

Interpreting the Book of Revelation

4 Views of Interpretation and Interpretive Tools for the
Book of Revelation.

View 1 - The Futurist View

Revelation is prophecy primarily about the future end of the world.

In the futurist view, all or nearly all of Revelation is yet to occur. Revelation is a prophecy that describes the end of time and the years leading immediately to the end.

Dispensational premillennialists as well as some historic premillennialists interpret Revelation in this way.

View 1 - The Futurist View

The futurist approach. A consistently futurist approach holds that everything in the Revelation from chapter 4 to the end finds its fulfillment in the very last days of human history. The view is also held in a more moderate form, according to which some of the events in these chapters—particularly the earlier ones—take place in history before the end.

D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament, Second Edition*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 720.

View 2 - The Historicist View

The book of Revelation is prophecy about church history from the time of John to the end of the world.

Historicists view the events in Revelation as symbolic descriptions of historical events throughout church history. (Some futurists also understand the Seven Churches [Revelation 1-3] in a historic manner, treating each church as descriptive of a particular era of church history.)

View 2 - The Historicist View

The historical approach. Several movements in the Middle Ages grew up in the conviction that the millennium was about to dawn. To buttress their beliefs, they found in the Revelation a sketch of history from the time of Christ to their own day. This approach was popular with the Reformers also, enabling them to identify the beast in the Revelation with the papacy.

D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament, Second Edition*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 720.

View 3 - The Idealist View

Revelation is a non-historical and non-prophetic drama about spiritual realities.

Some aspects of this perspective seem to have originated among ancient Alexandrian theologians, who frequently spiritualized and allegorized biblical texts, but this view may have had earlier proponents as well.

View 3 - The Idealist View

The idealist approach. Some scholars are convinced that we are on the wrong track altogether in trying to identify the events portrayed in John's visions. The symbolism is designed, they argue, to help us understand God's person and ways with the world in a general way, not to enable us to map out a course of events. Revelation, then, teaches us "the action of great principles and not special incidents."

D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament, Second Edition*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 720.

View 4 - The Preterist View

The book of Revelation is prophecy that was fulfilled primarily in the first century ad.

“Partial Preterism” views most of Revelation as prophecy fulfilled in the first century ad, though final chapters of Revelation describe future events to occur at the end of time. “Full Preterists” contend that the return of Jesus was spiritual and occurred in ad 70.

Preterists are typically amillennialists or postmillennialists, though some historic premillennialists could fit in this category.

View 4 - The Preterist View

The preterist approach. This approach, also known as the “contemporary-historical”. It insists that the visions of John grow out of and describe events in John’s own day. The symbols in the visions all refer to people, countries, and events in the world of that day; and John’s purpose is to exhort his readers to remain faithful to Christ as they wait for God to deliver them into his eternal kingdom.

D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament, Second Edition*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 719–720.

The 4 Views

Futurist - All going to happen in the Future.

Historicist - All took place in the last 2000 years and will keep taking place till the end.

Idealist - All going to take place figuratively and allegorically.

Preterist - All took place from AD 50 - AD 125.

Revelation 1:1 “soon”; 1:3 “near”; 1:19 “what is”

(Compare, [22:6](#), [7](#), [12](#), [20](#))

Futurist View

These words refer to the whole of the “last days” or to the quickness with which Jesus will return.

Historicist View

The prophecy began to be fulfilled close to the author’s lifetime.

Idealist View

Christ is always at hand, near and quick to save his people.

Preterist View

Near, soon, and quickly are taken literally.

The Seven Churches of Asia Rev. 2:1 -3:22

The Seven Churches of Asia Minor

Futurist View

The prophecy begins with the seven churches, which were actual churches in John's day and may also symbolize the types of churches present in the last days.

Historicist View

The prophecy begins with the seven actual churches in John's day and proceeds through history from there.

Idealist View

The book begins with the seven churches, which symbolize tendencies in the church that can occur in every age.

Preterist View

The prophecy begins with the seven actual churches of Asia Minor. It then focuses on the land of Israel before ad 70.

God on His Throne

Rev. 4:1-3

God on His Throne

Futurist View

God gives John a vision from his throne of the events which are to take place “after these things.”

Historicist View

God is about to outline his rule over history: the first part of that history is revealed under the vision of the seven seals.

Idealist View

God gives John the heavenly viewpoint of the important truths about his power over all things and his care for the church.

Preterist View

God’s courtroom in the heavenly temple is the scene. The Judge on his throne is about to hold court.

The Scroll Rev 5:1-4

The Scroll

Futurist View

The scroll could be the title deed to the earth or God's prophetic message in Revelation or God's eternal will and testament.

Historicist View

The scroll is the coming history of the church as God reveals it and is Lord over it.

Idealist View

The scroll is God's will and testament, revealing his salvation plan for all time.

Preterist View

The scroll is God's bill of divorce against unfaithful Israel or God's eternal will and testament.

The Seven Seals

Rev. 6:1-17

The Seals

Futurist View

The seals begin to describe the great tribulation, with each opened seal leading to a greater tragedy upon the earth.

Historicist View

The seals are the stages of church history, perhaps describing the church from the late first century ad to the late fourth century.

Idealist View

The seals are about recurring evils throughout history and God's authority over them.

Preterist View

The seals describe the Roman war with the Jews which lead to the destruction of Jerusalem (ad 70).

The 144,000

Rev. 7:1-8

The 144,000 (see p. 228-234)

Futurist View

The 144,000 are Jewish Christians in the last days.

Historicist View

The 144,000 is a symbolic number that represents the entire church.

Idealist View

The 144,000 are the true spiritual Israel: the church on earth.

Preterist View

The 144,000 may be the Jewish Christians who escaped the destruction of Jerusalem.

The Trumpets

Revelation 8:1-13

The Trumpets

Futurist View

The trumpets describe the events of the tribulation in the last days.

Historicist View

The trumpets are the stages of church history, perhaps from about ad 400 until the fifteenth century (or to the present).

Idealist View

The trumpets are about the cycles of human sin, consequences, and God's salvation.

Preterist View

The trumpets represent a vision of the Roman war with the Jews in the first century ad and extend the seals' description in further detail.

The Four Angels

Rev. 9:13-19

The Four Angels at the Euphrates

Futurist View

The four angels represent the armies of the Orient that will march against Israel in the last days. They will cross the Euphrates as a signal of war.

Historicist View

The four angels could represent the four principalities of the Turkish empire. The Turks destroyed the last of the Roman empire in ad 1453.

Idealist View

The four angels represent the judgment of God that comes on evil when there is no more restraint, which is represented by the river Euphrates.

Preterist View

The four angels may represent the four legions of Roman soldiers stationed in Syria that Vespasian led against the Jews (around ad 70). The colors mentioned are Roman military colors.

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The 4 Views

Along with several recent commentators, we find some truth in all four of these views. **Yet it is the futurist approach that comes closest to doing justice to the nature and purposes of Revelation.** As we have seen, Revelation adapts and modifies the apocalyptic perspective. Jewish apocalyptic writers projected themselves back into time so that they could describe the imminent breaking into history of God's eternal kingdom as the culmination of history. By writing in his own name, John discards the historical survey and confronts his readers with an elaborate vision of the establishment of Christ's reign in history. **Revelation is about eschatology, not history.**

D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 720.

Interpreting the Book of Revelation

1. Study biblical apocalyptic in the light of apocalyptic ways of thinking in the ancient world. Apocalyptic is a unique genre with specific codes and ways of communicating, but it was not a genre unique to the Bible. Apocalyptic ways of envisioning things were very common in the biblical world near the end of the Old Testament and through the time of the New Testament. Thus, understanding the biblical examples of apocalyptic within the scope of non-biblical examples is essential.

Interpreting the Book of Revelation

2. Read apocalyptic in view of a context of crisis. People frustrated to the point of despair were the expected hearers of apocalyptic, and authors sought ways to communicate encouragement for them to withstand the torrent of tribulation and to stand tall in the faith.

Interpreting the Book of Revelation

3. Do not look for something in apocalyptic that it does not intend to disclose. The function of an apocalyptic text is the key to understanding it. Though apocalyptic authors do have something important to communicate, it is more hope for the future than information about the future. Since the meaning of a passage is closely tied to the impact that the passage is designed to have on the readers, apocalyptic is generally not a chronological account of the future but a literary shock treatment of bold and graphic images to take our attention away from the problems we currently face and give us hope that God will win a resounding victory over all evil.

Interpreting the Book of Revelation

4. Expect apocalyptic to be full of metaphorical language.

Because the apocalyptic genre is intensely literary—with an abundance of figures of speech such as metaphor, hyperbole, and irony—readers must look carefully at the literary techniques of the authors. The compelling scenes and images are intended to draw readers into the story so that they can experience it like a child enraptured in a fairy tale. Apocalyptic is intentionally vivid in how it describes things.

Interpreting the Book of Revelation

5. Do not attempt to identify the significance of every detail in apocalyptic. The metaphorical language of apocalyptic often cannot be deciphered, partially because its language is so unique that other uses in Scripture of similar motifs may be of little value for understanding apocalyptic. Furthermore, the images within a single apocalypse may be fluid, such that the meaning of a motif varies within the same piece of literature. This may leave the significance of some portions of an apocalypse a mystery. And that is the way it should be: If we could solve all the puzzles of apocalyptic, it would defraud the genre of the mystery that is intended to surround it. [D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, JR. (2012). Cracking Old Testament Codes. B&H Publishing Group. Retrieved from <https://app.wordsearchbible.lifeway.com>]

Interpreting the Book of Revelation

6. Keep all options open for how apocalyptic predictions will be fulfilled. The subject matter of apocalyptic is heaven and the future, both areas unknown in human experience. Because of the inherent limitations of human language to describe something that humans have never experienced, the descriptions of creatures, scenes, and people of heaven or of the future may not be the same in reality as they are in the visionary literature of apocalyptic. [D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, JR. (2012). Cracking Old Testament Codes. B&H Publishing Group. Retrieved from <https://app.wordsearchbible.lifeway.com>]

Interpreting the Book of Revelation

7. Seek to understand the main point of an apocalyptic text.

Apocalyptic tends to be impressionistic, more like an abstract painting which communicates an overall impression. If you stand too close to the painting trying to examine the detail of the artist's work, you fail to grasp what the picture is intended to present. Likewise, correct interpretation of apocalyptic seeks to understand the big picture—the meaning of the whole rather than the meaning of the parts. Sometimes the details in apocalyptic are for dramatic effect; there may be no significance other than how the imagery of the scene is enhanced by the details. The details in apocalyptic must not be seen as allegorical in the sense that each detail has a corresponding reality.

Interpreting the Book of Revelation

8. Appreciate the full and rich symbolism of apocalyptic.

Once apocalyptic is correctly understood, readers will be freed to enjoy the beautiful imagery used to describe heaven and the future. Though the terminology of apocalyptic often denotes something different from what those same words may mean in their normal sense—the description may be more symbolic than literal—nevertheless, every detail in apocalyptic is significant in portraying God's perspective on things to come.

Basic Rules of Prophecy

1. ...[in the Bible] a prophet was understood more as a **forthteller** of the divine message than a **foreteller** of future events. His ministry was often more concerned with proclamation than prediction.

Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 89.

Basic Rules of Prophecy

“There is considerable difference between the art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and that of the nineteenth century. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art is realistic in nature and seeks to reproduce objects in a way similar to how a photographer does today. A scene in the paintings of that day shows the buttons people have on their clothing clearly, even if they are standing in the distance. Everything is painted in exact detail. A magnifying glass held over small sections of the painting reveals amazing detail. It almost seems that the painter possessed microscopic brushes in order to paint with such precision...

Basic Rules of Prophecy

...On the other hand, at the end of the nineteenth century artists tended to be more impressionistic than realistic in their paintings. Such paintings often appear to be only globs of paint. You have to stand back and observe the overall painting in order to understand what the author is seeking to convey. I would suggest that the ancient prophets “painted” their prophetic message more along the lines of such nineteenth-century impressionists as Monet and Renoir than in the manner of the Flemish and Italian schools of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.”

Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 98.

Basic Rules of Prophecy

Another aspect of prophecy with which the interpreter must reckon involves the vocabulary used by the prophetic writers. Much of the terminology found in prophecy makes use of customary imagery used in this genre. For instance, in the judgment prophecy found in Isaiah 13:9–11 we read:

See, the day of the Lord is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless.

Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 91–92.

Basic Rules of Prophecy

Because of the cosmic imagery found in this prophecy, many interpreters assume that it is referring to the end of history. Yet it is clear from Isaiah 13:1 (“An oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw”) and 19 (“Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the glory of the Babylonians’ pride, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah”) that the prophecy concerns the Babylonian empire of the sixth century b.c. The Babylonian kingdom that destroyed Jerusalem and the Solomonic temple, this empire that sent the cream of Judean society into exile, was about to experience divine judgment.

Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 92.

Basic Rules of Prophecy

Yet this judgment is described in cosmic terminology. Such terminology, however, was part of the imagery and symbolism available to the prophets when they sought to describe God's intervention in history and his sovereign rule over the kingdoms of this world (cf. Dan. 2:21; 4:17, 25, 34–35; 5:21). Such imagery was not meant to be interpreted literally. The sun was not actually going to be darkened; the moon would not stop giving its light; the stars would not stop showing their light.

Basic Rules of Prophecy

“What” the author willed to communicate by this imagery, that God was going to bring judgment upon Babylon, was to be understood “literally.” And that willed meaning, God’s judgment upon Babylon, did take place. This prophecy was fulfilled with the rise and rule of the Persian empire over the territories once ruled by Babylon, and the later readers of this prophecy knew that this prophecy had indeed been fulfilled. Babylon had been judged just as the prophecy proclaimed, and it was God’s doing just as the cosmic imagery described. The imagery, itself, however, was understood by the prophet and his audience as part of the stock terminology used in this kind of literature to describe God’s intervention into history.

Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 91–92.