

Revelation Introduction & 1:1-3


Introduction

- * **Important Term:** *Eschatology*. Greek: "eschatos" means "last." So then, *eschatology* is the study of "last things." The Book of Revelation is almost entirely an eschatological book (from the 4th chapter onward) because it deals with "last things" (the end of history).
- * **Basic Background**
 - *Author:* John the Apostle (the son of Zebedee) and brother of James.
 - *Date:* A.D. 95-96 during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96) from the island of Patmos where he had been exiled by Domitian. Early church history asserts that after the reign of Domitian ended, John was released from Patmos and returned to Ephesus where he lived out his remaining days.

Verse-By-Verse Notes

- * **Verse 1**
 - The title is Revelation (singular) *not* Revelations (plural) and comes from the Greek word "*apocalypsis*" meaning "unveiling" or "revelation." It is where we get the word "apocalypse."
 - The content of the Book of Revelation is the consummation of all of history according to the plan of God.
 - Robert Mounce: "*History is not a haphazard sequence of unrelated events but a divinely decreed ordering of that which must take place. It is a logical and moral necessity arising from the nature of God and the revelation of his purpose in creation and redemption.*"
 - Revelation points to the imminence of the end of history.
- * **Verse 2**
 - John is the prophetic voice of the end of history. See Amos 3:7 **For the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.**
- * **Verse 3**
 - In John's time, most of the population could not read, so the emphasis on reading "aloud" the "words of this prophecy" makes clearer sense in that context because the Old Testament Scriptures and New Testament writings of the Apostles would be read aloud in churches on the Lord's Day (likely by the church's elders). See below.
 - In 1st century synagogues and churches, significant time was given to the reading of Scripture (1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Corinthians 3:14-15; Luke 4:16-17; Acts 13:13-15; Acts 13:27; Acts 15:21)

Patmos and the Seven Churches

 Presumed route by which John's letter was circulated among the seven churches



INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGES

No other NT book poses more serious and difficult interpretive challenges than Revelation. The book's vivid imagery and striking symbolism have produced 4 main interpretive approaches:

The *preterist* approach interprets Revelation as a description of first century events in the Roman Empire (see Author and Date). This view conflicts with the book's own often repeated claim to be prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). It is impossible to see all the events in Revelation as already fulfilled. The second coming of Christ, for example, obviously did not take place in the first century.

The *historicist* approach views Revelation as a panoramic view of church history from apostolic times to the present—seeing in the symbolism such events as the barbarian invasions of Rome, the rise of the Roman Catholic Church (as well as various individual popes), the emergence of Islam, and the French Revolution. This interpretive method robs Revelation of any meaning for those to whom it was written. It also ignores the time limitations the book itself places on the unfolding events (cf. 11:2; 12:6, 14; 13:5). Historicism has produced many different—and often conflicting—interpretations of the actual historical events contained in Revelation.

The *idealist* approach interprets Revelation as a timeless depiction of the cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil. In this view, the book contains neither historical allusions nor predictive prophecy. This view also ignores Revelation's prophetic character and, if carried to its logical conclusion, severs the book from any connection with actual historical events. Revelation then becomes merely a collection of stories designed to teach spiritual truth.

The *futurist* approach insists that the events of chaps. 6–22 are yet future, and that those chapters literally and symbolically depict actual people and events yet to appear on the world scene. It describes the events surrounding the second coming of Jesus Christ (chaps. 6–19), the Millennium and final judgment (chap. 20), and the eternal state (chaps. 21, 22). Only this view does justice to Revelation's claim to be prophecy and interprets the book by the same grammatical-historical method as chaps. 1–3 and the rest of Scripture.

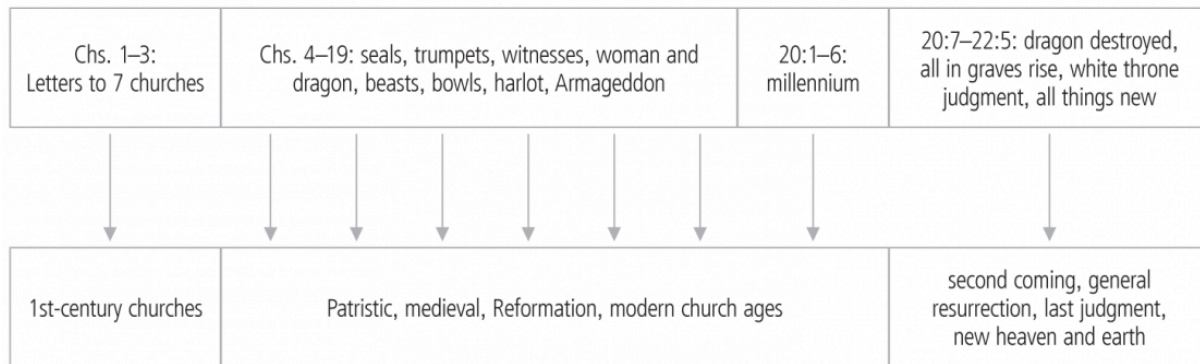
Schools of Interpretation

Four approaches for interpreting Revelation have been distinguished by their understanding of the relationship of the visions to one another and the relationship of the visions to the events of history:

1. *Historicism* understands the literary order of the visions, especially in 4:1–20:6, to symbolize the chronological order of successive historical events that span the entire era from the apostolic church to the return of Christ and the new heaven and earth.

Historicist School

Revelation's Visions

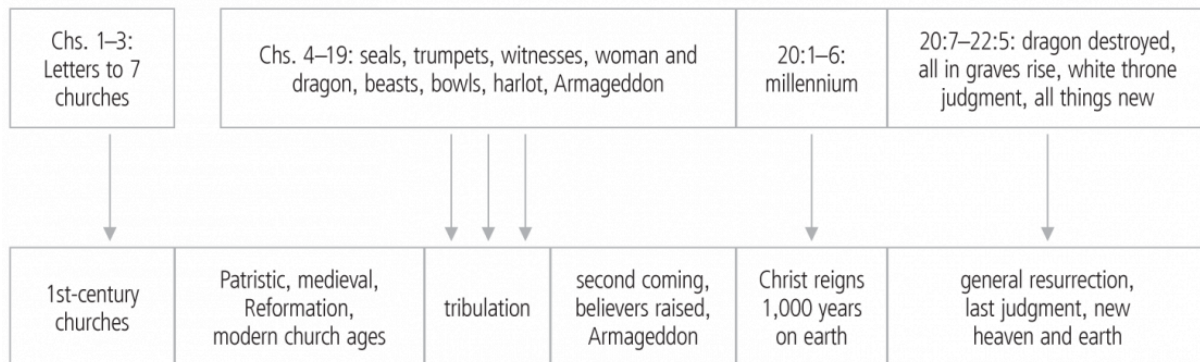


Historical References and Events

2. *Futurism* likewise treats the order of the visions as reflecting the order of particular historical events (with some exceptions). Futurists, however, typically view the visions of chapters 4–22 as representing events still future to twenty-first-century readers, thus in a *distant* future from the standpoint of John and the churches of Asia. For many futurists, these coming events include a discrete seven-year period of intense tribulation (chs. 6–19), followed by a millennium (20:1–6) in which Christ will rule on earth before the general resurrection and the inauguration of the new heaven and earth (20:7–22:5).

Futurist (Historical Premillennialism)

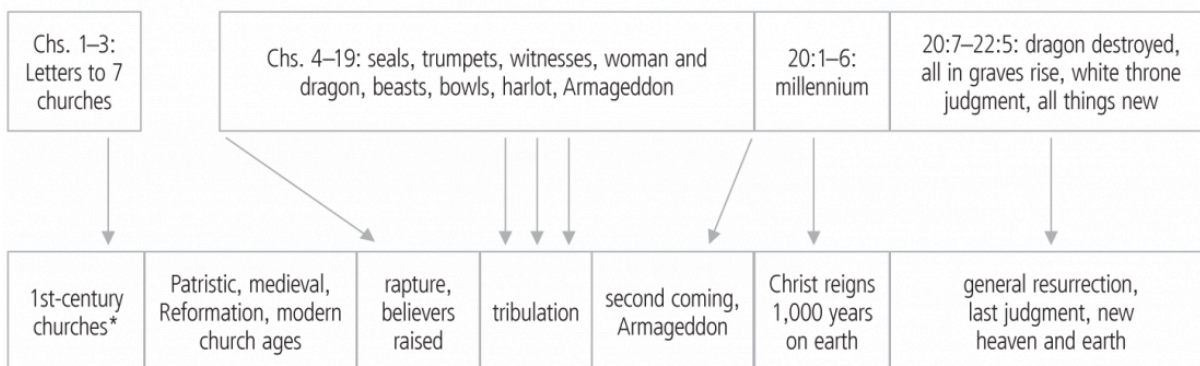
Revelation's Visions



Historical References and Events

Futurist (Dispensational Premillennialism)

Revelation's Visions



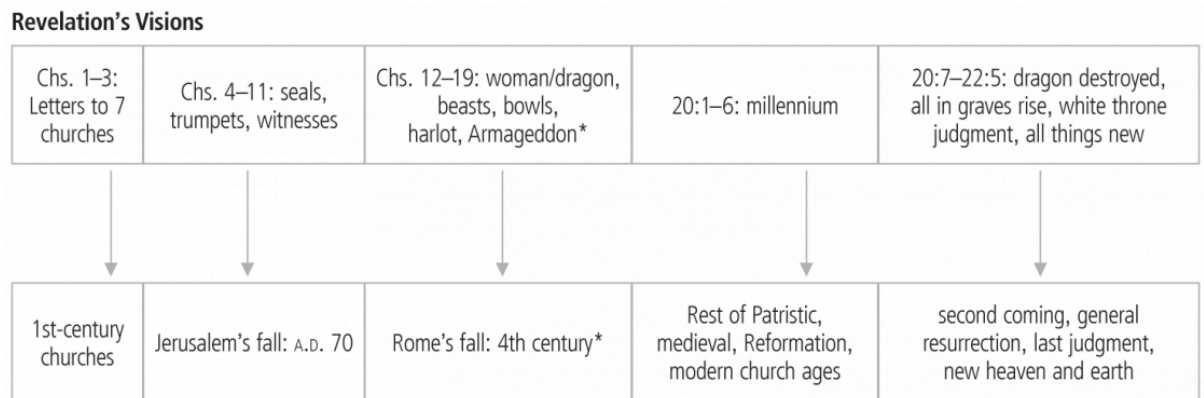
Historical References and Events

* Some dispensational interpreters think the churches addressed in chs. 2–3 predict different periods in church history.

3. *Preterism* (from Latin *praeteritum*, “the thing that is past”) thinks that the fulfillment of most of Revelation’s visions already occurred in the distant past, during the early years of the Christian church. Preterists think these events—either the destruction of Jerusalem or the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, or both—would “soon take place” only from the standpoint of John and the churches of Asia. Some preterists interpret the order of the visions as reflecting the chronological succession of the events they signify, but others recognize the presence of recapitulation (that is, that distinct, successive visions sometimes symbolize the same historical events or forces from complementary perspectives; see [Structure and Outline](#)). Full preterism—which insists that every prophecy and promise in the NT was fulfilled by A.D. 70—is not a legitimate evangelical option, for it denies Jesus’ future bodily return, denies the physical resurrection of believers at the end of history, and denies the physical renewal/re-creation of the present heavens and earth (or their

replacement by a “new heaven and earth”). However, preterists who (rightly) insist that these events are still future are called “partial preterists.”

Partial Preterist School(s)



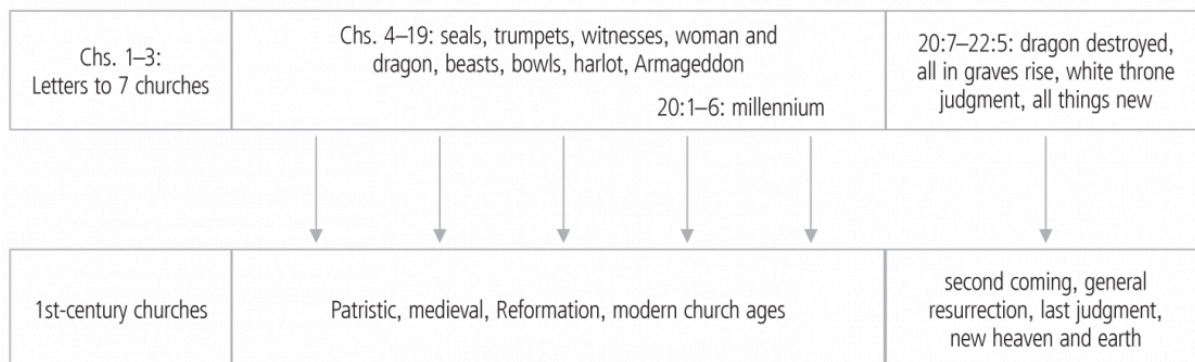
Historical References and Events

* Partial preterists differ on what would (from the original recipients’ viewpoint) precipitate the millennium. This chart represents the view that sees ancient Rome as the church’s main enemy. Others would understand Second Temple Judaism as the church’s main enemy.

4. *Idealism* agrees with historicism that Revelation’s visions symbolize the conflict between Christ and his church on the one hand, and Satan and his evil conspirators on the other, from the apostolic age to Christ’s second coming. Yet idealist interpreters believe that the presence of recapitulation (see [Structure and Outline](#)) means that the visions’ literary order need not reflect the temporal order of particular historical events. The forces and conflicts symbolized in Revelation’s vision cycles manifest themselves in events that were to occur “soon” from the perspective of the first-century churches (as preterists maintain), but they also find expression in the church’s ongoing struggle of persevering faith in the present and foretell a still-future escalation of persecution and divine wrath leading to the return of Christ and the new heaven and earth.

Idealist School

Revelation's Visions



Historical References and Events

5. Finally, some interpreters hold a *mixed* view, combining features of these various positions, such as saying that many events have both present and future fulfillments, or saying that many events have past fulfillments but that there may still be a future personal Antichrist.