

Revelation 1

The Revelation: Introduction

In the first chapter of the *Revelation*, we are given the *Origin of the Revelation*, the *Division of the Revelation*, and how we are to *Interpret the Revelation*.

The Author of the Revelation

The *Book of Revelation* was written by the Apostle John who testified to everything he saw concerning the *Word of God* and Jesus Christ.

The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Rev. 1:1-2

As a faithful witness to the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, John was given the *Revelation* to show God's servants what must *soon* take place. In this case, the word *soon* refers to the events of John's own lifetime. In particular, John was told to write on a scroll what he saw concerning the *Seven Churches*, which were located in the province of Asia (Modern-day Turkey), and that existed at the time of the writing of the *Revelation*.

On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea." Rev. 1:10-11

After being given the above instructions, the Lord appeared to John among seven golden *lampstands* with seven *stars* in his hands.

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw *seven golden lampstands*, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest... In his right hand he held *seven stars*, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. Rev. 1:12-16

The voice of the Lord commanding John to, "*Write down what you see*", and the vision of the Christ among the seven golden lampstands forms the testimony of John concerning the *origin* of the *Revelation*, which came from God, and *not* from John himself or a false angel.

The Division of the Revelation

Following the appearing of the Lord, John was given further instructions concerning what he was to write.

"Write, therefore, what you have *seen*, what is *now* and what will take place *later*." Rev.

1:19

The above command divides the *Book of the Revelation* into *three sections*; John's testimony concerning his witness of Christ (*what you have seen*), the *Letters to the Seven Churches* (*what is now*), and the events that would take place in the future (*what will take place later*). From this, we learn that the *Revelation* was written to show John both cotemporary and future events.

Interpreting the Revelation

This chapter ends with John being given the meaning of the *seven golden lampstands* and the *seven golden stars*, which John saw when the Lord appeared to him.

“The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” Rev. 1:20

The example of John being given the meaning of the *seven stars* and *seven lampstands*, within the *Revelation* itself, provides us with the method by which we are to interpret the rest of the *Book*. That is, we are to use the *Scriptures* to interpret the *Scriptures*. In this way, the *Revelation* will explain itself.

1. Preterist. Most prophecies in the book of Revelation were fulfilled during the time of the Roman empire.

A word of caution here. Not all preterists are created equal. The term preterism can describe two very different approaches: 1) A belief that the text is not inspired prophecy, but is rather a description of certain historical events amidst fanciful apocalyptic imagery. 2) A belief that the prophecies of the book are divinely inspired and were fulfilled mostly in the first centuries after Christ.

The first type of preterist, theologically liberal, advocates a later writing of the book (A.D. 95), and while accepting the historical reality of certain events in the text, believes John's apocalyptic visions were never, and will never be, fulfilled.

The second type of preterist, theologically conservative, believes in an early writing of the book (before A.D. 70). Those who advocate this view point out the correspondence between Revelation and the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. They point to Revelation 1:1, 19, which says that the predicted events must “shortly come to pass.” They also point to Jesus' Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24) as primarily being fulfilled with the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in A.D. 70.

Most conservative preterists allow, however, that the last chapters of Revelation describe the Second Coming of Christ.

2. Historicist. The prophecies have been fulfilled throughout history and are still being fulfilled today.

While this interpretation is not widely in use today, those who have been steeped in popular futurist views are often surprised to learn that most of the classic commentaries from a century or more ago are written from a historicist viewpoint. Many of the great leaders of the Reformation and later also held to this view: Wycliffe, Knox, Tyndale, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Melancthon, Newton, Huss, Foxe, Wesley, Edwards, Whitfield and Finney.

According to historicists, Revelation is a kind of survey of church history, with historical events symbolically portrayed. Historicists believe that exact time periods are specified, assuming that each day specified in the text equals a year in real time.

The challenge for historicists has been to align actual events with the details in the text (an approach shared by preterists and futurists). This requires large amounts of conjecture, and the flexibility to revise interpretations in light of ongoing world events.

Another prominent feature of Protestant historicism is its belief that the Antichrist of Revelation refers to the Papacy. For this reason, some die-hard historicists assert that all other interpretations of Revelation are Satanically inspired attempts to obscure the Antichrist's true identity.

In any case, historicism has fallen out of vogue. Critics point out that it has not kept up with history much past the 14th century and that it is Eurocentric — not recognizing more recent and significant developments in the church in other parts of the world.

3. Futurist. Most prophecies beyond Revelation 3 are yet to be fulfilled.

This is the view held by most contemporary North American evangelical writers and teachers. Somewhat ironically, futurism was originated in 1585 by Francisco Ribeira, a Spanish Jesuit priest, for the purpose of refuting the historicist views of the Protestant reformers.

The most popular version of futurism today is dispensationalism, which has only been around since 1830, when J.N. Darby began teaching his ideas of a secret Rapture of the church (Revelation 4:1) followed by a tribulation period, and a 1,000-year rule of Christ.

Futurists tend to take a literal view of the book of Revelation. Since futurists believe that few, if any, of the events from chapters 4-22 of Revelation have taken place, it is easy for them to assert that most of these prophecies are to be taken literally (whereas preterists, historicists and spiritualists must wrestle with symbolic interpretations of passages about the two witnesses and the four horsemen, for example).

This literal interpretation of the highly symbolic book of Revelation ignores the style of writing God inspired John to use. The first key in understanding literature of any type is to determine the kind (genre) of literature it is.

Revelation is prophecy, letter and apocalyptic — with the apocalyptic style predominating. Apocalyptic style was well known at the time John wrote, using cryptic meanings and symbolic images. Above all, apocalyptic literature is born of immediate persecution and oppression and anticipates the final triumph of good over evil.

Disregarding the language God inspires to convey his message, futurists conveniently avoid having their “this is going to happen in the near future” approach tested by historical events.

Dispensationalists, in particular, can prognosticate freely with the confidence that they will be raptured before the bulk of Revelation is fulfilled and will not be around on earth to be embarrassed by any inaccuracies in their predictions.

On further thought, this approach renders the book irrelevant and of little practical use for most Christians, as they either will have died or will have been raptured before its fulfillment.

4. Spiritual (or Symbolic or Idealist). Most prophecies portray the ongoing cosmic conflict of spiritual realities and may have many fulfillments throughout history.

This actually represents a variety of approaches that look for lessons or principles — often recurrent in history — symbolically depicted in Revelation. Noting the apocalyptic style in which the book is written, this interpretation sees the central theme as the triumph of good over evil, of Christ over Satan. Passages that other approaches regard as depicting chronological events (such as the seals, trumpets and emergence of the beast) are regarded allegorically by spiritualists as recurring realities in history as part of God’s sovereign plan for humankind.

The obvious advantage of this view is that there is no need to match events described in the book to real events. The disadvantage is that the book of Revelation itself claims to predict certain specific events (1:1).