

## The Book of Revelation: Historical Context

**Opening Prayer:** Heavenly Father, You have been involved in our lives and our world from the beginning. Guide us as we consider what life was like for those suffering under Roman persecution. Reassure us that You will continue to be with us no matter what we experience and will make everything work together for our salvation. We pray in Jesus' Name. Amen.

### **Revelation Is God's Message To His Suffering People**

- Where have you seen people suffer for their Christian faith?
- How have you suffered for your faith?

### **Watch The Video: Lesson 2**

In the video we saw what life was like for those Christians to whom Revelation was written.

- What are some similarities *and* differences between our world and the world in which they lived?

Pastor Klaus demonstrated that Rome and Christianity were headed on a collision course.

- How are *we* on a collision course in this country?
- How far should we go to avoid the collision or *soften the blow*?
- In what ways do you think we have bent to our society too much already?
- How can we reach out to those who embrace the ungodly values of our society and yet remain true to our faith?

Apocalyptic Language:

The Book of Revelation is written in apocalyptic language. In Hebrew literature, this form was used during times of intense persecution and difficulty. It is thought that this was some form of code writing that the faithful could decipher but be meaningless to the unbeliever. If so, the code has obviously been lost over time. In the Old Testament there are examples of apocalyptic literature in Ezekiel, Joel, Daniel, Isaiah and Zechariah. We will be looking at numbers and symbols in Revelation later on in this course.

Characteristics of Apocalyptic Language:

1. *Prescientific worldview* – The world consists of 3 main levels: heaven on top, the earth in the middle and hades/hell on the bottom. Hades included the bottomless pit, the Abyss and other indicators of death and judgment. The people of John's day thought of their world in these terms.
2. *Dualism* – There are 2 great forces at work in the world – good and evil. These forces are engaged in a life and death struggle for control of humanity. Elements are aligned with either one or the other. There are no grey areas – it's either black or white.

3. *Determinism* – Everything that happens on earth has been predetermined and is written down in a book in heaven. To know what has been written is to know the future.
4. *Eschatology* – The study of last things or the end times. Apocalyptic language deals with these things that will come to pass.
5. *Crisis Ethic* – An oversimplified ethic that comes from a sense of impending doom. Since the topic is the end, the focus is on maintaining the faith and keeping pure in the little time that remains. (Puritanism, Pietism)

#### Interpretations of The Book of Revelation:

There are four basic interpretive approaches to the Book of Revelation. Their perspectives may be summarized as follows:

##### 1. THE PRETERIST OR CONTEMPORARY HISTORICAL VIEW

This view is favored by theological liberals and those who reject the inspiration of Scripture and the possibility of predictive prophecy. The Preterist View assumes that Revelation is no different than any other example of apocalyptic literature from the period. The author, whomever he may have been (most preterists reject the traditional view that St. John the Apostle was the author of Revelation), is describing events from the recent past and the present as if he were foretelling future events. According to this view the book is a tract on contemporary history written for the First Century. It deals with nothing more than Roman or Jewish persecution of the Christian Church during that period.

##### 2. THE FUTURIST VIEW / DISPENSATIONAL PRE-MILLENNIALISM

This view is favored by fundamentalists who subscribe to the theory of dispensational pre-millennialism. It is sometimes called “Dispensational Futurism.” According to this view the visions of chapters 4-22 refer exclusively to a future time immediately preceding the end of history. Dispensational Futurists emphasize a rigid literalism through which they decipher a hidden time line for the end of the age. The time line includes these events: 1. The restoration of ethnic Israel to its promised land; 2. The rapture of the Gentile church into heaven; 3. A seven year tribulation period; 4. The reign of the Antichrist in Jerusalem during the Tribulation Period; 5. The gathering of the godless nations to battle for Jerusalem; 6. The triumphant return of Christ to defeat His foes in the battle of Armageddon; 7. The thousand year (millennial) reign of Christ on earth; 8. Satan’s final rebellion at the end of the millennium; and, 9. The destruction of Satan and the eternal reign of Christ in heaven.

##### 3. THE HISTORICIST OR CONTINUOUS HISTORICAL VIEW

There are many varieties of the Historicist view. In this view, Revelation is seen as predicting the major events and movements of Christian history throughout the first and second comings of Christ. Individual symbols and signs within the Book are specifically identified with personalities, places, and events in Christian history providing a chronological sequence of prophecies which are being continuously and successively fulfilled from the days of John the Revelator until the Last Day. The difficulty with these

specific identifications is that they cannot be validated in the text and often tend to focus the applications of the text to persons and events contemporary to the interpreter.

#### 4. THE IDEALIST / SYMBOLIC VIEW / AMILLENIALISM

**The fourth and final view is the viewpoint that has prevailed throughout much of Christian tradition.** The Idealist agrees that Revelation describes and predicts persons and events throughout the New Testament era. However, he disagrees with the Historicist, in that he generally refuses to limit the identification of the symbol or application of the prophecy to only one historical reality. Such specific individual application may be made only when it is facilitated and required by the text of Revelation itself. However, in most cases, the prophecies of Revelation portray events and patterns that are repeated over and over again throughout history. In this way, Revelation is relevant for God's people in every time and place, as pertinent to us today as it was to the First Century believers of John's original audience.

Conservative Lutheran scholar Siegbert Becker argues that the idealistic view is based on Scripture's interpretation of itself and is thus the true literal interpretation of the Book: *"The idealistic interpretation is really only a variation of the church historical interpretation of Revelation...The idealistic or church historical interpretations are really the grammatical-historical method of interpretation applied to this particular form of literature. And it ought to be stressed again and again that the words of the text itself tell us that we are dealing with symbols that stand for something else...The idealistic interpretation is the literal interpretation."* (Becker, pp. 18-19)

#### An Outline of Revelation

##### I. The Prologue (1:1-20)

- A. Introduction (1:1-3)
- B. Salutation (1:4-8)
- C. John's Commission from Christ (1:9-20)

##### II. The First Vision - The Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)

- A. The Letter to Ephesus (2:1-7)
- B. The Letter to Smyrna (2:8-11)
- C. The Letter to Pergamum (2:12-17)
- D. The Letter to Thyatira (2:18-29)
- E. The Letter to Sardis (3:1-6)
- F. The Letter to Philadelphia (3:7-13)
- G. The Letter to Laodicea (3:14-22)

##### III. The Second Vision - The Vision of the Seven Seals (4:1-7:17)

- A. The Throne of God in Heaven (4:1-11)
- B. The Book of the Seven Seals (5:1-5)
- C. The Lamb Before the Throne (5:6-14)
- D. The First Seal - The White Horse (6:1-2)

- E. The Second Seal - The Red Horse (6:3-4)
- F. The Third Seal - The Black Horse (6:5-6)
- G. The Fourth Seal - The Pale Horse (6:7-8)
- H. The Fifth Seal - The Souls Beneath the Altar (6:9-11)
- I. The Sixth Seal - The Final Judgement (6:12-17)
- J. The Servants of God (7:1-17)

- IV. The Third Vision - The Seven Trumpets (8:1 -11:19)
  - A. The Seventh Seal - The Seven Angels with the Seven Trumpets (8:1-5)
  - B. The First Four Trumpets (8:6-13)
  - C. The Fifth Trumpet - Locusts from Hell (9:1-11)
  - D. The Sixth Trumpet - The Host From Beyond the Euphrates (9:12-19)
  - E. The Impenitence of Those Who Remained (9:20-21)
  - F. The Angel with the Little Book (10:1-7)
  - G. John's Commission to Preach ((10:8-11)
  - H. The Two Witnesses (11:1-14)
  - I. The Seventh Trumpet and the End of the World (11:15-19)

- V. The Fourth Vision - The Seven Scenes (12:1-15:8)
  - A. The First Scene - The Great Red Dragon's Assault (12:1-13:1)
  - B. The Second Scene - The Beast from the Sea (13:1-10)
  - C. The Third Scene - The Beast from the Earth (13:11-18)
  - D. The Fourth Scene - The 144,000 with the Lamb (14:1-5)
  - E. The Fifth Scene - The Three Angels (14:6-13)
  - F. The Sixth Scene - The Harvest (14:14-20)
  - G. The Seventh Scene - The Angels with the Plagues (15:1-8)

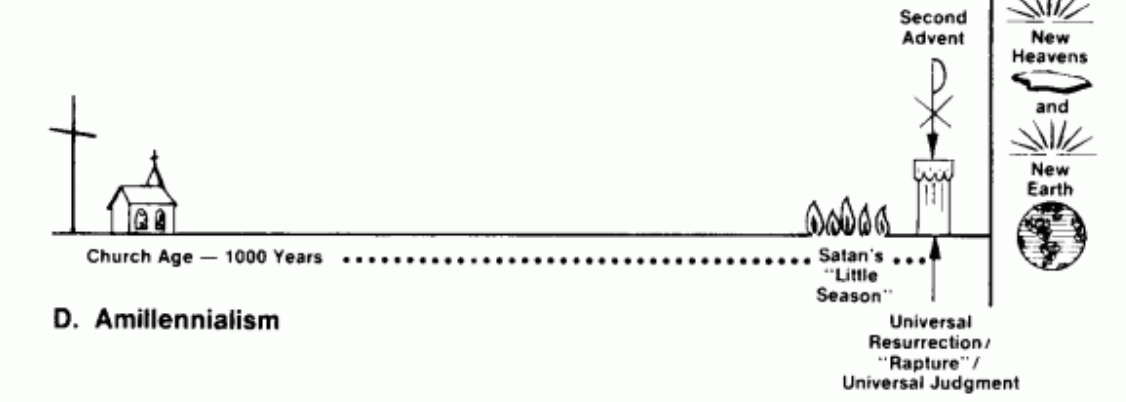
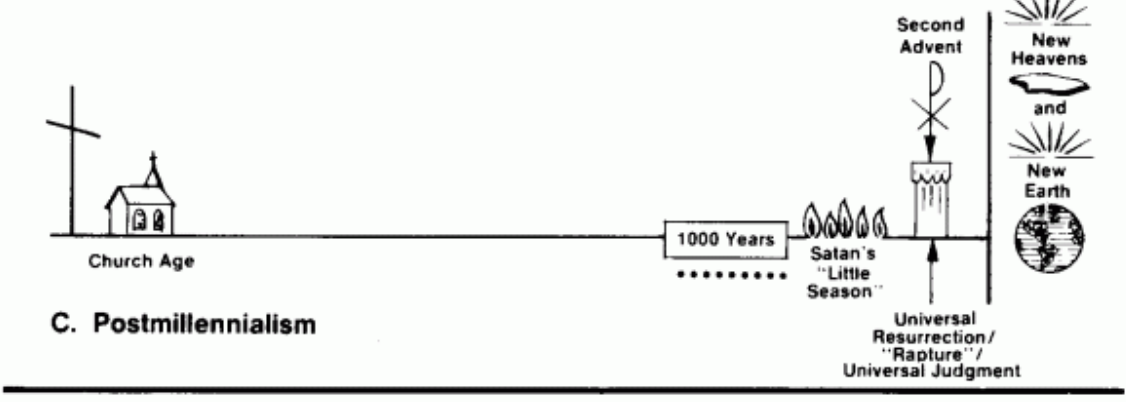
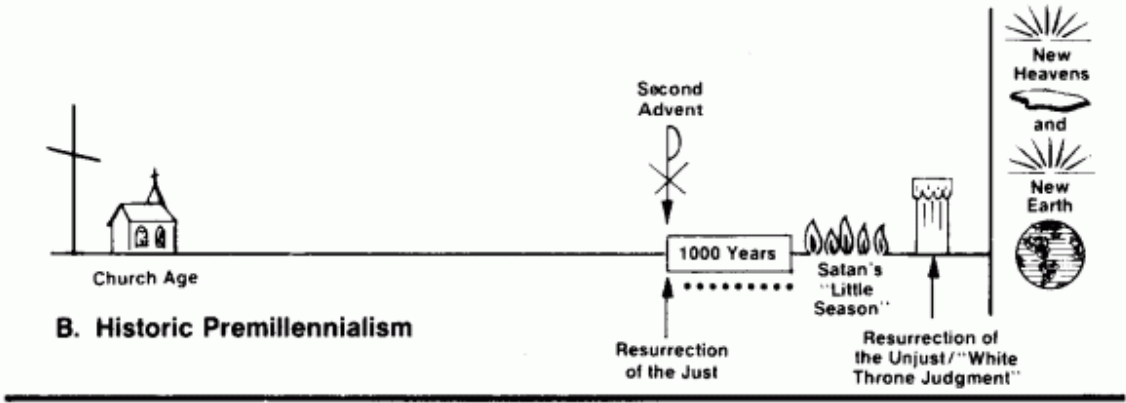
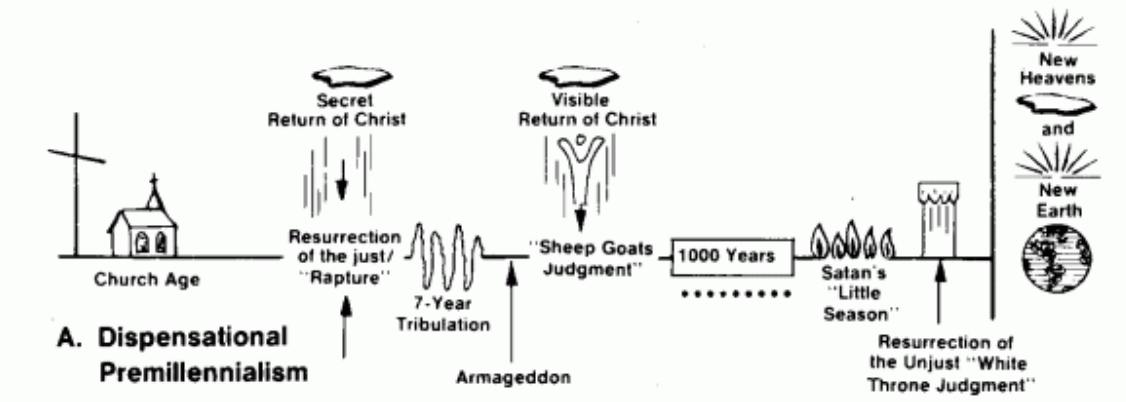
- VI. The Sixth Vision - Christ and Anti-Christ (17:1-19:21)
  - A. The Great Harlot (17:1-18)
  - B. The Defeat of Babylon (18:1-24)
  - C. The Church's Victory (19:1-21)
  - D. The Marriage Feast of the Lamb (19:1-10)
  - E. The Rider on the White Horse (19:11-21)

- VII. The Seventh Vision - The Final Victory of Christ and His Church (20:1-22:5)
  - A. Christ and Satan (20:1-3)
  - B. The 1,000 Year Reign (20:4-6)
  - C. The Defeat of Satan (20:7-10)
  - D. The Final Judgment (20:11-15)
  - E. The New Heaven and Earth (21:1-8)
  - F. The New Jerusalem (21:9-27)
  - G. Paradise Restored (22:1-5)

- VIII. The Conclusion (22:6-21)

# APPENDIX I

## Diagrams of Millennial Views



## Prophetic Writing Versus Apocalyptic Writing

In the Bible, when God wants to tell us about future events, He chooses one of two styles of writing—prophetic or apocalyptic. Prophetic writing reflects the role humans play in the way God's plans unfold. God chooses apocalyptic writing when He wants to show He is in complete control and no one can stop Him from accomplishing His purposes for His people. We find apocalyptic writing in Revelation, as well as in parts of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah in the Old Testament. In fact, the English word, "revelation," is a translation of the Greek word "apocalypse." Apocalyptic writing reveals or uncovers what God is going to do in the future.

- In prophetic writing, God talks to the whole world.  
*In apocalyptic writing, He is talking to a select group.*
- In prophetic writing, people of the world have hope for repentance.  
*In apocalyptic writing, good and evil are unalterably opposed.*
- In prophetic writing, the world's history has multiple paths.  
*In apocalyptic writing, the Lord has one, straight path.*
- In prophetic writing, we help in the outcome of things.  
*In apocalyptic writing, God and Satan are often the only players.*
- In prophetic writing, evil can sometimes win.  
*In apocalyptic writing, God is ALWAYS ultimately victorious.*

If you understand apocalyptic writing, you can avoid some of the pitfalls that easily lead to misunderstanding.

## Time In Revelation

Was Revelation written for the past, the present or the future? How do we see time? A number of interpretations have been suggested:

### Futurist interpretation

- Futurists say Revelation only speaks to the end of time.
- They basically ignore the first-century Church.
- They pay little attention to the principals of biblical interpretation.

### Historical interpretation

- Historicists say Revelation is a direct line of church history stretching from the first century to the present.
- Historicists usually only work with Western European history.

### Preterist interpretation

- Preterists say Revelation almost always deals with the first century alone.
- Preterists say Revelation has little to say about the *parousia* (Second Coming of Christ), the end of the world, and final judgment.

**Idealist interpretation**

- Idealists feel Revelation is not fixed in an historical context but is relevant to all periods.
- Idealists say the seven churches are symbolic of churches in all time.
- Idealists say Revelation talks of problems faced by churches in all ages.

**Dramatic interpretation**

- This view holds that Revelation is a cosmic drama that describes eternal principles.

So what's *right*? Consider these points:

- Revelation was written to help God's people find courage in a sinful world.
- Revelation was especially applicable to the first-century churches, as it will be to those at the end of time.
- Revelation is pertinent to all Christians as it explains and gives assurance of God's ultimate victory in the lives of His people and the world.
- Understand Revelation best by thinking of it as a tire that revolves, but still moves forward.
- (Idealist Interpretation is the correct interpretation)