

The Interpretation of Revelation

The difficulty in understanding the many symbols and actions described in Revelation led to the development of four major schools of interpretation: **preterist**, **historicist**, **futurist**, and **idealist**. The first three of these views differ in their time perspective for the events in Revelation. The fourth view regards the contents of Revelation as largely symbolic and thus as having little connection with actual historical events.

1. Those who follow the **preterist** view affirm that Revelation related primarily to the period of time in which it was written. Preterist interpreters maintain that John described the coming struggle between the church and the Roman government. They limit the historical references in Revelation to the first century. The strength of this approach is that it makes the message of Revelation relevant to the life situation of the early church. Its limitation is its inability to find a significant message for the church beyond the first century except by glancing at God's actions in the first-century church and assuming that he might repeat the same pattern in the contemporary church.
2. The **historicist** interpreters regard Revelation as a continuous chronicle of church history from apostolic times until Christ's return. Those who interpret Revelation from this viewpoint believe that opening the seals, blasting the trumpets, and pouring out the bowls represent different events in world and church history. The strength of this viewpoint is that it gives readers a strong impression of the sovereignty of God in world events. Its weakness is its subjectivity and the widespread disagreement among its interpreters. Those who support this view display a wide variety of interpretations in their efforts to relate the symbols of Revelation to world events.
3. Followers of the **futurist** view approach Revelation with the understanding that the bulk of its content refers to the future action of God in history. Futurists accept the fact that Revelation arose out of the pressures of the first century, but they insist that Revelation 4–22 refers to events leading up to Christ's return, the coming of Christ's kingdom, the final judgment, and the eternal state. Several interpretative approaches can be identified among the futurists. Futurists themselves disagree about whether the church will be removed from the earth during a "secret" return of Christ known as the rapture (dispensationalism) or will be left on the earth to face the judgments of the tribulation (historical premillennialism). The strength of the futurist approach is its emphasis on the progressive activity of God in world history. A major limitation is that it leaves the original hearers of Revelation with a limited message of encouragement. How could the original hearers receive much encouragement from having information about the return of Christ at least two thousand years into the future?
4. The fourth approach to Revelation omits references to history and time as the specific focus of God's activities. This approach is called **idealist** or spiritual. Those who follow this viewpoint feel that the language of Revelation does not predict future events but paints a picture of the continuous struggle between good and

evil in the church and the history of the world. It emphasizes basic principles of God working in history rather than specific events. Those who follow this approach contend that God was strengthening the church with a promise of ultimate victory rather than referring to specific events in time. One advantage of this view is its recognition of the presence of many symbols in Revelation. A weakness is the often skeptical attitude of its followers toward predictive prophecy and their failure to develop a perspective on the action of God in history.

Interpretations of Revelation

Viewpoint	Chapters 1–3	Chapters 4–19	Chapters 20–22
Preterist	Actual churches	Symbols of first-century conditions	Symbols of heaven and victory
Idealist	Actual churches	Symbols of conflict between good and evil	Triumph of righteousness
Historicist	Actual churches	Symbols of historical events; fall of Rome, papacy, Reformation	Final judgment; eternal state
Futurist	Stages of church history	Future tribulation	Millennial kingdom; final judgment; eternal state

Which of these approaches to Revelation is correct? Each contains an element of truth. The preterist interpreter emphasizes the significance of Revelation for the first hearers of the message. The futurist and the historicist interpreters emphasize the action of God in history. The idealist view emphasizes the great principles by which God has operated in history. It is not possible to maintain one approach to interpretation consistently throughout the entire book. It is wisest to use the approach that the specific text of Revelation demands. For example, it is important to read the message of Revelation 2 and 3 from the perspective of the original readers, and it is also important to catch the hope of Christ's future return mentioned in Revelation 19:11–21.

Millennial Perspectives of Revelation

Many who study the book of Revelation are familiar with the terms *premillennialism*, *postmillennialism*, and *amillennialism*. These terms describe the relationship of the return of Christ to the millennium, the thousand-year reign of Christ mentioned in Revelation 20:1–6.

Premillennialists insist that the return of Christ will take place before the millennium begins. Dispensational premillennialists emphasize that the return of Christ will occur in two stages. The first stage will take place prior to the period of final judgment known as

the tribulation. This first stage of Jesus' return is called the rapture. The second stage of Jesus' return will occur at the end of the tribulation in the events described in Revelation 19:11–21. Historical premillennialists believe that the return of Christ is a single-stage event that will occur at the close of the tribulation but prior to the beginning of the millennium.

Postmillennialists emphasize that the return of Christ will take place at the conclusion of the millennium. They feel that the return will occur at the close of a lengthy period of human progress (the millennium) in which the moral climate of the world is changed by a sweeping conversion of the world to Christianity.

Amillennialists teach that the picture of Christ's thousand-year reign in Revelation 20:1–6 is a symbol of his present spiritual kingship at the right hand of God in heaven. Many amillennialists suggest that the millennium is this present period of world history in which the gospel can spread freely and influence history by bringing people to faith in Christ.

The millennial position that an individual brings to the interpretation of Revelation will affect the exegesis of the book. Generally those who prefer a premillennial approach will follow a more literal interpretation. Those who follow an amillennial approach will emphasize the importance of a proper understanding of the various symbols in Revelation.

Millennial Perspectives of Revelation

Viewpoint	Chapters 1–3	Chapters 4–19	Chapters 20–22
Postmillennial	Actual churches	Usually historicist	Symbol of victory of Christianity over the world
Amillennial	Actual churches	Usually historicist	Return of Christ; final judgment; eternal state
Premillennial	Actual churches or seven stages of history	Usually futurist	Millennial reign; final judgment; eternal state ¹

R.C. Sproul:

“Whichever eschatological view we hold, we must hold it humbly because we do not know the future. We can all look backward, but we do not know God’s agenda for what’s to come. We must be humble and acknowledge that our eschatological view might not

¹Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 584–588.

be accurate. At the same time, much of the doctrinal teaching in the New Testament has to do with future things, so how we understand God's promises about the future has a dramatic impact on our personal confidence and involvement in the mission Christ gave to the church."²

² R. C. Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2014), 314.