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2.1.5 The Book of Revelation

The book of Revelation has puzzled Christian interpreters almost from the very beginning of the history of interpretation. The assumption is that the intended meaning of the text was understood by the initial readers at the end of the first Christian century. But subsequent readers of this text have not been nearly as fortunate. A wide variety of interpretations of the book have emerged over the centuries, and, unfortunately, numerous cult leaders over time have made this NT document the basis of their perversion of the Christian faith through twisted interpretation of Revelation's meaning. Cultic religion always plays off a false hermeneutic: *one takes the obscure texts of the Bible to claim perfect interpretation for them and then turn this into an interpretive key for the rest of the scripture*. Just the opposite principle of interpretation is the time honored approach: *texts with clear meaning aid the understanding of obscure texts*. Both approaches work off the assumption of a general uniformity of meaning throughout the scripture. This is basically true if not pressed too tightly; unquestionably, great diversity of viewpoint is present in scripture.

What is Revelation? The document identifies itself as Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (**a revelation of Jesus Christ**). It is the only document in the entire New Testament with a title heading. Thus the document identifies itself as an *apocalypse*. And what is an *apocalypse*? A helpful answer to this question is found at the Wikipedia web site:

Apocalypse (Greek: Ἀποκάλυψις *Apokálypsis*; “lifting of the veil” or “revelation”) is a term applied to the disclosure to certain privileged persons of something hidden from the majority of humankind. Today the term is often used to refer to the end of the world, which may be a shortening of the phrase *apokalupsis eschaton* which literally means “revelation at the end of the æon, or age”. In the holy book of the Christians, the Bible, the term *apocalypse* refers to a revelation believed by Christians to be of their God's will.

To be sure, this definition relates to Christian writings and theological understanding. The rest of the ancient world had different ideas about divine revelation, as Prof. Oekpe has described in the *Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*:

1. *Popular Religion*. While the Romans stress regularity in revelation, the Greeks find deity primarily in the unusual. Common means may be used, however, to declare the forces of destiny. Dreams and their interpretation are important, but above all the oracle. The Greeks do not use *apokályptein* for divine revelation. For them deity is as open and hidden as the reality of which it is the basic form; one may thus see it or miss it. If it is still of the essence of deity to manifest itself, there is no unique revelation. The gods only give hints, and they are as fickle as fortune, having no standard of an inviolable moral will. Greek religion knows revelations but is not a religion of revelation.

2. *Believing and Unbelieving Criticism*. Antiquity can be critical of revelations. It does not accept myth as history, allegorizes its objectionable features, and contests miraculous signs (cf. the Epicureans, and the stress of Epictetus that we should be guided by duty). Plutarch, discussing the oracle, accepts the fact that the soul may be an instrument of deity but points out that it is an imperfect instrument. The deity uses inspired people, but does not enter into them bodily or use them involuntarily. Physical phenomena may stir up the mantic gift, however, so that if we understand the matter correctly we are not to dismiss the oracular as undeserving of confidence.

3. *The Turning to History*. Although magical conceptions may form the starting point, the idea

of the “divine man” marks a turning to history. Outstanding rulers, statesmen, poets, physicians, scholars, and philosophers (cf. Empedocles, Pythagoras, and Apollonius; also Socrates, Plato, and even Epicurus) make such an impress on their own and succeeding generations that they are seen and honored as divine revealers.

4. *The Rationalization of the Idea of Revelation.* Greek philosophy inclines toward causal and immanent explanations. This might seem to exclude the idea of revelation. But meaning, embraced by thought, is injected into nature. Being and thought form a unity, whether as *lógos*, *noús*, or idea. The cosmos manifests thinking spirit, and when Poseidonius gives this a religious turn, the idea of natural revelation results. Thus Cicero infers from creation that it must have either a creator or a governor. Hidden from the senses, the deity, like the human spirit, may be grasped by the *noús*, with no need for a special revelation.

5. *Mysticism and Gnosticism.* Mysticism accepts the hiddenness of deity and the occurrence of special revelations. Initiates, however, know the deity, if only step by step, so that deity is veiled only by lack of initiation, not by essence. The roots of mysticism are in magic. An enhancement of life by divinization is postulated, and this is attained by the use of the right methods or formulas. This rules out historical singularity in revelation. As the sacral actions are spiritualized, they gradually yield to vision and contemplation, which may be purely inward and cognitive rather than emotional. A compact may thus be made with Gnosticism and philosophy, as in the Hermetic writings. These embody the esoteric knowledge entrusted to Hermes Trismegistos. God has given the word of revelation which leads to regeneration, which is to be received with reverence and thanksgiving, which must be kept secret, but which also impels to witness. In spite of the terms, here again is no historical revelation but simply the handing on of knowledge of the factually but not intrinsically hidden ground of the world that may just as well be impersonal as personal.

6. *The Use of Terms.* When the Greeks speak of something analogous to revelation, they mostly use other words. The Hermetic corpus has *apokalýptein* for the illegitimate disclosure of mysteries, which is worthy of execration. Iamblichus, however, has it for beneficial exposition. The noun usually has such ordinary senses as uncovering the head or finding hidden springs. It is, however, a technical term in soothsaying, finds a place in astrology and alchemy, and may signify cultically the revealing of secret matters. Theological use of either verb or noun is fundamentally alien to the Greeks and perhaps derives from the Greek Bible, though this is philologically debatable.

This idea of a divine revelation as the title of a document in the New Testament represents a sharp departure from the surrounding religious atmosphere of the Greeks and Romans in the ancient world. To find some hints at the conceptualization intended by John in using this title, one has to look to his Jewish heritage where similar concepts had been around for several centuries. In the apocalyptic Jewish tradition that developed during the inter-testamental 400 year era between the Old and New Testaments, the roots of John's ideas took shape, as is described in the Wikipedia article of ‘apocalyptic literature.’

Apocalyptic literature was a new genre of prophetic writing that developed in post-Exilic Jewish culture and was popular among millennialist early Christians.

“Apocalypse” is from the Greek word for “revelation” which means “an unveiling or unfolding of things not previously known and which could not be known apart from the unveiling” (Goswiler 1987 p. 3). The poetry of the Book of Revelation that is traditionally ascribed to John is well known to many Christians who are otherwise unaware of the literary genre it represents.

The apocalyptic literature of Judaism and Christianity embraces a considerable period, from the centuries following the exile down to the close of the middle ages. In the present survey we shall limit ourselves to the great formative periods in this literature--in Judaism from 200 BCE to 100 CE, and in Christianity from 50 to approximately 350 CE.

Apocalypse then comes to designate an effort to set forth divine revelation, but in a literary form that is distinct from all other genres in the ancient world. We will pursue that more below under topic 2.1.5.1.2.1.

But John is not content with just this label. Additionally, he calls his writing a ‘**prophecy**’ some six times: 1:3, 19:10, 22:7, 10, 18, 19. Particularly in 22:19 is this so: “if anyone takes away from the words of *the book of this prophecy*, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.” Thus, we began to see the Jewish heritage shining through here. An apocalypse was intended to proclaim the message of God to God's people. Thus to prophesy was not to predict the future; rather, it was to proclaim the message of God's control of the future and His provision of salvation. The message wasn't

the prophet's; it was God's message given to the prophet for him to deliver to God's people.

Additionally, the document is in general structured around **an ancient letter** format, with Praescriptio elements in 1:4-7 and Conclusio elements in 22:6-21. Chapters two and three contain seven brief letters to seven different churches, and these contain typical ancient epistolary elements in them. This third literary genre provides further emphasis on the intention of the author to communicate a personal message to his initial readers that addressed concerns they had and also offered them words of hope and encouragement in their Christian walk.

All this becomes important for the interpretation of the document, since each of these literary aspects provides clues into how to best make sense of this book that many have had difficulty understanding.

2.1.5.1 *Compositional History*

The connection between the early church tradition and the internal author profile becomes somewhat challenging at points. Not necessarily because of tension between the two. More so because both sources of authorship identification don't provide clear cut directions pointing to any single individual in the apostolic world.

2.1.5.1.1 *External History*

The early church tradition concerning the identity of the John mentioned inside the book as the writer is generally agreed on John the apostle, although this was not a universal viewpoint in the ancient Christian world at all. Gene Boring, writing in the *Interpretation* commentary volume on Revelation comments:

The inclusion of Revelation in the Christian Bible did not happen without a struggle. From the moment of its composition, Revelation has been a controversial writing. We should not suppose that everyone in the seven churches to which it was originally addressed accepted it as authentic Christian teaching, for these churches contained rival prophets and teachers who opposed John and his message (2:2, 6, 14-15, 20-23). The letter was, however, accepted by many Christians and within a few decades had achieved such a wide circulation that it was cited as authoritative Christian teaching by bishops and other Christian leaders, not only in its native Asia (Melito, Bishop of Sardis, 160-190, who wrote a commentary on it) but in Egypt (Clement of Alexandria, d. 215), North Africa (Tertullian, d. 220), Rome (Muratorian Canon), and South Gaul (Irenaeus, 177-202).

Yet questions and disputes arose. A second-century Christian leader named Montanus caused much excitement by teaching that the church had entered into the final age of the Spirit, and predicted that the End was near and the new Jerusalem would descend at the nearby town of Pepuza, in what is now Turkey. Since he and the sect that followed him drew support from Revelation for their views, Revelation fell into disrepute among "mainline" Christians—not the last time in church history that Revelation would be rejected because of its misuse by its false friends. The "Alogi," an anti-Montanist group, refused to use Revelation on the basis that it contained errors in fact and had not been written by an apostle. Gaius, an influential presbyter of the Roman church, wrote (ca. 210) a manifesto declaring that Revelation had been written by the gnostic heretic Cerinthus. About 250 the Bishop of Alexandria, Dionysius, made a careful study of the language and grammar of Revelation and concluded that it could not have been written by the same author as the Gospel of John and that it was therefore not apostolic. His conclusion provided helpful support for those Alexandrian Christians who wanted to oppose the use of Revelation in the churches, on the basis that its literal interpretation, especially of the "millennium," was a distortion of the spiritual nature of Christianity. Thus as late as the fourth century, when Eusebius (d. 340) classified the Christian literature purported to be Scripture into "accepted," "rejected," and "disputed," Revelation was still classified as "disputed." Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386) was even more negative, omitting it from the list of canonical books and forbidding its use publicly or privately.

Even after its official acceptance into the canon, many Christians have been hesitant to regard Revelation as a part of their Bible. Although Martin Luther included Revelation in his Bible, he denied it functional canonical status because, in his view, it was not theologically adequate. The Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli likewise refused to base Christian teaching on Revelation, pronouncing it "no biblical book." John Calvin passed over it in silence in his biblical exposition, writing commentaries on twenty-six New Testament books. Rudolf Bultmann is only one example of those modern theologians who, even though they regard the New Testament as the normative witness to the meaning of the gospel for the church's faith and life, relegate Revelation to the margin. To this day, Catholic and Protestant lectionaries have only minimal readings from Revelation, and the Greek Orthodox lectionary omits it altogether. On the other hand, Christian thinkers from Irenaeus and Augustine in the early centuries through Walter Rauschenbusch and Paul Minear in America and Bishops Hans Lilje and Eduard Lohse in Germany are among those who have found Revelation to measure up to its canonical role of providing direction and sustenance for the church's life and mission, especially in extraordinary times.

The picture of early Christianity is not uniform but does tend to favor John the apostle as the writer of this document.

2.1.5.1.2 Internal History

The internal writer profile of this document has to give consideration to the main literary genre of the writing, apocalypse, as a part of its effort to understand the origin of this document.

2.1.5.1.2.1 Apocalypse Genre

Prof. Oepke (KTDNT) summarizes the form this way:

This book calls itself *apokalypsis*. It shares with John the use of the term *lógos*, but the orientation is now to the future in an unveiling of the heavenly world. In spite of some affinities to Jewish apocalyptic, it is closer to prophecy and has more of the content of biblical revelation. It is designed to strengthen the church in its clash with the self-absolutizing power of the state. Above both brutal state and suffering church stands the world of eternity which is the world of the final conquest and the kingdom of God and his Christ.

Additional insight comes from the Wikipedia article:

Apocalypse, in the terminology of early Jewish and Christian literature, is a revelation of hidden things revealed by God to a chosen prophet or apostle. The term is often used to describe the written account of such a revelation. Apocalyptic literature is of considerable importance in the history of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic beliefs and traditions, because it makes specific references to beliefs such as the resurrection of the dead, judgment day, eternal life, final judgment and perdition. Apocalyptic beliefs predate Christianity, appear throughout other religions, and have been assimilated into contemporary secular society, especially through popular culture (see Apocalypticism). Apocalyptic beliefs also occur in other religious systems, for example, the Hindu concept of *pralay*.

Changes in meaning from the Second Century A.D. to the present time

From the Second Century A.D. onward, the term “Apocalypse” was applied to a number of books, yet in the process the meaning has vastly changed from the unveiling of new or unseen ideas in ancient Greek to today’s meaning of the destruction of earth as we now know it, both Jewish and Christian, which show the same characteristic features. Besides the Apocalypse of John (now generally called the Book of Revelation) included in the New Testament, the Muratorian fragment, Clement of Alexandria, and others mention an Apocalypse of Peter. Apocalypses of Adam and Abraham (Epiphanius) and of Elias (Jerome) are also mentioned; see, for example, the six titles of this kind in the “List of the 60 Canonical Books”;^[1] and also Development of the New Testament canon.

The use of the Greek noun to designate writings belonging to a certain literary genre is of Christian origin, the original norm of the class being the New Testament Book of Revelation. In 1832 Gottfried Christiane explored the word “Apocalypse” as a description of the book of Revelation, Communication of ideas through this genre include 1) dreams or visions; 2) angels or divine messengers; 3) a ‘beast’ or end time ruler known as the ‘Antichrist’; 4) emphasis on the future activities of God in exerting His control over human history; 5) graphic imagery; 6) mystical symbolism; and 7) end of the age depiction. These vehicles of idea expression are what give an apocalypse its distinctive character.

The self-label of prophesy for this document orients the writing to a communication of God’s word to God’s people in order to help them understand God’s presence and working in their world. Revelation is not a set of tarot cards for reading the future. It doesn’t chart out the history of humankind from the second century to the end of the world. Instead, it spoke to late first century believers suffering under the heavy hand of persecution about God and His powerful control of the world. He was in charge, despite all outward appearances. And that control would eventually mean the termination of the Roman Empire and its persecution of believers. The abiding message of the book remains the same. God still is in control and is moving human history ever toward the day of judgment and claiming of believers as the bride of Christ who then will share all eternity with Christ in Heaven.

2.1.5.1.2.2 Author Profile

Analysis of the contents of the book of Revelation uncover an interesting picture, but without a lot of helpful clues to identification. J. W. Bowman in the *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* provides the following summation of the internal profile:

John the seer who wrote the Revelation was consciously imbued with the prophetic spirit and fire. He was a theist who shared the passionate belief of an Amos and a Paul in God’s universal

concern for mankind and for its salvation (7:9 ff; cf. [Amos 9:7](#); [Rom. 5:18](#); [Gal. 3:28](#)). John believed in God's omniscience -- his universal insight into the needs of his creation (4:6; 5:6); his providential care of his people (7:2 ff); his universal saving purpose through the Lamb that was slain (5:6, 13); his redemptive activity through the incarnate life of Jesus (12:4-6) and in the history of the church (12:13-17). This author was, moreover, perhaps the church's first scholar to attempt the construction of a philosophy (or, better perhaps, a theology) of history (see § E4 below), and perhaps the first possessed of the literary ability to present the gospel in the form of drama. This John was the pastor of at least the "seven churches" of Asia, and he wrote to them out of a shepherd's concern for his flock, while temporarily exiled from them in the penal colony of Patmos,* "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9), which had formed the subject of his preaching.

The setting for the document is put forth in Rev. 1:9-11:

9 I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10 I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet 11 saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

From all this we know that the writer's name was John. He considered himself a prophet of God. He wrote a document he labeled both an apocalypse and a prophecy. He made use of ancient letter structure to frame this writing. He was experiencing persecution from the Roman government at the time of the writing and the document was addressed to readers experiencing the same.

The **Place of writing** is identified inside the document as the Island of Patmos. During this period it was a prison labor camp for the Roman government. The prisoners mined granite stone for construction purposes elsewhere in the empire. That John was there under persecution is no real surprise since in the later decades of the first Christian century Roman governmental leaders became increasingly suspicious of this new sect of Christians who were functioning outside the boundaries of a legal religion in the empire (*religio illicita*).

The **Time of writing** is less clear. A variety of proposals have surfaced since the late second century, which are summarized in the Wikipedia article on the Book of Revelation:

According to early tradition, the writing of this book took place near the very end of Domitian's reign, around 95 or 96. Others contend for an earlier date, 68 or 69, in the reign of Nero or shortly thereafter.^[16] The majority of modern scholars also use these dates.^[17] Those who are in favor of the later date appeal to the external testimony of the Christian father Irenaeus (d. 185), who stated that he had received information relative to this book from those who had seen John face to face. He says that "it was not seen very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign" (A.H. 5.30.3), who according to Eusebius had started the persecution referred to in the book; however, recent scholars dispute that the book is situated in a time of ongoing persecution and have also doubted the reality of a large-scale Domitian persecution.^[18]

According to Epiphanius of Salamis, the Revelation of John was written in the time of Claudius (PG, XLI 909-910).

Some exegetes (Paul Touilleux, Albert Gelin, André Feuillet) distinguish two dates: publication (under Domitian) and date of the visions (under Vespasian). Various editors would have a hand in the formation of the document, according to these theories. The dating of the work is still widely debated in the scholarly community.

Also one cannot be dogmatic, the evidence does point toward the



late first century reign of the Roman emperor Domitian and the middle 90s of the first century.

2.1.5.2 Contents

The contents of the Book of Revelation can be summarized as follows (source: David Aune, "Revelation, book of," *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*):

Revelation exhibits the most complex structure of any Jewish or Christian apocalypse. One of the most obvious features is the significance to the author of the number seven, which occurs 54 times throughout the book. The author makes extensive use of groupings of seven, such as the seven proclamations to the seven churches (chs. 2–3), and the visionary narratives of the seven seals (6:1–8:1), the seven trumpets (8:2–11:18), and the seven bowls (15:1–16:21). Various attempts to arrange other unnumbered vision sequences in groups of seven have not proven convincing (e.g., A. Y. Collins, *The Combat Myth*). These series of seven are juxtaposed with other units of text which have little to do either with the heptads within which they are embedded or the larger context of Revelation. These quasi-independent textual units, often called "interludes," include 7:1–17 (the sealing of the 144 thousand); 10:1–11 (the angel with the little scroll); 11:1–13 (the two witnesses); the woman, the child, and the dragon (12:1–18); the beasts from the sea and the land (13:1–18); the whore of Babylon (17:1–18); the fall of Babylon (18:1–24); the rider on the white horse (19:11–16). These units are very different from each other. Some are symbolic visions whose meaning is not explicated (12:1–18), while the meaning of other symbolic visions is explained by an interpreting angel (17:1–18). Others are not visions at all but prophetic narratives (11:1–13; 13:1–18). All of these texts are extremely important to the author, who has embedded them in unifying literary structures. The diversity of form, style, and structure suggests that these textual units were not originally written for inclusion in their present literary contexts, but were rather adapted to the context when the author produced a finished composition toward the end of the 1st century.

2.1.5.2.1 Overview of Contents

The contents of Revelation come mostly in units of seven as can be noted from the outline below.

OUTLINE OF REVELATION¹

Last revised: 4/18/00

- Prologue: Christ communicating (1:1-8)
 - A. Superscription to the book (1:1-3)
 - B. Greeting and salutation (1:4-5a)
 - C. A doxology to Christ (1:5b-6)
 - D. The theme of the book (1:7)
 - E. The divine imprimatur (1:8)
- I. Vision one: Christ in the church (1:9-3:22)
 - A. The revelator: the glorified Christ (1: 9-20)
 - B. The seven letters (2:1-3:22)
 - 1. The letter to Ephesus (2:1-7)
 - 2. The letter to Smyrna (2:8-11)
 - 3. The letter to Pergamum (2:12-17)
 - 4. The letter to Thyatira (2:18-28)
 - 5. The letter to Sardis (3:1-6)
 - 6. The letter to Philadelphia (3:7-13)
 - 7. The letter to Laodicea (3:14-22)
- II. Vision two: Christ in the cosmos (4:1-16:21)
 - A. The heavenly throne (4:1-11)
 - B. The seven seals (5:1-8:1)
 - 1. The sealed book (5:1-14)
 - 2. The six seals (6:1-17)
 - a) The first seal: the white horse (vv. 1-2)
 - b) The second seal: the red horse (vv.3-4)
 - c) The third seal: the black horse (vv.5-6)
 - d) The fourth seal: the pale horse (vv.7-8)
 - e) The fifth seal: the souls of martyrs (vv.9-11)
 - f) The sixth seal: the signs in heaven (vv.12-17)
 - 3. Interlude: the two multitudes 7:1-17)
 - a) The 144,000 (vv.1-8)
 - b) The unnumbered multitude (vv.9-17)
 - 4. The seventh seal: the silence in heaven (8:1)

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- C. The seven trumpets (8:2-14:20)
 - 1. The six trumpets (8:2-9:21)
 - a) Preparation (8:2-6)
 - b) The first trumpet: hail, fire, and blood (8:7)
 - c) The second trumpet: sea turned into blood (8:8-9)
 - d) The third trumpet: star falling upon waters (8:10-11)
 - e) The fourth trumpet: sun, moon, and stars darkened (8:12-13)
 - f) The fifth trumpet: opening of bottomless pit (9:1-12)
 - g) The sixth trumpet: loosing of four angels (9:13-21)
 - 2. Interlude (10:1-11:13)
 - a) The angel and the little book (10:1-11)
 - b) The measuring of the temple and the two witnesses (11:1-11)
 - 3. The seventh trumpet: announcement of consummation (11:14-19)
 - 4. Interlude (12:1-14:20)
 - a) The dragon, the woman, and her seed (12:1-17)
 - b) The two beasts (13:1-18)
 - c) Visions of assurance (14:1-20)
- D. The seven bowls (15:1-16:21)
 - 1. The preparation: (15:1-8)
 - 2. The first bowl: the sore on men (16:1-2)
 - 3. The second bowl: turning of sea into blood (16:3)
 - 4. The third bowl: turning of fountains into blood (16:4-7)
 - 5. The fourth bowl: increase of heat of sun (16:8-9)
 - 6. The fifth bowl: darkness (16:10-11)
 - 7. The sixth bowl: unclean spirits (16:12-16)
 - 8. The seventh bowl: consummation (16:17-21)
- III. Vision three: Christ in conquest (17:1-21:8)
 - A. The mystery of Babylon (17:1-18)
 - B. The judgment of Babylon (18:1-19:5)
 - 1. Angelic announcement of Babylon's fall (18:1-2)
 - 2. Warning to God's people (18:4-5)
 - 3. Cry of vengeance (18:6-8)
 - 4. The lament of the kings and merchants (18:9-19)
 - 5. Outburst of praise (18:20)
 - 6. The destruction of Babylon (18:21-24)
 - 7. A thanksgiving for the judgment of Babylon (19:1-5)
 - C. The final triumph and consummation (19:6-21:8)
 - 1. The marriage of the Lamb (19:6-10)
 - 2. The coming of Christ (19:11-16)
 - 3. The battle of Christ and Antichrist (19:17-21)
 - 4. The binding of Satan, the resurrection, and the millennial kingdom (20:1-6)
 - 5. The final destruction of Satan and death (20:7-15)
 - 6. The new creation (21:1-8)
- IV. Vision four: Christ in consummation (21:9-22:5)
 - A. The city of God (21:9-21)
 - B. The worship of God (21:22-27)
 - C. The blessings of God (22:1-5)
- Epilogue: Christ challenging (22:6-21)
 - A. To obedience (22:6-9)
 - B. To reward (22:10-15)
 - C. To fellowship (22:16-20)
 - D. Benediction (22:21)

2.1.5.2.2 Interpretative Approaches

Over the centuries numerous approaches to interpreting Revelation have developed. They often are grouped under differing categories. G.K. Beale, writing in the *New International Greek Testament Commentary*, summarizes these as follows:

There have been four main interpretative approaches to the book of Revelation. These will be summarized here and only briefly evaluated, since assessment of these views will occur at various points throughout the commentary.¹

The Preterist View

The preterist perspective has two forms. The first sees Revelation as a prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., which, of course, requires that the Apocalypse be dated prior to 70. “Babylon the Great” represents apostate Israel, who aids Rome in oppressing Christians. Accordingly, part of the purpose of the book is to encourage Christians that their Jewish persecutors will be judged for their apostasy and to assure the readers that they are now the true Israel.² The problems with this position already have been discussed above (see the section above on the date of the Apocalypse) and will be addressed further at appropriate points throughout the commentary.

A significant problem with this form of the preterist approach is that it limits most of the book’s prophecies of salvation and judgment to 70 A.D. and asserts that these prophecies reached their climactic fulfillment at that time. Indeed, the prophecies of Daniel 2 and 7 alluded to throughout the Apocalypse foresee a last judgment of the evil nations, not primarily of unbelieving Israel.³ Interestingly, these preterist interpreters identify the beast from Daniel 7 in Rev. 13:1ff. with a pagan nation (Rome), which Daniel then sees as the object of final judgment. But then they identify apostate Israel elsewhere in the book as the main object of Daniel’s prophesied final judgment (e.g., see below on 11:15–18). It is true that the OT and NT expect apostate Israel to be judged along with the nations. John likely follows suit. Nevertheless, it would be strange if John saw unbelieving Israel as the primary object of judgment instead of the evil nations, since Daniel viewed these nations as the main object of punishment. Therefore, one of the most difficult problems facing consistent proponents of this alternative is that what appear to be prophecies of final judgment throughout the book are seen as figuratively fulfilled in 70 A.D.⁴

A closely related problem is that these preterist interpreters understand the prophecies of final judgment in Revelation to be limited to Israel, whereas Daniel 2 and 7 anticipate a *universal* judgment. John’s depictions, including his allusions to Daniel, are best interpreted in the same way as Daniel. Consequently, the burden of proof rests on these preterists to provide an exegetical rationale both for exchanging a pagan nation with Israel as the primary object of Daniel’s final judgment and for limiting the last judgment mainly to Israel and not applying it universally. Significantly, the phrase “some from every tribe, people, tongue, and nation” is used in Revelation of both redeemed and unredeemed groups (5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 17:15). It is probably not coincidental that this repeated phrase alludes to Daniel 3–7, where it is also repeated. There it refers to peoples throughout the earth as subjects of the Babylonian or Persian empires or of the end-time divine kingdom (see below on 5:9). Clearly the formula in Dan. 7:14 (Theod.) refers to all peoples throughout the world as subjects of the Son of man. The same universal nuance is probable in Revelation and is underscored in 13:7–8, where it is equated with “all who dwell on the earth.” The contention that these apparently universal formulas and like phraseology in Revelation are limited either to Israel or to other groups in the first century has not been persuasively demonstrated.⁵

The second form of preterist interpretation holds that Revelation is a prophecy of the fall of the Roman Empire, “Babylon the Great,” the persecutor of the saints, in the fifth century A.D. The purpose of the book is to encourage Christians to endure because their persecutors assuredly will be judged. Furthermore, Christians are exhorted not to compromise their witness by identifying in any way with the idolatrous Roman system, which has made inroads into Asia Minor. This version of the preterist approach is more viable than the 70 A.D. alternative because it does not necessitate the early date and because Rome is a more probable identification of “Babylon” than Jerusalem.⁶ But this version does encounter the difficulty of understanding many of the apparent prophecies of final judgment as being already fulfilled in the fall of the Roman Empire during the fifth century A.D. Some interpreters hold to a form of preterism in which (some of) John’s prophecies of worldwide destruction are to be understood literally, not figuratively, but never came to pass because he was merely mistaken.

The Historicist View

There are many versions of the historicist approach. Historicist interpreters generally see

Revelation as predicting the major movements of Christian history, most of which have been fulfilled up to the time of the commentator. The majority of these commentators have understood the seals, trumpets, and bowls as unfolding successive events of history in general chronological order.⁷ Christ's final coming is usually seen as very imminent. Typically this view identifies parts of the Apocalypse as prophecies of the invasions of the Christianized Roman Empire by the Goths and the Muslims. Further, the corruptions of the medieval papacy, the reign of Charlemagne, the Protestant Reformation, and the destruction wrought by Napoleon and Hitler have been seen as predicted by John.

This view tries to identify historical movements too specifically and limits the prophecies of the Apocalypse to Western church history, leaving aside the worldwide church. Proponents of this view living at different periods of church history cannot agree with one another, since they limit the meaning of the symbols only to specific historical referents contemporary with their own times.

Another weakness of this approach is that such a projection of future history would have had little relevance to the first-century readers of Revelation.⁸ A possible response to this objection is that from the perspective of any readership, including the first readers, Christ's coming would have appeared as imminent. Therefore, it would not be difficult for a historicist interpreter of the first or second century to apply to the earliest readers the visions depicting events directly preceding Christ's second advent.⁹

The Futurist View

There are two forms of the futurist perspective. Both understand the visions from ch. 4 up through 22:5 as referring exclusively to a future time immediately preceding the end of history. The most popular form is dispensational futurism, which interprets very literally and generally sees the order of the visions as representing the historical order of future events: (1) the restoration of ethnic Israel to its land (apparently beginning directly prior to the events depicted in 4:1–22:5), (2) the church's rapture into heaven, (3) a seven-year tribulation, (4) the antichrist's reign, (5) the assembly of evil nations to fight over Jerusalem, (6) Christ's second coming, when he defeats the evil nations, (7) his millennial reign, (8) Satan's final rebellion at the end of the millennium, when he gathers together unbelievers from throughout the world to fight against Christ and the saints, and (9) Christ's eternal reign together with the saints in a new heaven and a new earth. 1:19 is often seen as the outline of the book: "Therefore, write what you have seen" represents the past, which is described in ch. 1; "and what is" represents the present, which is described in chs. 2–3; "and what things are about to come to pass after these things" represents the future, which is described in 4:1–22:5. Further explanation and critical evaluation of this scheme will come later in this Introduction.¹⁰

A second version of futurism may be referred to as "modified futurism." It does not interpret as literally as the popular view and does not hold as strictly that the visions represent the chronological sequence of future history. In particular, this version can affirm that the church is true Israel and that there will be no "pretribulation rapture." Rather, Christians will pass through the final period of trial. Some of these commentators hold that 4:1–8:1 covers the period from Christ's resurrection up to the end of history, while 8:2–22:5 is still taken to pertain only to the future final tribulation and succeeding events.¹¹ Another form of modified futurism maintains that the seals, trumpets, and bowls all represent the same successive time periods (as some idealists hold), but also that they refer only to the future period of tribulation.¹² Such versions of modified futurism are more viable than the strict form, but even these encounter significant problems.¹³

The futurist position especially encounters the difficulty that the book would have had no significant relevance for a first-century readership. However, like the historicist, the futurist may contend that the book would have been relevant since Christ's coming has always been expected imminently and that even first-century readers could therefore have thought the visions about the "final great tribulation" were potentially quite pertinent to them. The stricter futurists cannot appeal as strongly to this response, since they affirm that the church is to be "raptured" into heaven and will not experience the events on earth depicted in 4:1–22:5. The appeal to imminence is even less attractive to those who affirm that the original intention of the letters to the seven churches was to

map out seven successive, extended periods in church history, which are concluded by the so-called “rapture” of the church.¹⁴

The Idealist View

The idealist approach affirms that Revelation is a symbolic portrayal of the conflict between good and evil, between the forces of God and of Satan. The most radical form of this view holds that the book is a timeless depiction of this struggle. The problem with this alternative is that it holds that Revelation does not depict any final consummation to history, whether in God’s final victory or in a last judgment of the realm of evil. The idealist notion encounters the opposite problem facing the preterist and historicist views, since it identifies none of the book’s symbols with particular historical events.

My personal approach is to take the book seriously as a message intended primarily for the persecuted believers of late first century Christianity. Out of historical oriented exegesis of the text comes the tremendous reassurances relevant to us today that our God remains in control of the world and of world events. He has a plan to bring all of human history to a climax at some point in the future and we are privileged to gain some insight into that with the broad contours painted by John with his pen.

For me, the most important picture of the book comes in 4:6-11

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle.

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing, “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.” And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”

Truly our God is worthy of all the praise we can muster to give Him.