



The Book of Revelation: Interpretive Approaches and Practical Tips

Over time, various approaches to interpreting the book of Revelation have been taken. These are connected to, but different from, four main approaches to interpreting biblical teaching about the “end times.” The study of this biblical teaching is called eschatology, from the Greek word eschatos, meaning “last” or “final.” In this document we review these various approaches. First, we recommend some practical approaches that help us to keep sight of the book’s main themes so that we don’t get overwhelmed by interpretive debates.

Initial Strategies (adapted from James A. Meek, Bible Content Overview)

- Look for *practical purpose*:
 - Revelation is meant to bless, not terrify, readers; see 1:1-4.
 - It is meant to inspire “overcomers” (see 1:9-3:22), not to intimidate, confuse, overwhelm, or discourage
- Look for *universal application*:
 - Revelation is intended to offer blessing to *all* readers, not just a select few; see 22:17-21.
 - Interpretations which make the book “essentially meaningless to first-century readers” are to be avoided, as are interpretations which find little application beyond the first century.
- Look for *symbols* and their proper interpretations
 - The book draws its symbolism from two major sources: the OT (e.g., the tree of life in 22:2) and first-century culture (e.g., the sword of 1:16; the agricultural imagery of 6:6). To interpret the book’s symbols, we should look to these backgrounds rather than anachronistically identifying modern referents (e.g., the Soviet Union, nuclear warheads, helicopter gunships) that could not have been a blessing for readers before the 20th century.
 - *Revelation is filled with detailed descriptions of symbols that represent realities.* The book often interprets its own symbolism (cf. 1:20; 8:4; 17:5) in ways that suggest it is not to be taken “literally” (unless we understand “literally” according to the older meaning of the word: i.e., in a manner consistent with the work’s literary genre—which in the case of Revelation is “apocalyptic,” a genre that relies heavily on *symbolism*; cf. 6:14, 16).
 - The book often uses numeric symbolism; be careful not to assume a literal interpretation of a number that may be symbolic (666; 144,000; cf. 7:4, 9).
- Look for *repetition or recapitulation*
 - It is at least possible (very likely, according to many interpreters) that Revelation, like various other Biblical books (e.g., Jeremiah, the Gospels, Acts 11-12), is not

intended to be read as a continuous, chronologically-sequenced narrative; some sections of the book may repeat the same event or story from a different perspective (cf. 7:4, 9 + 14:1-5; 6:9-11 + 20:4; chs. 12-14 + ch. 20).

- Look for *clear passages* to shed light on the *obscure*
 - Look for the “who” and the “how” rather than the “what” and the “when.” That is, Revelation is ultimately about persons: God, Christ, the Holy Spirit; the redeemed people of this triune God; the enemies of God, including Satan and all under his influence.
 - Revelation tells us *how* it is possible for a church under pressure—from the world, and ultimately from Satan—to “overcome”: by God’s justice and truth (15:3;16:7; 19:2), and by “the blood of the Lamb and [our] testimony” (12:11).

Four Schools of Interpreting/Applying Revelation

- **Preterists** hold that the majority of the book describes the first century—the situation of the church under the Roman empire—and *nothing more*. Though some principles will still apply today, the only chapters which have not been fulfilled are those concerning the second coming and the new Jerusalem.
 - This approach is not widely held, but those who do take this approach are generally very passionate.
- **Historicists** hold that the book is a chronological description of church history from the first century to the end of time. Each chapter, and perhaps each letter to the 7 churches, represents a different period in history.
 - This approach views the literary sequence of the book as corresponding to the chronological sequence of history. If an event is described earlier in the book, it happens earlier in time, and so forth.
 - However, many interpreters see the book as less chronologically organized—for example, some chapters may skip ahead for a preview of a future event (chapter 7, for example), and some chapters may overlap in the time period(s) they depict.
- **Futurists** hold that the majority of the book (from 4:1 onward; chs. 1-3 may be interpreted on the historicist model) focuses on the events that immediately precede and follow the return of Christ—i.e., events which follow the “rapture.”
 - This approach is the most common in Western Christianity today, and it has roots in the ancient church as well.
- **Idealists** hold that Revelation depicts general principles which characterize the on-going conflict between the “counterfeit kingdom” of darkness and God’s kingdom of light. These principles had first-century application, have application for the present, and will have a future application as this cosmic conflict intensifies in the days immediately preceding Christ’s return.
 - Less well-known today, this approach has ancient roots and may represent the majority approach when we take into account the entirety of church history.

Four Approaches to Eschatology

- **Definition:** eschatology is the study of what the Bible teaches about the “last things” (from the Greek word *eschatos*, “last, final”).
 - Traditionally this has included such subjects as heaven, hell, Christ’s second coming, the final judgment, and the “eternal state” that will exist when Christ returns to inaugurate the “new heavens and the new earth.”
 - It is important to recognize that no major Christian creed has ever advocated specific beliefs about the return of Christ. Historic, orthodox Christianity has generally allowed for latitude, asserting only that Christ’s return is certain, that it will be a bodily return in real time and space, and that it will be followed by the “eternal state.”
- **Key Term:** to understand these four approaches, we must understand the term “millennium” and how it is used.
 - Revelation 20 mentions a 1000-year period during which Satan is “bound” (v. 2) “so that he might not deceive the nations” (v. 3). The souls of faithful “witnesses” (v. 4) experience “the first resurrection” (v. 5) and “reign with Christ for a thousand years” (v. 4). Many interpreters treat the 1000-year period as symbolic (representing a very long period of time), while others see it as literal.
 - Various schools of thought regarding “eschatology” are labeled according to the chronological relationship between this “millennial reign” and the return of Christ: for example, a *postmillennialist* holds that the *second coming* will be *after* the millennium described in Rev. 20, while a *premillennialist* believes Christ will return *before* the millennium of Rev. 20.
- **The Four Approaches:**
 - **Postmillennialism:**
 - The millennial reign of Christ is accomplished through the spread of the Gospel; before Christ returns, there will be a period (not necessarily 1,000 years long) of peace and righteousness as the majority of the world comes under the sway of the Gospel.
 - Chief characteristics: optimism, expectation of progress, emphasis on world mission and outreach.
 - Origin: mid-1600’s
 - **(Historic) Premillennialism:**
 - The millennial reign of Christ will occur after his return and after the resurrection of Christian believers, but before he ushers in the “eternal state;” that is, during this approximately 1,000 year period, the world will enjoy a level of peace, prosperity, and justice never before seen, *although sin, death, and evil will still exist*. This period is preceded by the conversion of a great number of Jews, and is followed by the final, decisive confrontation between Christ and Satan.
 - Chief characteristics: emphasis on the need for Christ’s glory and power to be clearly revealed *before* the present age is brought to a close; expectation that many Jewish people will come to faith in Christ.
 - Origin: 2nd century A.D.
 - **Dispensational Premillennialism:**

- The return of Christ occurs in two stages, with the millennium occurring after the second: he descends to “rapture” believers from the earth before a 7-year (or less) period of tribulation (his coming “for the church”); after this, he descends to reign (his coming “with the church”). The millennial reign is the final outworking of God’s promises to ethnic Israel: for 1,000 years Jesus will rule from Jerusalem over a primarily Jewish kingdom, complete with reconstructed temple and animal sacrifices (resurrected believers are not a part of this kingdom; they dwell in the “new Jerusalem,” which is suspended above the earth during the millennium); peace and prosperity will abound, though death and evil still exist. Some of those born during this period will rebel against Christ, and they along with Satan will be destroyed in a final battle at the end of the 1,000 years. Typically, this view has held that God has two peoples and two “programs”: Jews and Judaism (the “earthly” kingdom) vs. Gentiles and Christianity (the “heavenly” kingdom—not predicted in the Old Testament, and instituted only when Israel rejected Jesus).
 - Chief characteristics: commitment to consistent literalism; optimism regarding ability to construct precise chronology of “end times,” expectation of cultural decline (leading to desire for rapture); emphasis on salvation of ethnic Jews.
 - Origin: mid-1800’s
 - **Amillennialism:**
 - The millennial reign of Christ began with his ascension and continues until his return; during this period (the “church age”), the souls of deceased believers reign with him (the “first [i.e., spiritual] resurrection,” to be followed by the “second [i.e., bodily] resurrection” at Christ’s return), and there is ever-increasing conflict between good and evil—the gospel makes great gains, but so does the work of Satan. When this conflict reaches its most intense point, Christ returns to triumph.
 - Chief characteristics: cautious realism (neither overly optimistic nor overly pessimistic); expectation of simultaneous progress and decline; emphasis on God’s kingdom as a present reality throughout the church age; desire to avoid over-literal interpretation and speculation regarding specifics.
 - Origin: 4th century A.D.
- **Key Principles:**
 - Try to discover which of these approaches a preacher, speaker, or writer takes to “eschatology” in general. Doing so will tell you a great deal about why they interpret Revelation as they do!
 - Beware those who strongly emphasize one of these four positions, yet show little or no awareness of the existence of other positions. Those who have never considered views other than their own will probably not be aware of the weaknesses involved in their own position.
 - As regards our salvation, which of these four views we take is irrelevant: all four positions have been espoused by committed Christians who take the Bible

seriously and eagerly await the return of Christ. We are saved by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ—not by our views about the end times!

- There is some correspondence between temperament and one's millennial view: optimism and postmillennialism go hand-in-hand, as do premillennialism (especially in its modern, dispensational form) and pessimism. Amillennialists, by contrast, often find themselves suspended between optimism and pessimism. And those who tend to like things "open-and-shut" may prefer dispensational premillennialism, with its consistently "literal" interpretation of Scripture. The implication? Unless our millennial view is based on a great deal of careful study and soul-searching, it is likely to tell us more about ourselves than about the nature of Christ's second coming!
- The pastors at Intown would recommend Christian charity on this topic. However, we recommend against adopting the approach of dispensational premillennialism, as it tends to introduce some separations into our thinking that are not consistent with Scripture. For example, some dispensationalists would say that in the Old Testament, God's people were saved by obeying his Law, with salvation by grace through faith coming into view much later; and a dispensational approach to the rapture assumes that God has one purpose (a "heavenly kingdom") in his work with the non-Jewish church, and another purpose (an "earthly kingdom") in his work with ethnic Jews. Instead, Intown's pastors urge us to see one covenant of redemption—by grace, through faith, on the basis of the work of Christ—uniting all of Scripture and all of God's interactions with humanity throughout time and eternity.