

Introduction to the Book of Revelation

*“Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words
of this prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it;
for the time is near” (1:3)*

It is crucial for every student of the book of Revelation to read and meditate upon this statement in 1:3. Revelation was written in such a way that it should be not only intelligible to any Christian who reads and/or hears its words, but also a blessing to the person who obeys and believes what it says. Simply put, contrary to popular opinion, and notwithstanding the often bizarre and mysterious images it conveys, God intends for Revelation to be *understandable, edifying, and enjoyable!*

A. *Authorship*

As Beale notes, “there are three possibilities concerning the author of the book: John the apostle, another John (sometimes referred to as John the Elder), and someone else using ‘John’ as a pseudonym” (34). Josephine Massyngberde Ford, in her commentary in the Anchor Bible series (1975), identified the author of Revelation as John the Baptist! But, as Michaels notes, “it would be difficult to find even one other scholar who shares that opinion” (27).

1. The author of the Revelation identifies himself as “John” (1:1,4,9; 22:8). He calls himself a “servant” (1:1), their “brother and fellow-partaker in tribulation” (1:9) and a “prophet” (22:9). He never speaks of himself as an apostle. This could be for one of two reasons: a) he isn’t an apostle; or b) his identity as an apostle is so well-known, his authority so self-evident, and his relationship with the people of the churches in Asia Minor so intimate that it was unnecessary for him to use the term.
2. The earliest tradition within the church ascribes the Revelation to the apostle John: e.g., Justin Martyr (135-140 a.d.), Irenaeus (@200 a.d.), Clement of Alexandria (@200 a.d.), and Tertullian (@200 a.d.). Others often cited as supporting apostolic authorship are Papias, Melito of Sardis, Origen, and Hippolytus. It was not until Dionysius of Alexandria in the third century (@250) that any major dissent from apostolic authorship was heard.
3. Arguments against apostolic authorship are primarily based on the supposed grammatical, stylistic and terminological differences between the Revelation and the 4th gospel. Some contend that the language of the gospel is smooth, fluent, and written in relatively simple and accurate Greek, whereas that of the Revelation is harsh, with many grammatical and syntactical irregularities. Smalley (*Thunder and Love*) disagrees, reminding us that the uniqueness of Revelation is due in part to the fact that John was thinking in Hebrew while writing in Greek. Thus “it has a grammar of its own; but this is at least clear and consistent, and it is not *ungrammatical*. The style of Revelation is the one which the writer chose to adopt for his own special purposes; and to my mind it is just as majestic, and poetic indeed, as that of the Fourth Gospel” (65).

Others contend that the theology of the two books is so divergent as to preclude identity of authorship; e.g., the *love* of God is primary in the gospel, *wrath* in the Revelation (but this is a difficulty only for those who find these attributes mutually exclusive; they are in fact complementary). The fact is, what differences do appear are traceable to the circumstances under which each document was composed, the nature and genre of each document (gospel vs. prophetic apocalypse), and the purpose for which each was written.

In an unpublished manuscript titled, *Ears to Hear and Eyes to See: Unlocking the Revelation of Jesus Christ Through the Gospel of Saint John* (1997), Warren Gage and J. Randy Beck have demonstrated the remarkable verbal, thematic, and even structural similarity between Revelation and the 4th gospel.

The view of David Aune in his recent 3-volume commentary in the Word Biblical commentary series is that “during a relatively extensive period of time (perhaps as many as twenty to thirty years . . .), the author-editor composed a number of relatively independent, self-contained apocalyptic documents for a variety of purposes and intended for a variety of settings (some written, some oral), into which he incorporated a number of earlier traditions. Eventually the author-editor decided to place these documents, which required various degrees of revision, into a unifying literary context that became the Revelation of John, his apocalyptic *magnum opus*” (1:cxxi). Clearly, Aune’s view precludes the apostle as author and runs counter to the claims of “John” and the evidence of the book that he received his visions in a relatively short period of time, soon after which he composed the book as a single, literary unity.

Robert Mounce concludes:

“Since internal evidence is not entirely unfavorable to apostolic authorship and since external evidence is unanimous in its support, the wisest course of action is either to leave the question open or to accept in a tentative way that the Apocalypse was written by John the apostle, son of Zebedee and the disciple of Jesus” (31).

B. *Date*

Most commentators date the book either in the late 60’s, during the reign of Nero, or in the early to mid 90’s, during the reign of Domitian.

Everyone is agreed that the visionary experience happened on the island of Patmos, “a rocky and rugged island about six miles wide and ten miles long, some forty miles southwest of Ephesus in the Aegean Sea” (*An Introduction to the NT*, Carson, Moo, Morris, 473). What is less certain is whether the book was actually written there or perhaps composed elsewhere after a period of reflection on what he had seen.

1. *Arguments for an Early Date for Revelation*

a. The argument is made that the temple in Jerusalem is described in Rev. 11:-12 as still standing (the temple was destroyed in 70 a.d.).

b. In 17:9 “seven mountains” are mentioned, which most agree is an allusion to Rome and its seven hills. These mountains are said to represent seven kings, five of which have fallen, one which “is”, and the other yet to come. The sixth king is the one in power as John writes. Advocates of an early date for the book insist that the first of these kings is Augustus, the first official Roman emperor. The sixth is Galba, who reigned briefly after Nero’s death (68-69). Some (see Gentry) argue that Julius Caesar is the first king, thereby making Nero the sixth and Galba the seventh. In any case, this listing of the seven kings dates the book’s composition to the late 60’s of the first century. [The meaning of the seven mountains and seven kings will be addressed in the exposition of chp. 17. Let it be said here, however, that I tend to agree with Beale that “the seven kings are not to be identified with any specific historical rulers but represent rather the oppressive power of world government throughout the ages, which arrogates to itself divine prerogatives and persecutes God’s people” (23-24). Even should we conclude that seven specific Roman emperors are in view, they may serve simply to symbolize all evil kingdoms through history.]

Stephen Smalley (*Thunder and Love*) makes a case for Vespasian as the sixth king who “is”, with Titus being the seventh who “is to come” but who will reign only for a short time (two years, in fact). The eighth, who will eventually be destroyed, is Domitian. Smalley opts for composition sometime during the Jewish war of 66-74, most likely “just before the fall of Jerusalem to Titus, Vespasian’s son, in ad 70.

c. Using Hebrew transcription, the numerical value of 666 = Nero Caesar. If the Beast is portrayed in Rev. 13 as active at the time of writing, it would point to Nero and thus a pre-70 date for the book’s composition.

Other arguments for an early date are tied up with the preterist approach to the book as a whole. See below.

2. *Arguments for a Late Date for Revelation*

a. Revelation portrays Christians as being required to participate in some form of emperor worship under threat of persecution. This fits better with what we know of conditions during Domitian's reign than that of Nero's. After surveying the historical evidence, Beale concludes:

“Therefore, a date during the time of Nero is possible for Revelation, but the later setting under Domitian is more probable in the light of the evidence in the book for an expected escalation of emperor worship in the near future and especially the widespread, programmatic legal persecution portrayed as imminent or already occurring in Revelation 13, though the letters reveal only spasmodic persecution” (9).

Having said that, it must be noted that “it is by no means easy to plot the growth of the imperial cult, in relation to Christianity, either in Rome or in Asia. The first secure testimony that Christians were required to pay homage to Caesar is provided during the reign of Trajan (ad 98-117)” (Smalley, *Thunder and Love*, 44). Emperor worship had flourished in Asia Minor since Augustus and Nero himself was certainly pleased when, in a.d. 55, the Roman Senate set up a large statue of him in the Temple of Mars. As Smalley notes, “all this was well before the time of Domitian; and, even if that ruler asked that he should be called ‘Lord and God’, there is no evidence that all Christians were required to do so, or that this demand, in itself, provoked a clash between the Roman state and the Christian church” (44). His conclusion is that “the reference to the imperial cultus in the Apocalypse does not rule out a Domitianic timing . . . but neither does it establish such a date beyond doubt” (44).

Smalley also reminds us that “the persecution of Roman Christians initiated by Nero was just as fierce as anything that took place under Domitian; . . . On the other hand, when Eusebius describes Domitian as the successor to Nero in his enmity and hostility towards God, he also records that the later Emperor was as much concerned to attack the Roman aristocracy as the church; and Eusebius does not mention the death of any Christians during Domitian's persecution” (43).

b. Some point to the condition of the churches in Asia Minor (Rev. 2-3) as indicating a late date. The spiritual lethargy in Ephesus (2:4-5), Sardis (3:1), and Laodicea (3:15-17), so the argument goes, would have taken a significant period of time to develop:

“For example, that Ephesus had left its ‘first love’ could mean that the church had done so within only a few years of its establishment, but the language may fit better a longer development, perhaps so that the church was in its second generation of existence. The Laodicean church is called ‘wealthy,’ but the city experienced a devastating earthquake in 60-61 a.d. Therefore, the natural assumption is that the city took longer than merely three or four years to recover economically. And . . . the very existence of the church at Smyrna suggests a later date, since it is possible that the church was not even established until 60-64 a.d.” (Beale, 16-17).

In addition to this, “the hitherto unknown party of the Nicolaitans has by now become firmly established, both at Ephesus (2:6) and Pergamum (2:15)” (Smalley, 41).

On the other hand, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, which are among the earliest of the NT documents, bear ample witness to the problems in both belief and behavior that can emerge quickly. Also, the Galatians were rebuked by Paul for “so quickly” turning away to “another gospel” (1:6).

c. It is believed by many commentators that Revelation alludes to the so-called *Nero redivivus* or the “revival of Nero” myth (see 13:3-4; 17:8,11), according to which Nero would revive or resurrect from the dead and lead a Parthian army against the Roman empire. But “if these texts reflect the myth, then Revelation is better dated later than earlier, since presumably it took time for the myth to arise, develop, and circulate after Nero's death in 68 a.d.” (Beale, 17).

Smalley again counters by pointing out that “rumours of Nero’s ‘reappearance’, after his suicidal death in ad 68, were extant the very next year, 69, during the time of Vespasian” (44).

d. John’s use of the word “Babylon” may point to a late date, insofar as “Babylon” consistently refers to Rome in Jewish literature only *after* 70 a.d. “Jewish commentators called Rome ‘Babylon’ because the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in 70 a.d., just as Babylon had done in the sixth century b.c.” (Beale, 19).

e. The earliest patristic witness is to a late date. The most decisive testimony comes from Irenaeus who, in discussing the identity of the Antichrist, writes: “We will not, however, incur the risk of pronouncing positively as to the name of Antichrist; for if it were necessary that his name should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been announced by *him who beheld the Apocalypse. For it was seen not very long ago, but almost in our day, toward the end of Domitian’s reign*” (*Adv. haer.* 5.30.3; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.18.3; 5.30.3). Proponents of the early date counter that the words “it was seen” should be rendered “*he* [i.e., John] was seen,” so that the phrase means only that John the apostle was seen during Domitian’s time but not necessarily that Revelation was written at that time. In other words, what Irenaeus had in mind was to comment on *how long* the author of Revelation had lived, not on *when* he had written Revelation.

An important, and unanswered, question is “whether Irenaeus made this statement based on some firm tradition” or “was expressing his own opinion” (Aune, 1:lix). If the latter, how much weight should we give to his statement in deciding on the date of composition?

f. Some point to Rev. 6:6 and connect it to an edict issued by Domitian in a.d. 92. “This edict,” notes Aune, “ordered half the vineyards in the provinces to be destroyed and prohibited the planting of new vineyards in Italy. The opposition to this edict in Roman Asia was so violent that the edict was rescinded before its provisions could be enacted” (1:lxiii). However, the content of Domitian’s edict is different from that of 6:6.

Another interesting suggestion is that of Garrow (*Revelation*, 1997) who argues for a date around 80 a.d. He believes the sixth seal “portrays a cataclysm whose proportions it is difficult to associate with reality; however, a real event which could have been seen as mirroring this vision was the eruption of Vesuvius in ad 79” (78).

After surveying the evidence, dogmatism on the date of Revelation is inadvisable. My own working conclusion is that the reign of Domitian, during the early 90’s, remains the more probable time for its composition.

C. *Literary Form of the Book*

In 1:1 John describes the book as a “revelation”, literally *apokalupsis*, from which we get our English term “apocalypse” or “apocalyptic”. In 1:3 he calls the book a “prophecy” and in 1:4 he proceeds as if he were writing an “epistle” or “letter” (cf. Rev. 2-3). The fact is, Revelation gives evidence of being all three.

1. *The Revelation as an Epistle* – That John was instructed to write a letter to 7 churches which contained the substance of his visions is evident (1:4,11; 2:1,8,12,18; 3:1,7,14). In this sense the Revelation corresponds to the other NT epistles. See also 22:6-22.

2. *The Revelation as an Apocalypse* – The term “apocalyptic” is taken from the Greek word, found in Revelation 1:1, that means a “revelation,” an “unveiling” or “uncovering.” It is currently used to classify a group of writings prominent in the biblical world between 200 b.c. and 100 a.d. (the term “apocalyptic” was never used in this way by the authors of the literature itself).

Intertestamental Jewish works classified as apocalyptic: 1, 2, and 3 Enoch, Sibylline Oracles, the Treatise of Shem, the Apocryphon of Ezekiel, the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, Jubilees, 4 Ezra (2 Esdras), the Apocalypses of Abraham, Adam, Elijah, and Daniel, the Testament of Abraham, the

Testaments of Levi and Naphtali (from the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs), the Ascension of Isaiah, and the Shepherd of Hermas.

Much of the problem in the attempt to assess this literature is due to the ambiguity of the term “apocalyptic” as it is used by contemporary scholars. More recently, however, many have come to distinguish between “apocalypse” as a literary genre (a “genre” being a group of written texts characterized by recurring features which constitute a distinctive and recognizable type of writing), “apocalypticism” as a social ideology, and “apocalyptic eschatology” as a set of ideas and motifs that may be found in a number of different literary genres. We are primarily concerned with the literary genre “apocalypse,” which has been defined as

“a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world” (John J. Collins, “Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” in *Semeia* 14, *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (1979), p. 9).

Before we examine the two major sub-genres or types of apocalypses, let us note several characteristic features of this sort of literature. In doing so, however, it must be remembered that not every “apocalypse” will necessarily manifest every characteristic. More on this in relation to Revelation (and Daniel) later.

Characteristics of Apocalyptic

- The revelation imparted to the earthly recipient is frequently *esoteric* in nature, i.e., it is said that the revelation is to be kept hidden until the end of time (which time, of course, turns out to be that of the apocalypticist). Revelation is a clear exception to this.
- The apocalypse is *literary* in form. “The prophet, for the most part, declared his message by word of mouth which might subsequently be put into writing by himself or by his disciples or by editors at a much later date. The apocalypticist, on the other hand, remained completely concealed behind his message which he wrote down for the faithful among God’s people to read” (Russell/118).
- The apocalypses share a basic *world view*. “Specifically, the world is mysterious and revelation must be transmitted from a supernatural source, through the mediation of angels; there is a hidden world of angels and demons that is directly relevant to human destiny; and this destiny is finally determined by a definitive eschatological judgment. In short, human life is bounded in the present by the supernatural world of angels and demons and in the future by the inevitability of a final judgment” (Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*/7).
- All apocalyptic literature is *eschatological*. In other words, it points to a *future* divine intervention in the affairs of men both to deliver and judge.
- There is always a strain of *dualism*. The world is seen to be dominated by a conflict of God with Satan, good with evil, light with darkness, heaven and earth, this age and the age to come, etc.
- The apocalyptic writer is usually *pessimistic* about the destiny of this world; improvement and eventually the consummate state of perfection must come by the intervention of divine power. Simply put: evil will persist until God acts at the end of the age.
- Apocalyptic literature is deterministic in its approach to human history. That is to say, all are keenly aware that notwithstanding the presence of evil in the world all the events of history and its ultimate course and end are predestined.
- Another characteristic of apocalyptic literature, unlike strictly prophetic books, is the presence of *ethical passivity*. The apocalypticist consoles and sustains the righteous whereas the prophet castigates the

hypocrite. The former confirms and encourages the remnant in the midst of their suffering, the latter rebukes and exhorts the immoral, demanding their reform.

- The apocalypticist writes with a sense of imminence, i.e., with a sense of immediacy concerning the end of the age (which, as noted earlier, they often believe will occur or is occurring in their own day).
- There is always to some extent the presence of an *angelic* messenger or mediator who either reveals the vision or interprets it, or both.

The 3 most important characteristics of the genre “apocalypse” . . .

- Apocalyptic literature is almost always characterized by *pseudonymity* (the exceptions being the canonical books of Daniel and Revelation; more below). In other words, the apocalypticist writes under a false name, invariably the name of a venerable figure from the past such as Enoch, Moses, Ezra, etc. The reason for pseudonymity is not altogether clear. It was not to escape from persecution, for in that case anonymity would have served equally well. It was not designed to intentionally deceive the readers of the work, for pseudonymity was a well-known, popular literary device in ancient times. Some suggest that it was used to lend authority to the revelation. But how can this be if all its readers were aware that the alleged author was fictitious? The question must at this time remain unanswered.
- Apocalyptic literature is also characterized by *vaticinium ex eventu* = prophecy after the event. In other words, history is rewritten as prophecy. An apocalyptic author writing in the 1st century b.c., for example, would write as if he were some famous figure who lived centuries earlier. Thus what on the surface appears to be prophecy is, in fact, history written after the fact.
- The most conspicuous element in apocalyptic literature is the use of *symbolic* language. The symbolism is most often quite bizarre in which the images usually transcend and violate our normal conception of the way things ought to be. The concrete objects in our everyday life are presented in an almost grotesque and often distorted manner. Animals have multiple heads, horns, wings; they speak and act as if human; etc. D. S. Russell’s explanation is helpful:

“The apocalyptic literature is marked by a highly dramatic quality whose language and style match the inexpressible scenes which it tries to portray. Such scenes cannot be portrayed in the sober language of common prose; they require for their expression the imaginative language of poetry. But it is poetry quite unlike the restrained language of the Old Testament Scriptures. The apocalypticists give full rein to their imaginations in extravagant and exotic language and in imagery of a fantastic and bizarre kind. To such an extent is this true that symbolism may be said to be the language of apocalyptic. Some of this symbolism no doubt had its origin in the fertile imaginations of the apocalypticists themselves through their experience of dreams, visions and the like. But for the most part they were using stereotyped language and symbols which belonged to a fairly well-defined tradition whose roots went back into the distant past. Some of this symbolism is taken over directly from the Old Testament, whose imagery and metaphors are adapted and used as material for graphic figurative representation. Much of it, however, has its origin in ancient mythology. This influence is traceable even in the Old Testament itself, but in apocalyptic it is much more fully developed. Over the course of the years a pattern of imagery and symbolism was evolved--indigenous and foreign, traditional and mythological--which became part of the apocalypticists’ stock-in-trade. The same figures, images and ideas appear in book after book; but because of the constant adaptation and readaptation of the old figures to convey new interpretations there is no guarantee that they will have the same meaning in two successive books” (122).

Collins writes:

“Biblical scholarship in general has suffered from a preoccupation with the referential aspects of language and with the factual information that can be extracted from a text. [I disagree with this statement as it is applied to the Bible in general, but agree with Collins that . . .] Such an attitude is especially detrimental to the study of poetic and mythological material, which is expressive

language, articulating feelings and attitudes rather than describing reality in an objective way. The apocalyptic literature provides a rather clear example of language that is expressive rather than referential, symbolic rather than factual” (*Apocalyptic Imagination*/14).

One should not be disturbed by the usage of the term “myth,” by which is not meant “pagan” or “false.” Rather, “the word is used in biblical studies primarily to refer to the religious stories of the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world. When we speak of mythological allusions in the apocalyptic literature we are referring to motifs and patterns that are ultimately derived from these stories” (ibid./15). Any attempt, therefore, to interpret apocalyptic literature with the hermeneutic of “literalism” as is done, for example, in the epistles of Paul, is certainly a mistake (although this does not mean that an apocalypse is devoid of “literal” truth).

How the Book of Revelation differs from Apocalyptic

- Apocalyptic is usually distinguished from prophecy, yet John calls his book a prophecy (1:3; 22:7,10,18,19).
- The Revelation contains numerous moral imperatives and calls to repentance, an element not frequently found in apocalyptic material.
- The apocalypses are generally pseudonymous and are written in the name of some illustrious predecessor. The writer of the Revelation gives his own name (1:4).
- The pessimism of the apocalyptists is not dominant in Revelation. Although reference is made to an outbreak of Satanic activity and persecution, the general tenor is optimistic for the people of God.
- As stated earlier, the apocalyptist retraces history and puts it in the guise of prophecy. From the perspective of some figure in the distant past they forecast what will happen up to their own day. John, on the other hand, takes his stand in the present and forecasts the future.
- In apocalyptic literature the interpretive mediation of an angelic being is almost always dominant, to the degree that at times the entire apocalypse is dependent for its meaning on the heavenly guide. In Revelation we occasionally see angelic interpretation of a symbol (17:7ff.), but the general practice is for the vision to be left to the reader to analyze.
- In apocalyptic literature there is generally a looking forward for the intervention of God. In Revelation the decisive action of God to bring about the new order has already occurred in the past: in the redemptive work of Christ (cf. Rev. 4-5).

The two major Sub-Genres of Apocalypse

(1) *The Historical Apocalypses*

a. the media of revelation (there is always an account of the manner or way in which the revelation was received)

- 1) symbolic dream vision (cf. Dan. 7-8)
- 2) epiphany (the vision of a single supernatural figure, such as in Dan. 10)
- 3) angelic discourse (revelation delivered as a speech by an angel)
- 4) revelatory dialogue (conversation between the recipient and the revealer, either God or an angel)
- 5) midrash / pesher
- 6) revelation report

b. the content of the revelation

- 1) *ex eventu* prophecy (of which there are 2 types)
 - a) periodization of history (history, or a significant part of it, is divided into a set number of periods)
 - b) regnal prophecy (prediction of the ongoing rise and fall of kings and kingdoms)
- 2) *eschatological prediction* (predictions of end-time events that fall into the pattern of crisis-judgment-salvation)
 - a) signs of the end, with special emphasis on cosmic disturbances that disrupt human affairs (cf. Mark 13:24-25; Joel 3:1-2)
 - b) description of judgment scene (Dan. 7:9-14)
 - c) epiphany of a heavenly figure (Dan. 7:13-14)
 - d) prophecy of cosmic transformation

(2) *The Otherworldly Journey*

(What distinguishes this sort of apocalypse from the historical type is a visionary experience in which an individual ascends into the heavens for a journey under the direction of an angelic being who interprets the revelatory scenes. As far as we can tell there are no OT examples of this type of apocalypse; but cf. Rev. 4:1ff.)

- a. the media of revelation
 - 1) transportation of the visionary
 - a) report of ascent
 - b) report of descent
 - 2) the revelation account
 - a) report of a tour
 - b) report of ascent through a numbered series of heavens
- b. the content of the revelation
 - 1) lists of revealed things
 - 2) visions of the abodes of the dead
 - 3) judgment scenes
 - 4) throne visions (cf. Rev. 4-5)
 - 5) lists of vices

3. *The Revelation as Prophecy* – That John’s writing is prophetic in character will be developed in the exposition of the book. One might note at this point 1:3; 10:11; 19:10; 22:6,7,9,10,18,19. John claims, in effect, that what he writes is an authoritative revelation given through the medium of visions. He writes in the present, of the future, and under his own name.

D. *Schools or Methods of Interpretation*

1. *The Preterist View*

The word “preterist” comes from the Latin word *praeteritus* which means “gone by” or “past”. Proponents of this view thus contend that “the closer we get to the year 2000, the farther we get from the events of Revelation” (Gentry, *Four Views*, 37). The major prophecies of the book, so they argue, were fulfilled either

in the fall of Jerusalem in 70 a.d. (which would, of course, necessitate the earlier date of composition) or in the fall of Rome in 476 a.d. In his short commentary, *The Time is at Hand*, Jay Adams writes:

“The view of the Apocalypse which this book asserts to be true is that all of the prophecy in the first nineteen chapters, and part of that in the twentieth, has been fulfilled. Furthermore, their fulfillment took place in the lifetime of those to whom John wrote (or shortly thereafter), and not throughout the entire church age” (46).

Gentry contends that Revelation has two fundamental purposes relative to its original audience:

“In the first place, it was designed to steel the first century Church against the gathering storm of persecution, which was reaching an unnerving crescendo of theretofore unknown proportions and intensity. A new and major feature of that persecution was the entrance of imperial Rome onto the scene. The first historical persecution of the Church by imperial Rome was by Nero Caesar from a.d. 64 to a.d. 68. In the second place, it was to brace the Church for a major and fundamental re-orientation in the course of redemptive history, a re-orientation necessitating the destruction of Jerusalem (the center not only of Old Covenant Israel, but of Apostolic Christianity [cp. Ac. 1:8; 2:1ff.; 15:2] and the Temple [cp. Mt. 24:1-34 with Rev. 11])” (*Before Jerusalem Fell*, 15-16).

Preterists appeal to four primary arguments.

First, they point to John’s repeated declaration that the time of the fulfillment of Revelation’s prophecies is *near*. “Near” and “shortly”, they contend, mean precisely that; not 1,900 years later.

“ . . . to show to His bond-servants the things which *must shortly take place*” (Rev. 1:1).

“Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; *for the time is near*” (Rev. 1:3).

“ . . . to show to His bond-servants the things which *must shortly take place*” (Rev.22:6).

“And he said to me, ‘Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, *for the time is near*’” (Rev. 22:10).

Second, there are allusions throughout Revelation to Nero as the current Roman emperor (see 6:2; 13:1-18; 17:1-13).

Third, preterists argue that the conditions in the seven churches (Rev. 2-3) best correlate with what we know to have been true of pre-70 a.d. Jewish Christianity.

Fourth, they argue that Rev. 11 portrays the Temple as still standing, thereby demanding a pre-70 date.

2. *The Historical View*

This view is almost non-existent today, although an array of historical luminaries from the past embraced it in one form or another: e.g., John Wycliffe, John Knox, William Tyndale, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Philip Melancthon, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Finney, and C. H. Spurgeon, just to mention a few. This view understands the Revelation as a symbolic prophecy of the entire history of the church from John’s day to the return of Christ and the end of the age. The symbols of the book, especially the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments, are intended to portray the various historical movements, men and events in the western world. For example, E. B. Elliott contends that the trumpets (8:6-9:21) cover the period from 395 a.d. to 1453 a.d., beginning with the attacks on the western Roman empire by the Goths and concluding with the fall of the eastern empire to the Turks (see *Horae Apocalypticae*, 3rd ed.; London: Seely, Burnside, and Seely, 1847, I:343-501).

Generally speaking, the interpretation of the book depends on the time and place in history of the commentator. That is to say, *each assumes that the events predicted in the Apocalypse were reaching a climax in his own time*. Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202) believed the fifth head of the Beast was the emperor Henry IV (1050-1106) and the sixth was Saladin (1137-93), the Muslim leader who recaptured Jerusalem from the crusaders. A common feature among advocates of the historical school is identification of the Beast of Rev. 13 with the papacy of Rome. The Waldensian sect insisted that papal Rome was the whole of Babylon whereas Jacopone da Todi (1230-1306) associated the papacy with the dragon of Rev. 12. The Anglican bishop John Bale (1495-1563) argued that “the beast of the bottomlesse pitte is the cruell, craftye, and cursed generacion of Antichrist, the pope with his bishoppes, prelates, priestes, and religiouse in Europa, Mahomete with his dottinge doucepers [i.e., knights] in Affrica, and so forth in Asia and India” (quoted in Wainwright, 59-60). Bale believed that one of the beast’s heads was wounded at the Reformation but was healed when Queen Bloody Mary restored Catholicism in England.

Roman Catholics had their own unique interpretations. For example, “Bertold Purstinger, bishop of Chiemsee, explained that the locusts of the sixth trumpet vision were Lutherans[!]. Serafino da Fermo described Luther as the star falling from heaven and the beast from the land” (Wainwright, 61).

The historicist view is regarded by most as being “too parochial, failing to take the development of the church throughout the world into consideration” (Gregg, 37). Merrill Tenney has observed that “the Historicist view which attempts to interpret the Apocalypse by the development of the church in the last nineteen centuries, seldom if ever takes cognizance of the church outside Europe. It is concerned mainly with the period of the Middle Ages and the Reformation and has relatively little to say of developments after a.d. 1500” (“Revelation,” in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 5:96).

3. *The Futurist View*

Generally speaking, those who hold this view understand the Revelation as a prophecy of yet future events, concentrated in a short period of time (perhaps 7 years), which lead up to and accompany the end of the world and the inauguration of the eternal state. The futurist believes that all of the visions from Rev. 4:1 to the end of the book are yet to be fulfilled in the period immediately preceding and following the second coming of Christ. Within this school of thought are two somewhat variant positions.

a. Classical Pre-tribulational Dispensational Premillennialism

Not only is the whole of 4:1-22:21 seen as yet future, even the 7 letters of chapters 2 and 3 are understood to portray seven successive eras of church history. In a sense, then, this school does to chps. 2-3 what the historicist school does to the entire book. The basic traits of each church depict the chief characteristics of the 7 periods of church history, the last of which will be a time of apostasy (Laodicea). For a detailed exposition of this view, see J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (149-55).

b. Progressive Dispensational Premillennialism

This view is held both by pre- and post-tribulationists. They reject the identification of the 7 letters with 7 successive periods of history and find in 4:1 no reference to the rapture of the church (as do many of the former school). While agreeing with the former view that the purpose of the book is to describe the consummation of God’s redemptive plan and the end of the age, this view makes a concerted effort to find within these prophecies of the end time points of application for first-century Christians. George Ladd explains:

“Thus, while the Revelation was primarily concerned to assure the churches of Asia of the final eschatological salvation at the end of the age, together with the judgment of the evil world powers, this had immediate relevance to the first century. For the demonic powers which will be manifested at the end in the great tribulation were also to be seen in the historical hatred of Rome for God’s people and the persecution they were to suffer at Rome’s hand. Therefore, we conclude that the correct method of interpreting the Revelation is a blending of the preterist and the futurist methods.

The beast is both Rome and the eschatological Antichrist – and, we might add, any demonic power which the church must face in her entire history. The great tribulation is primarily an eschatological event, but it includes all tribulation which the church may experience at the hands of the world, whether by first-century Rome or by later evil powers” (13-14).

Robert Mounce takes a similar approach:

“It will be better to hold that the predictions of John, while expressed in terms reflecting his own culture, will find their final and complete fulfillment in the last days of history. Although John saw the Roman Empire as the great beast which threatened the extinction of the church, there will be in the last days an eschatological beast which will sustain the same relationship with the church of the great tribulation. It is this eschatological beast, portrayed in type by Rome, that the Apocalypse describes. Otto Piper notes that many modern interpreters overlook the distinction between the historical fulfillment of prophecy and its eschatological fulfillment. The pattern of imperceptible transition from type to antitype was already established by the Olivet Discourse in which the fall of Jerusalem becomes in its complete fulfillment the end of the age” (44-45).

An interesting historical factor is that the futurist view became extremely popular in one form or another among Roman Catholic interpreters in the late middle ages and into the time of the Reformation. It provided them with an answer to their critics and the Protestant Reformers who identified the Beast and/or the Whore of Revelation with the papacy. If the prophecies of Revelation were yet future, then no one could legitimately charge the pope (at least not the one then in power) with being the oppressor of the true church.

4. *The Idealist View*

This view contends that Revelation is not concerned with any specific period, event, or series of events in church history. Rather, its primary purpose is to describe symbolically the conflict of good and evil throughout history and the principles on which God acts at all times. It is a *timeless* portrayal, therefore, of this ethical struggle. Milligan (*The Revelation of St. John* [1886], 153-54) wrote: “We are not to look in the Apocalypse for special events, but for an exhibition of the principles which govern the history both of the world and the Church.”

My view of the book is a mixture of these various schools and is best represented in the commentary by Beale:

“Accordingly, no specific prophesied historical events are discerned in the book, except for the final coming of Christ to deliver and judge and to establish the final form of the kingdom in a consummated new creation – though there are a few exceptions to this rule. The Apocalypse symbolically portrays events throughout history, which is understood to be under the sovereignty of the Lamb as a result of his death and resurrection. . . . [Thus] the majority of the symbols in the book are transtemporal in the sense that they are applicable to events throughout the ‘church age’” (48).

I cannot be more specific at this stage until we undertake an actual exegesis of the many texts in Revelation itself.

E. *Structure and Outline of Revelation*

Revelation has a prologue (1:1-8) and an epilogue (22:6-21). The whole of the book between the two “is recounted as a single visionary experience which took place on Patmos on the Lord’s Day (1:9)” (Bauckham, *Climax*, 3). I will resist the temptation to elaborate further on the structure of the book, reserving that for our inaugural study of the relationship between the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments that begins with chapter 6. Here I set forth the simplest of outlines.

- A. Prologue – 1:1-8
- B. Vision of the risen Christ – 1:9-20
- C. Letters to the Seven Churches – 2:1-3:22
- D. Vision of the Throne, Scroll, and Sovereign Lord – 4:1-5:14

1. The throne of the Lord God Almighty – 4:1-11
2. The scroll of the Lion of the Tribe of Judah – 5:1-14

E. The Seven Seal Judgments – 6:1-8:1

1. The first seal – 6:1-2
2. The second seal – 6:3-4
3. The third seal – 6:5-6
4. The fourth seal – 6:7-8
5. The fifth seal – 6:9-11
6. The sixth seal – 6:12-17

(Interlude: The 144,000 and the Innumerable Multitude – 7:1-17)

7. The seventh seal – 8:1,3-5

F. The Seven Trumpet Judgments – 8:2,6-11:19

1. The first trumpet – 8:2,6-7
2. The second trumpet – 8:8-9
3. The third trumpet – 8:10-11
4. The fourth trumpet – 8:12-13
5. The fifth trumpet – 9:1-12
6. The sixth trumpet – 9:13-21

(Interlude: The Little Scroll and the Two Witnesses – 10:1-11:13)

7. The seventh trumpet – 11:14-19

(Interlude: The Woman and the War – 12:1-18)

(Interlude: The Two Beasts – 13:1-18)

(Interlude: The 144,000, Three Angels, and the Harvest and Vintage – 14:1-20)

G. The Seven Bowl Judgments – 15:1-19:5

1. Introduction – 15:1-16:1
2. The first bowl – 16:2
3. The second bowl – 16:3
4. The third bowl – 16:4-7
5. The fourth bowl – 16:8-9
6. The fifth bowl – 16:10-11
7. The sixth bowl – 16:12-16
8. The seventh bowl – 16:17-21

H. The Great Whore – 17:1-18

I. The Great City – 18:1-19:5

J. The Great Supper – 19:6-10

K. The Great Coming – 19:11-21

L. The Millennium – 20:1-15

M. The New Heaven and the New Earth – 21:1-22:5

N. Epilogue – 22:6-21