstances under which he received the revelation *after* the fact, perhaps even after having left Patmos. Or consider the second trumpet (8:8–9). How does John know that a third of the living creatures in the sea died? He does not record anyone telling him the number. Did he *count* them? Or consider the binding of Satan (20:1–3). How does John know that Satan was bound for 1,000 years and that he is to be set free at the end of that period? Does his vision actually *last* for 1,000 years? Again, no one tells him these things.

To raise such questions is not to make light of John’s claim to have had a visionary experience. **The point is that there is more to the composition of Revelation than simply a person transcribing dictation and recording a series of visions as they happened.** It is clear that the book found its final form *after* John’s experience on the island of Patmos. In addition, the book gives indication that John has added material that he did not see or hear at the time—i.e., that he has *thought about* his experience. We might note that it is not unusual for scholars to suggest that Revelation is, in fact, a ‘literary fiction’ that John did not actually experience visions; rather, visions are the device he chose to organize the ideas he wished to communicate to his readers. But unless one begins with the assumption that visions do not happen, there is no reason to deny John’s claim to have experienced them. **Revelation is a literary presentation of John’s experience.**⁵ (emphasis added)

We see the importance of noting the author’s state when we outline the Revelation around John’s visual experiences. If he composes the final work after the visions, explicitly writing what he is told and adding that which he has processed in the Spirit, then we can see that each vision experience adds depth and vividness to the letter’s primary task: *to exhort and encourage the seven churches of Asia then and the church of Christ now until Jesus’ return*. Once again, we are back to the pastoral intent. The Revelation’s seemingly confusing flow is not the product of dictation from a divine vision experience but the purposeful and pastoral outline of a well-organized author. The organization of Revelation helps communicate its purposes.

According to Trafton, we can recognize four vision experiences introduced by a prologue, containing an interlude, and concluding with an epilogue. Each experience is presented with the phrase “in the Spirit.”

Prologue (1:1–8)

John’s first “in the Spirit” experience (1:9–3:22)

John’s second “in the Spirit” experience (4:1–11:19)

Three signs in heaven (12:1–16:21)

John’s third “in the Spirit” experience (17:1–20:15)

John’s fourth “in the Spirit” experience (21:1–22:6a)

Epilogue (22:6b–21).

⁵ Trafton, J. L., *Reading Revelation: a literary and theological commentary*. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2005), 8-9.

It is the overlap of the elements within these units which “propels the plot” forward as “...elements central to each unit are introduced in the previous one—e.g., the beast in 11:7, Babylon in 14:8, the Bride in 19:7. More generally, as we shall see, recurring images throughout the book tie the various sections together.”⁶

Using the four vision experiences to outline the book allows us to recognize that Revelation is not chronological—at least not in the manner our western literature has trained us to recognize. For example,

“...because readers typically read, for example, chapter 20 *after* they read chapter 13, they often assume that the events recorded in chapter 20 take place *later in time* than those recorded in chapter 13. But this is not a necessary assumption. To be sure, John provides temporal indicators with respect to the order in which he receives the visions (e.g., ‘after this,’ ‘then’), but it does not follow that the visions (or parts of them) cannot overlap. Scholars often speak of ‘recapitulation’ with respect to the visions in Revelation—i.e., that some parts of the book ‘recapitulate’ (cover the same ground as) earlier parts. The point here is not to impose a particular scheme (either recapitulation or strict chronology) upon the book, but to raise the possibility that **some parts of Revelation may treat the same period of time, but from different angles**. With respect to issues of the temporal order of events, readers must take their cue *from the text*, not from assumptions based upon when they read things.”⁷ (emphasis added)

Such understanding of the author’s state helps us remain faithful to the Revelation’s direction when we begin to get “lost in the weeds” of what can prove confusing parts of this remarkable story. As we will see,

“John presents sets of illustrations that convey a number of events, yet these events must be perceived as different aspects of the same sequence of occurrence. **With every additional set, new light is cast on the illustrations, so that the reader gains a better understanding of the message of the Apocalypse**. Not John but God, who has enhanced its composition with extraordinary care, proves to be the great architect of this remarkable book. Revelation reveals unequaled precision and planning with respect to its structure, use of numbers and figures, and choice of words. The last book in the Bible demonstrates God’s handiwork from beginning to end.”⁸ (emphasis added)

⁶ Ibid. 10.

⁷ Ibid. 13.

⁸ Kistemaker & Hendriksen, 11–12.

CONTEXT

Similar to how knowing the author and how he constructed the book helps keep us on the most fruitful path through the Revelation, so too does understanding the context in which the letter was written.

There have been in recent history arguments around the Revelation's context regarding the first-century setting in which it was penned. According to Mounce, "The majority of scholars place the composition of the Apocalypse either during the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81-96) or toward the end or immediately after the reign of Nero (A.D. 54-68)."⁹ The internal and historical evidence demonstrates that the readers of the Revelation were in the midst of conflict. Aspects of that conflict were physical persecution, social ostracizing, and internal pressures to compromise in their pursuit of following Jesus. Again, Osborne is most helpful,

"It is clear that the seven churches were in a hostile environment from two directions—the Jewish world and the Roman world. The 'synagogue of Satan' (2:9; 3:9) had turned against them. Relations between church and synagogue, never good from the start, deteriorated in the last couple of decades of the first century, and Revelation reflects that situation. Judaism had a special privilege that the Romans allowed only them, freedom from worshipping the Roman gods and participating in the Greco-Roman cults. Christianity was considered part of Judaism at least through the Jewish War (a.d. 66–70) and also benefited from this privilege. However, Judaism tried more and more to separate itself from Christianity and get the Roman Empire to recognize that Christianity was not exempt. This probably caused some of the pressure reflected in the book. Bredin... points to the Judean tax that the Romans imposed on Jews for the rebuilding of the Capitoline temple. It was this tax that allowed the Jews freedom from participation in the imperial cult. Christians refused to pay this tax; thus, the Jews denounced Christians as not being true Judeans and as being troublemakers.

...Christians felt a great deal of economic and social pressure to participate in Roman life, including the trade guilds with their idolatrous feasts and cultic practices as well as the imperial cult. Beale... describes the pressure to compromise with the guilds, especially the annual feast honoring each guild's patron deities as well as the emperor (the Nicolaitan cult gave in to these pressures). When Christians refused to do so, a great deal of antipathy was naturally directed against them. This situation is reflected in the seven letters, in the 'affliction' they were experiencing (2:9), and in the imminent intensification of that affliction to the point of imprisonment and death (2:10; cf. 13:10). *While there is no developed persecution in the book, there was a great deal of daily opposition as well as signs of intensification on the near horizon.*

Therefore, Yarbro Collins's thesis overstates the situation. There is more than a perceived crisis, for difficulties have actually begun. Still, her basic point is correct, for **Revelation presents a counter reality to the prevailing reality of the Roman world, a transcendent realm in which the people of God are part of a counterculture and are willing to suffer for it...** written to persuade the readers to take action against pressures to conform to pagan ways, encouraging the faithful to persevere, and warning the weak against compromise. Yet it must be added that John also writes to encourage the persecuted believers to remain true and to promise them that God would vindicate them for their suffering."¹⁰ (emphasis added)

Revelation is written to encourage and exhort, to help those called by Jesus to remain faithful, hopeful, and empowered to persevere with Jesus and one another.

⁹ Mounce, Robert H. *The Book of Revelation*. NICNT. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 15-16.

¹⁰ Ibid. 11-12.

TYPE OF LITERATURE

The Revelation is both prophecy and apocalyptic literature. While some argue that it is impossible to distinguish between the two definitively, it is most helpful for us to note each's features to immerse in the world of the Revelation fully. Trafton makes a compelling argument first to understand the Revelation to be prophecy. He provides a helpful way for understanding the concept of “prophecy” in biblical history that is often confused in our modern conceptualization and experience.

“The starting point for understanding any piece of writing is recognizing what it claims about itself. If we read a newspaper editorial as merely a presentation of facts or a biography of a great woman as fiction or a science fiction novel as a representation of the universe as it really is, then we will misread it.

The same is true for Revelation. Our starting point must be to try to determine what sort of book it claims to be. To our delight, we learn at the outset that the author calls his book ‘prophecy’ (1:3). But therein lies the problem. *Modern culture equates prophecy with prediction.* To say that Revelation is prophecy, then, suggests to many readers that it is a book that predicts the future. Hence, readers typically interpret the book against modern events in order to see if its ‘prophecies’ are being fulfilled in the world today.

But to do so is to misunderstand the meaning of ‘prophecy’ in the ancient world. In the Old Testament, prophecy involved communicating a message from God. In Deut 18:18, God tells Moses, ‘I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.’ *The prophet speaks God’s message.* Similarly, when appointing Aaron as Moses’ spokesman in Exod 7:1–2, God says to Moses, ‘See, I make you as God to Pharaoh; and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you; and Aaron, your brother shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land.’ The Old Testament prophets served as spokespeople for God, relaying his word to the Israelites. *To be sure, God’s message could include predictions (e.g., Jeremiah’s prediction of the fall of Jerusalem), but such predictions were part of a larger message designed for the present situation (e.g., Jeremiah’s critique of faithless Israel).*

That *prophecy is the communication of a message from God for the present situation* is also the understanding of the New Testament. Paul characterizes prophecy (a manifestation of the Spirit—1 Cor 12:7, 10) as speaking to people ‘for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation’ (1 Cor 14:3). When the disciples speak in tongues on the day of Pentecost—an event accompanied by a citation of Joel 2:28–32 in which ‘prophesying’ is mentioned twice (Acts 2:17, 18)—such speaking signifies the present activity of the Holy Spirit as the disciples tell their listeners of ‘the mighty works of God’ (Acts 2:11). Even in the case of Agabus’s prophecy, which predicts Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem, the focus is on the fact that it is a message from the Holy Spirit (Acts 21:10–11). The fact that it is a prediction does not make it any less relevant to the immediate concern of Paul, the one to whom it was given. Paul could have chosen to break off his trip to Jerusalem had he been so inclined.

John’s claim that his book is prophecy is consistent with this background. The opening word of the book, *apokalupsis* (from which comes the oft-used designation ‘the Apocalypse’), identifies it as a ‘revelation,’ which invokes the notion of uncovering something that is hidden. Hence, by speaking of a ‘revelation of Jesus Christ,’ ***John claims that the contents of the book are not his own ideas; rather, they have been given to him by Jesus Christ, who, in turn, received them from God*** (1:1). Furthermore, he understands that he has been commissioned to pass along this revelation to other Christians, specifically the seven churches of the province of Asia (1:1, 11). This identification of the book as a revelation, therefore, confirms its place within the classic understanding of prophecy.

The starting point for understanding the book, then, will be to take seriously the book’s claim to be prophecy—i.e., to see it as a message that, according to its author, has been given to him by God to pass along to a specific group of Christians in his day. A proper approach to Revelation as prophecy will help us focus our attention on what it

claims to be: a book for first-century Christians. **While this approach will not discount altogether the possibility that the book contains predictions, it will enable us to keep such predictions in their proper perspective when we encounter them.**"¹¹ (emphasis added)

Revelation is a message from God to a particular people at a particular time; thus, it is undoubtedly prophecy. In turn, it was meant for more than just the original hearers, as our author is commanded to exhort us to,

"...not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. Let the evil doer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy." (Rev. 22:10-11)

Jesus is depicted as returning to overcome fully all that is broken and evil, establishing in full those who are his in the new city (Rev. 21-22). Because of Jesus' return, the Revelation words are to resonate within God's children until such actions are made final (Rev. 22:12-20). Thus we need to understand how this prophecy connects to time beyond its original audience. It is here that the literary type of Revelation becomes most helpful. For, the book of Revelation is *apocalyptic*.

Barclay notes that,

"Between the Old and the New Testaments, there grew up a great mass of what is called apocalyptic literature, **the product of an indestructible Jewish hope**...History for the Jews was a catalog of disasters from which it became clear that no human deliverer could rescue them."¹² (emphasis added)

Bartholomew and Goheen argue that it was during this intertestamental period, especially after the Maccabean revolt, that,

"Many who looked to the Torah [the first five books of the OT] for understanding now identified Rome with the prophet Daniel's vision of the last and worst of four 'beasts' rising out of the sea: 'There before me was a fourth beast—terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts.' (Daniel 7:7)... During this period, about ten or twelve revolutionary movements arose around a messianic or quasi-messianic figure."¹³

It was Israel's longing for the promise of God through the prophets to come to fruition, a restoration of God's cosmic rule that compelled them to look for a messiah, an anointed one, a Christ to deliver them and destroy all that opposed God and his people. Often such desires resulted in rebellions against the status quo and also in the form of writing that encouraged faithful opposition to occupying forces and allegiance to God's kingdom.

"The image that best captured Israel's expectation was the 'kingdom of God.' Israel looked to a day when there would be 'no king but God.'...Until that day, the faithful of Israel lived in hope; they prayed, studied the Scriptures,

¹¹ Trafton, 1-3.

¹² Barclay, William. *The Revelation of John*. Vol. 1. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 1976), 2-3.

¹³ Bartholomew, C. G., Goheen, M.W., *The Drama of Scripture: finding our place in the biblical story*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 121-122.

celebrated the festivals to keep hope alive, remained faithful to the Torah, and continued to be ready for military actions.”¹⁴

One of the means for fostering perseverance in their hope was apocalyptic literature. Barclay¹⁵ offers the main features of these **writings meant to stir awe and wonder, hope, and endurance**. A typical pattern for apocalyptic literature during the time between the OT and NT is as follows:

1. In apocalyptic literature, the Messiah was a divine, pre-existent, other-worldly figure of power and glory, waiting to descend into the world to begin his all-conquering career...there was nothing human or gentle about the Messiah...
2. The coming of the Messiah was to be preceded by Elijah's return, who would prepare a way for him (Malachi 4:5-6).
3. The last terrible times were known as 'the travail of the Messiah.' The coming of the messianic age would be like the agony of birth.
4. The last days will be a time of terror.
5. The last days will be a time when the world will be shattered, a time of cosmic upheaval when the universe, as we know it, will disintegrate.
6. The last days will be a time when human relationships will be destroyed.
7. The last days will be a time of judgment.
8. In all these visions, the Gentiles have their place—but it is not always the same place.
9. In the last days, the Jews who have been scattered throughout the earth will be gathered into the holy city again.
10. In the last days, the New Jerusalem, which is already prepared in heaven with God (4 Ezra 10:44-49; 2 Brauch 4:2-6), will come down among men and women.
11. An essential part of the apocalyptic picture of the last days was the resurrection of the dead.
12. There are differences in how long the messianic kingdom was to last. The most natural—and the most usual—view was to think of it lasting forever.

Likewise, most apocalyptic writings contained *blessings*, **for they were not written to merely frighten with the power of God but to encourage in the steadfast mercy of God.**

1. The divided kingdom will be untied again.
2. There will be in the world amazing fertility.
3. A consistent part of the dream of the new age was that in it, all wars would cease.
4. One of the loveliest ideas concerning the new age was that there would be no more conflict between wild animals or between human beings and the animal world.

¹⁴ Ibid. 124.

¹⁵ Barclay, 7-13.

5. The coming age will bring the end of weariness, sorrow, and pain.
6. The age to come will be an age of righteousness.

As Barclay concludes, “**The book of Revelation is the New Testament representation of all these apocalyptic works** which tell the terrors before the end of time and of the blessings of the age to come, and it uses all the familiar imagery.”¹⁶ (emphasis added)

There are certain aspects of apocalyptic literature that are unique and important to note in the Revelation. Specifically, “...it is not pseudonymous...and ultimate victory is not centered just on the future intervention of God but on the ‘past sacrifice of Jesus Christ, ‘the Lamb that was slain ‘(5:5; 7:14; 12:11).”¹⁷ Likewise, there is a unity in the Revelation that is often missing in apocalyptic literature which told partial stories or inconsistent stories.

Osborne argues that the following definition fits Revelation well,

“Apocalyptic entails the revelatory communication of heavenly secrets by an otherworldly being to a seer who presents the visions in a narrative framework; the visions guide readers into a transcendent reality that takes precedence over the current situation and encourages readers to persevere in the midst of their trials. **The visions reverse normal experience by making the heavenly mysteries the real world and depicting the present crisis as a temporary, illusory situation.** This is achieved via God’s transforming the world for the faithful.”¹⁸ (emphasis added)

Osborne goes on to note that, similar to the time between testaments, Revelation’s fundamental perspective is “...the exhortation to endure persecution on the basis of **the transcendent reality of God’s kingdom in the present as grounded in God’s control of the future.** Therefore the temporal world of temptation and pressure to conform to secular demands can be endured when one realizes that God is ‘the one who is and who was and who is to come’ (1:4b), that is, the same God who controlled the past and will control the future is still in control in the present, even though it does not seem like it.”¹⁹ (emphasis added)

Thus, the Revelation has a similar purpose to the writings between the Messiah's promised arrival and his flesh-and-blood birth. Now, the people of God, longing for the fullness of his Kingdom between Jesus’ earthly resurrection and his concluding return, need a vivid, awe-striking, compelling picture of the new hope for those to remain faithful and active within the in-between. An image more than the merely inspired creation of passionate and studied Jews (it is not insignificant to note the absence of intertestamental apocalyptic literature from our cannon even while the Revelation is included). *A vision, a prophecy, a picture from God himself that would shape his people's imagination towards living now and forever.* Needed was a writing meant to stir awe and wonder, hope, and endurance as the word and through the Word of God.

¹⁶ Ibid. 13.

¹⁷ Osborne, 13-14.

¹⁸ Ibid. 14.

¹⁹ Ibid. 14-15.

INFLUENTIAL SOURCES

One of the reasons we are immersing ourselves in the Revelation is the clear connection it has to Scripture's entire canon. There is no scholarly unity on the number of OT references, nor do all agree on how aware of specific NT writings was the author. Still, the consensus is that John knew God's story throughout history and saw Christ as the main character, continuation, and fruition of that same story.

Eugene Peterson argues,

"In the opening words of the Apocalypse, 'the revelation of Jesus Christ,' the preposition 'of' carries a double meaning: the revelation is *about* Jesus Christ; the revelation comes *by means of* Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is both the *content* of the revelation and the *agent* of revelation. Jesus Christ is the way in which God reveals himself to us; Jesus Christ is also God himself revealed to us.

It follows then that the Revelation is, in the first place, not information about the bad world that we live in, or a report on the first-century church under persecution. First of all, it is a proclamation by and about Jesus Christ. Items regarding future and past are introduced insofar as they are useful in providing material that is expositional of Jesus Christ. **The Revelation is nothing if not focused on Jesus Christ.**"²⁰ (emphasis added)

While John will allude to the OT from chapter 1 verse 1 to chapter 22 verse 21, we must note that he is not just repainting the same picture. Such was the issue with the intertestamental apocalyptic literature. In many ways, they were attempts to repaint the perceived image of God's judgment and mercy, redemption, and wrath in a modern context. Revelation is different. The Holy Spirit, through John, paints an entirely new picture for God's people! **A picture which certainly includes the OT, but in the clarity and consummation of Jesus that surpasses it!** What was glimpsed in the OT was but a small preview, a corner piece, of the grand portrait of Jesus!

Keeping the expansive nature of the Revelation in mind, we can observe that there are at least four agreed-upon sources that influenced John's writing. The first source is the OT itself. On the OT, Osborne argues that Revelation,

"...has no actual quotation yet far more allusions than any other NT book. *These allusions are as essential to understanding the book as the symbolism.* Virtually every point made comes in some way via an OT allusion. Contrary to popular opinion, the Book of Daniel is not the key to the Apocalypse. Isaiah, Zechariah, and Ezekiel are found almost as often. The key interpretive element is typology. As in the Gospels with Jesus, now the current time of trouble and the final conflagration are presented as reliving and fulfilling the prophecies of the OT."²¹

The second source is extra-biblical resources, specifically the apocalyptic literature between the testaments on which Trafton notes,

"A second source for John's imagery is Jewish books written between the Old Testament period and John's day, a period commonly known as the Second Temple period, especially those writings (or sections of writings) deemed by scholars as 'apocalyptic'...Some of the more important Jewish writings of this sort...include *1 Enoch*, *2 Enoch*, *4 Ezra*, *2 Baruch*, *3 Baruch*, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, and the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*...While apocalyptic writings and generalizations drawn by scholars about them must not be given an overly privileged status in

²⁰ Peterson, 26-27.

²¹ Osborne, 1-2.

interpreting Revelation, readers who familiarize themselves with these writings will find the imagery in Revelation to be much less foreboding. ***Ancient authors really did write about weird-looking creatures with extra appendages, and they expected their readers to understand what they meant!***²² (emphasis added)

The third source is the New Testament. Regarding the NT, there are some, like Trafton, who argue that John was not aware of the letters we have in our bibles. Therefore, one cannot use the NT to interpret the Revelation, and any connection to other NT books can illustrate the meaning of the Revelation but cannot determine it. Others, like Kistemaker and Hendriksen, argue that John alludes to the NT directly in every chapter of the book, suggesting that John is referencing these letters directly. Regardless of where you fall on the debate, *what is important to notice is that Revelation is consistent with both the Old and New Testaments*. You cannot read Revelation and not think of the Gospels or any epistle. As we already noted,

“From beginning to end, the entire fabric of Revelation is laced with thoughts and expressions taken from God’s written Word...We conclude that Revelation is truly the capstone of the entire canon of Scripture. As such, the book must be seen in the light of the rest of the Bible.”²³

A final source for John must be noted. John wrote in language familiar to his audience. So, the images John uses are contextually familiar. As Trafton argues,

“...John uses images from the Graeco-Roman world in which both he and his readers lived. Archaeological and literary knowledge of the seven cities of Asia and, more generally, the province of Asia itself can shed significant light on John’s message... The principle here is that certain images become part of a common culture and are readily understandable only as a part of that culture. The reader might consider, as a modern example, the way in which political cartoons use stock images of, say, elephants and donkeys to signify Republicans and Democrats, respectively.”²⁴

Understanding the various influences on John’s interpretation of his visions will help us immerse in the world that Revelation creates, a world where Jesus the Christ is the beginning and the end. Indeed, as Barclay notes,

“When we embark upon the study of Revelation, we feel ourselves projected into *a different world*.”²⁵

²² Trafton, 11-12.

²³ Kistemaker & Hendriksen, 18.

²⁴ Trafton, 11-12.

²⁵ Barclay, 1.

THE QUESTION OF REVELATION

Perhaps one of the reasons, at least from our modern perspective, that the Revelation world is so “different” for us is the use of imagery, metaphor, and symbolism. Trafton notes that the unavoidable question we all face when journeying in Revelation is,

*“...how does one go about making sense of the strange imagery in this book? To some, the answer seems obvious: take it literally (though one wonders how many really do so). But Revelation itself gives indication that the imagery is not to be understood in this manner. For example, is a promise to become a literal pillar in the temple of God really supposed to inspire the reader to become a conqueror (3:12)? Are we really to envision the rider on the white horse slaying his enemies with a literal sword that comes out of his mouth (19:21)? **There is no virtue in taking literally something that is intended figuratively.** Indeed, John essentially invites the reader to adopt a figurative approach to his book with the use in 1:1 of *esemanen* (‘he made known’), a word that typically refers to making something known in ‘signs.’ The reader must recognize that figurative language abounds in Revelation...*To acknowledge the presence of figurative language in Revelation is not, however, to give free rein to readers to interpret it as they please.* The reader’s task is to focus on how John intended for his readers to understand the visual imagery he used. This requires taking into account two factors. First, *painting pictures with words is never an exact science, especially when one is attempting to describe the indescribable—i.e., the things of God.* Although it has inspired many an artist over the centuries, Revelation remains a literary document. Second, to paint his pictures verbally, John uses imagery that is familiar to himself and, presumably, to his readers.”²⁶ (emphasis added)*

It is therefore imperative that we understand that there is imagery and symbolism in the Revelation **and** that not every detail is symbolic!

“The message is primary, the details secondary. Unless the message demands an interpretation of the individual parts, we should refrain from looking for a deeper meaning for each component. Not all the information in the Apocalypse is symbolic. If the writer states that the grass is green (8:7) and that a breast-plate is red, blue, and yellow (9:17), he merely describes the objects. When words like *green, blue, or yellow* occur only once in a given context, we have no basis to suspect symbolical language. Other passages relate to history, such as the author’s exile on the island of Patmos (1:9); the Lord’s Day (1:10); the letters to the seven churches (chapters 2 and 3); and the concluding verses of chapter 22...”²⁷

It will be for us to help one another work to tell the difference! What is important to note for us is that,

“...the Jewish mind of the first century received and presented information by means of pictures, illustrations, and symbols. By contrast, the Greek mind of that era dealt with abstract concepts that it analyzed and explained with clear verbal exactness...”²⁸

The Greek mindset is often ours. Perhaps that is why we have all the charts and graphs in many interpretive frameworks! **We long for the exactness of details when we need to be satisfied with the new picture's vividness.**

²⁶ Trafton, 10-12.

²⁷ Kistemaker, & Hendriksen, 16.

²⁸ Ibid.

“...Although John had spent considerable time in a Greek environment and wrote his book in the Greek language, his composition reflects an Eastern mindset that communicates revelation with the aid of pictorial images. The Hebrew mind sees God as a fortress, a rock, a shield, and a stronghold (Ps. 18:2). **And these images must be viewed in their totality and not with respect to each individual detail.**”²⁹ (emphasis added)

For our purposes, it is necessary to understand that there are things in the Revelation that are symbolic and literal. *There is no need to try and fit all the pieces of the Revelation into one box*³⁰. What is necessary, is the humility to approach the text as a conversation in the Spirit and a few general principles that help us hear with similar ears what the first audience of the Revelation heard. A few general principles are:

- Symbols *can* depict literal events.
- Apocalyptic literature was not meant to be predictive in precise detail *but* rather to stir up imagination and hope.
- Many of the symbols and images that are non-literal—or at least signify something more than themselves—have *a history of doing so throughout Scripture* and are *used with repetition* throughout the Revelation.

- For example, the numbers 4, 7, 10, and 12 signify wholeness or completeness throughout Scripture, and in the Revelation, we find these numbers used repetitively throughout the story:

“...as in the four corners of the earth or the four winds, the use of seven throughout Scripture, or the twelve tribes and twelve apostles...terms and ideas occur four times (four corners [7:1; 20:8]; four winds [7:1]; fourfold division of creation [8:7–8; 14:7; 16:2–3]; fourfold designation of the nations... ‘the one who lives forever and ever’ [4:9, 10; 10:6; 15:7]) or seven times (the seven spirits; sevenfold doxologies; seven seals, trumpets, and bowls; seven beatitudes; several titles of God [Lord God Almighty, the one who sits on the throne] or Christ [Christ; Jesus—14 times; Jesus as “witness;” Christ’s “coming;” Lamb—28 times]; the nations as “peoples, tribes, languages, and nations”; the Spirit—14 times; prophecy) in the book...all these cannot merely be coincidental. *It seems likely that John has written his book carefully to signify the perfect plan of God and the completeness of his work.* This does not mean that no number can be literal. There were, of course, twelve tribes and twelve apostles, but even that number was chosen by God for theological reasons. 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.”³¹

- Other numbers that have symbolic importance are:

“...the number *one* denotes unity, which for the Jews was codified in their creed: ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one’ (Deut. 6:4). *Two* is the number of persons needed to validate a testimony in a court of law; in the Apocalypse (11:3) two witnesses are God’s representatives of the church on earth. The

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ It will prove helpful to read the appendix on page 20 of this document for a brief look at 4 views of interpretation Revelation.

³¹ Osborne, 17–18.

number *three* describes the triune God (1:4–5). *Four* refers to God’s creation, as is evident from the four directions of the winds and the four seasons of the year. *Five* is a round number and as such does not have much symbolic significance. Thus, five months (9:5, 10) means a period of indefinite duration. *Six* symbolizes Satan’s reaching for completeness but always failing to achieve it; hence the number of the beast is a triple six (Rev. 13:18). Everywhere in Scripture, but especially in the Apocalypse, *seven* signifies completeness. The number *ten* depicts fullness in the decimal system, the number *twelve* exemplifies perfection, and the number *one thousand* intimates a multitude. Hence, the figure *12,000 stadia* describing the length, width, and height of the new Jerusalem relates to perfection in the form of a cube (21:16). A cube has twelve edges, that is, four at the top and four at the bottom with four on the sides. An edge measures 12,000 stadia, which times twelve equals 144,000 stadia. The thickness or height of the city walls is 144 cubits, which is the square of twelve. Last, the twelve tribes of Israel each consisting of 12,000 make a total of 144,000 (7:4–8), which is also the number of the redeemed who stand before the Lamb (14:1, 3).

John saw the number of mounted troops destroyed by four angels to be 200,000,000 (9:16). This number symbolizes an incalculable army of men and horses designated as the forces opposed to God, his Anointed, and his people. The angels are released to destroy these forces, so that a third of mankind is killed. The author’s use of the expression ‘time, times and a half a time’ (12:14) accords with 42 months and 1,260 days (11:2, 3; 12:6; 13:5). The expression ‘time, times and a half a time’ derives from Daniel 7:25, which refers to a period of three and a half years. The numbers clearly convey a symbolic message, for no one is able to pinpoint the exact date of fulfillment.”³²

You can already see how quickly we can get lost in the weeds of the Revelation! That is why we must remind ourselves why we most often get confused and what we must do to remain sure-footed along the journey. Thus we need to be confronted with a clear challenge,

“There is no doubt that Revelation is a strange book. But **what obscures its meaning as much as anything is when readers bring to it all sorts of preconceived notions** such as prophecy as prediction, Revelation as instantaneous transcription, a confused sense of what it means to take something ‘literally,’ the necessity of viewing Revelation within the larger context of Old Testament ‘prophecies,’ the priority of New Testament ‘parallels,’ order of reading as the order of events, and Revelation as allegory, not to mention a vague (or sometimes very precise!) understanding of what Revelation is ‘supposed’ to mean, at least according to self-styled ‘prophecy experts’! *The reader who truly desires to ‘hear what the Spirit says to the churches’ must lay aside all such preconceived notions and let the text speak for itself.*

At the opening of the book John pronounces a blessing on the one ‘who reads aloud the words of the prophecy’ and on ‘those who hear it, and who keep what is written therein’ (1:3). **John does not expect his readers to study his manuscript; rather, they will hear it read.** As they hear it, they will make connections between one scene and another, sometimes being led to anticipate what will follow, at other times building upon images to which they have already been introduced. **As they do so, they will reconstruct the story world underlying the revelation he has received.** In other words, *John invites his readers to use their imaginations.*”³³ (emphasis added)

³² Kistemaker & Hendriksen, 13–14.

³³ Trafton, 14.

PURPOSE OF IMAGINATION

The idea of using our imagination when studying Scripture might frighten some of us. Such fear is not without merit. If we approach the word of God humbly, rightly seeing that his ways are much higher than ours (Is. 55:8-9), then we are in an excellent position to receive *wisdom* (Ps. 1:7).

Maybe expressly because of such humility, a recognition of our place in God's world, we can begin to appreciate what God is doing in revealing to us himself. He is awakening us to a new world, revealing a world that is his. A world that is dying but being redeemed. A world that has a future far beyond what we can perceive or even dream. For the Revelation to be a book meant to awaken our imagination means it is a book designed to help us see as God sees, to recognize God's goodness, greatness, graciousness, and glory.

You might ask why imagination? Why not just knowledge? Merriam-Webster defines imagination this way,

"the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality."

Our brokenness, that same brokenness that requires us to approach Scripture and God himself with humility, has a dimness, an inability to "wholly" perceive our true reality. Because Christ Jesus calls us friends (Jn. 15) and gives us his Spirit that we might know him and the Father in a way unimaginable prior to his life, death, and resurrection (Jn. 14-16; Heb. 7-10), we can know that we are meant to have all our senses awakened to a world so much more significant, so much fuller, so much more expansive in time and space than what we can perceive today. Jesus promises that someday what is veiled will be made transparent (Lk. 8:16-18). Until that day, we strive to grow up into the fullness of who Christ has created and called us to be (Eph. 4:1). To do so, we need imagination.

Not creativity for creativity's sake. Not selfish production of what we perceive as beauty or depth of emotion; but *an image which overwhelms all our senses so that we might wholly perceive that which is our reality* which has been a mystery for the ages. Imagination, because it invigorates all our senses and emotions, can compel us to live in what is imagined. Positively, it means we can live in a world of the Revelation. The world of an intimate Savior King who controls all that oppose and oppress his people and will wholly and successfully overcome those forces, establishing an eternal place of harmony! A world in which our faith family lived and a world we are invited to live in as well.

There was a season in the ministry of Eugene Peterson in which each Monday morning he would retreat to the woods of Maryland to re-imagine. Like all of us, the busyness of life and the stresses of ministry dulled him to the vast beauty, creativity, provision, and magnificence of God and the world Peterson inhabited. While reflecting on these re-imagining treks, he commented,

*"What walking through Maryland forests does to my bodily senses, reading the Revelation does to my faith perceptions. For I am quite as dull to the marvelous word of Christ's covenant as I am his creation...A few paragraphs into the Revelation, the adrenalin starts rushing through the arteries of my faith, and I am on my feet alive, tingling. It is impossible to read the Revelation and not have my imagination aroused. **The Revelation both forces and enables me to look at what is spread before me, and to see it with fresh eyes.** It forces me because,*

being the last book of the bible, I cannot finish the story apart from it. It enables me because, by using the unfamiliar language of apocalyptic vision, my imagination is called into vigorous play.”³⁴ (emphasis added)

My prayer for you and me is that our imaginations would be called into vigorous play over these next few months as we find ourselves immersed in the world of Revelation! May the Spirit of God who fills us grant us eyes to see and ears to hear the images and words of our Savior King!

³⁴ Peterson, x.

APPENDIX | Methods of Interpretation

Osborne³⁵ provides a helpful summary of the four most common methods of interpreting the Revelation.

Historicist. This approach began with Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth century. He claimed that a vision had told him the 1,260 days of the Apocalypse prophesied the events of Western history from the time of the apostles until the present. The Franciscans followed Joachim and like him interpreted the book as relating to pagan Rome and the papacy (due to corruption in the church). Later the Reformers (e.g., Luther and Calvin) also favored this method, with the pope as the Antichrist (see Beckwith 1919: 327–29; Johnson 1981: 409). Classical dispensational thinking took this approach with regard to the letters to the seven churches, believing that the letters prophesied the seven periods of the church age. Also, the so-called prophecy movement, those preachers who see every detail in OT as well as NT apocalyptic symbolism as fulfilled in current events (the “newspaper approach” to prophecy), would be aligned with this school. Proponents of this method have tended to take Rev. 2–19, including the seals, trumpets, and bowls as well as the interludes, as prophetic of salvation history, that is, the development of church history within world history. Thus the beast/Antichrist has been variously identified with the pope, Napoleon, Mussolini, or Hitler. Because of its inherent weaknesses (its identification only with Western church history, the inherent speculation involved in the parallels with world history, the fact that it must be reworked with each new period in world history, the total absence of any relevance for John or his original readers; see also Beale 1999: 46), few scholars today take this approach.

Preterist. This approach argues that the details of the book relate to the present situation in which John lived rather than to a future period. Thus the symbols refer to events in the first-century world as experienced by the original readers, and John is telling them how God would deliver them from their oppressors. There are three basic approaches to the book from within this school of thought. The two most popular relate the book to the situation of the church in the Roman Empire. The first (taken by critical scholars like R. H. Charles, Sweet, and Roloff) views the book as written about Roman oppression and the fall of the Roman Empire. Due to the development of the imperial cult, pressure to conform and the resultant persecution have become serious threats to the church. The beast thus would be the Roman Empire or the Roman emperor, and the seals, trumpets, and bowls are contemporary judgments God is pouring (or soon will pour) upon Rome itself. Thus the book describes the conflict between church and state, between faithfulness to God and compromise with the pagan world.

The second is taken by many modern critics (Yarbro Collins, L. Thompson, Krodel, Barr) who argue that there was little persecution and a perceived crisis rather than a real one. The church is still called out from the “world” to follow God, but it is an internal spiritual crisis rather than external persecution. Osiek (1996: 343–44) says the eschatology of the book is not a timetable for the future but a reinterpretation of the present. It provides a spatial interaction between the earthly and the heavenly so as to give new meaning to the present situation. In this case the symbols provide alternative worlds that the readers have to choose between, the transcendent realm of God and the church or the alternative secular world of Rome. The problem of the book then is compromise, as seen in the Nicolaitan cult, and the solution is true worship of Christ (see esp. Krodel).

A third option is to take the book as written before a.d. 70 and prophesying the fall of Jerusalem as God’s judgment upon apostate Israel for rejecting the Messiah and persecuting the church (so Gentry, Chilton). The beast is Rome, the kings from the east are the Roman generals who brought the Roman army from the eastern boundary of the empire to destroy Jerusalem, and Armageddon is the siege of Jerusalem itself. For Kraybill (1999: 32–35) the white horse of 6:1–2 is Rome and the red horse of 6:3–4 is the Jewish War of a.d. 66–70.

This third approach is least viable, not only because it necessitates an early date of writing but because it limits the universal language of the book (all “peoples, languages, tribes, and nations”) to the Jewish people. Nevertheless,

³⁵ Osborne, 18–22.

the first two are also problematic because they would involve an error of prophecy (which many critical scholars state openly) since final judgment and the end of the world did not come with the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century.

Idealist. This popular approach argues that the symbols do not relate to historical events but rather to timeless spiritual truths (see Hendriksen, Hoekema, P. Hughes). As such, it relates primarily to the church between the advents, that is, between Christ's first and second comings. Thus it concerns the battle between God and evil and between the church and the world at all times in church history. The seals, trumpets, and bowls depict God's judgments on sinners at all times, and the beast refers to all the anti-Christian empires and rulers in history. Thus the book describes the victory of Christ and his people down through history. The millennium in this approach is not a future event but the final cycle of the book (so Hendriksen) describing the church age. There are certain strengths in this view: the centrality of theology for the book, the relevance for the church at all times, the symbolic nature of the book. But it has certain weaknesses as well: the absence of historical connections, the failure to see the future nature of many of the prophecies or to connect them in any way with history (as it seems the text does in several instances).

Futurist. This was the method employed by some of the earliest fathers (e.g., Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus), but with the triumph of the allegorical method (taking a spiritual approach to the book) after Origen and of the amillennial view after Augustine and Ticonius, the futurist method (and chiliasm) was not seen again for over a thousand years. The first to develop once more a literal view of the book was Franciscus Ribeira, a Spanish Jesuit who wrote in the late sixteenth century to counter the Reformation antipapal interpretation. While he was not truly a futurist, he turned the attention back to the early fathers, and after him that view returned to prominence and stands alongside the others as equally viable.

Futurism believes that chapters 4–22 refer primarily to events that will take place at the end of history and usher in the eschaton. There are two forms of this approach, dispensationalism and what has been called "classical premillennialism." Dispensationalists believe that God has brought about his plan of salvation in a series of dispensations or stages centering on his election of Israel to be his covenant people. Therefore, the church age is a parenthesis in this plan, as God turned to the Gentiles until the Jewish people find national revival (Rom. 11:25–32). At the end of that period, the church will be raptured, inaugurating a seven-year tribulation period in the middle of which the Antichrist will make himself known (Rev. 13) and instigate the "great tribulation" or great persecution of the 144,000 and others among Israel who have become Christians. At the end of that period will come the parousia as Christ returns in judgment, followed by a literal millennium (20:1–10), great white throne judgment (20:11–15), and the beginning of eternity in heavenly bliss (21:1–22:5). Classical premillennialism is similar but does not hold to dispensations. Thus there is only one return of Christ, after the tribulation period (Matt. 24:29–31; cf. Rev. 19:11–21), and it is the whole church, not just the nation of Israel, that passes through the tribulation period. Also, dispensationalists view themselves as literalists on the symbols, while the second school would take many of them to be symbolic. There are some weaknesses of this school as well: it can develop a perspective that would remove its applicability to first-century Christians... and it can often deteriorate to mere speculation cut off from first-century backgrounds. If all we have are events without symbolic/theological significance, much of the power of the book can be lost.

As Osborne would argue, all of the approaches above can be dangerous when taken to their extremes, even if all offer something in helping us understand the Revelation. Thus Mounce³⁶ argues for a more eclectic approach,

...it is readily apparent that each approach has some important contributions to a full understanding of Revelation and that no single approach is sufficient in itself. It is vitally important to see with the **preterist** that the book must

³⁶ Mounce, 29.

be interpreted in light of the immediate historical crisis in which the first-century church found itself. The author employs a literary genre that grew out of his own cultural and linguistic milieu. His figures of speech and imagery are to be interpreted in the context of his own historical setting. They are not esoteric and enigmatic references to some future culture totally foreign to first-century readers (e.g., hydrogen bombs, satellite television, and the European Common Market). With the **historicist** it is important to notice that the philosophy of history revealed in the Apocalypse has found specific fulfillment in all the major crises of human history up to the present day. With the **futurist**, we must agree that the central message of the book is eschatological, and to whatever extent the End has been anticipated in the course of history, it yet remains as the one great climactic point toward which all history moves. This age will come to an end. Satan and his hosts will be destroyed, and the righteous will be vindicated. These are historical events that will take place in time. And they are future. With the **idealist** one must agree that the events of history give expression to basic underlying principles. God is at work behind the scenes to bring to pass his sovereign intention for the human race. To whatever extent the idealist rules out a consummation, it is difficult to see from history alone any cause for optimism. It is the end that gives meaning to the process.

It is interesting to note that these varying approaches are, to a considerable extent, an accident of history. The author himself could, without contradiction, be preterist, historicist, futurist, and idealist. He wrote out of his own immediate situation, his prophecies would have a historical fulfillment, he anticipated a future consummation, and he revealed principles that operated beneath the course of history.

It is this “eclectic” approach that will allow us to immerse fully into the world of the Revelation in a faithful and formative manner.