

Book of Revelation Study Sheet

Basic Principles of Interpretation

The Style or Genre of the Book

Scripture is written in different genres or literary styles. Revelation cannot be understood without determining which.

Revelation is NOT

- Chronological historical narrative, like much of the Pentateuch & the books of Samuel, Kings & Chronicles.
- Didactic literature (direct teaching), like the N.T. epistles.

Revelation IS

- Dependent upon an understanding of the O.T., being written for “His servants,” (1:1) who were people of the Bible and would recognize its themes, symbols & various styles of writing.
- A series of prophetic and/or apocalyptic visions, “all things that he saw,” Rev. 1:2. (“I saw” occurs 33 times in the book.) Thus, it is not all intended to be understood literally – a rule of interpretation often misunderstood by the Pharisees (Jn. 2:18-21, 3:3-9, 7:31-36, Mk. 8:14-18)

Schools of Interpretation

The Preterist View. “Pre” referring to “before.” Virtually all the prophecies in the book have already been fulfilled in the days of the early church. Problems. If all the entire book has been fulfilled,

- Difficulty of explaining world-wide cataclysmic events, if in reality, they took place only within the Roman Empire.
- Difficulty of explaining the final nature of these events, including the second coming of Christ and the final casting of Satan into the lake of fire, within the preterist scheme.

The Futurist View. Virtually all the prophecies of the book are yet to take place at a time of great crisis just prior to the end of the age. Problems.

- Earlier generations of saints would benefit little from the book if only those living at the end of the age see the signs of it approaching.
- Tendency to excessive speculation regarding how current individuals & events correlate to the book.
- Only scholars can know & understand the correlations, thus putting the book out of reach for most Christians.

The Historical View. Those who hold this view believe the people & events in the book correspond to actual people & events throughout all of church history between the two comings of Christ. Problems:

- Historical events can be sifted through, and only the details used which support their theories. (For this reason, most historical interpretations written only a generation or two ago have little value today.)
- Only the most brilliant historians could ever understand the book; thus, who could ever be considered “blessed” for reading and hearing the book (1:3), if knowing its content were the result of mere intellectual understanding, rather than spiritual? (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26-29).

The Ideological view. The people and events and other details of the book represent important principles in the spiritual warfare between God & Satan, and between the saints & the wicked. Problems:

- Without being grounded in reality, sometimes passages having significant detail, when being described entirely symbolically, can become fanciful and hard to prove.
- When set free from any literal reality, liberal theologians can, and have, make passages mean anything they want them to mean.

The Composite view. A humble, spiritual view assumes all of the above schools have some merit, but in order to avoid making the book a playground for speculators, will focus more on the ideological, which confines most of our study *within the Scriptures themselves*. This gives spiritual benefit to all, as wrote John Gill, the 18th century commentator: “Though it is written in an uncommon style, yet may be understood, by the use of proper means, as by prayer and meditation, by comparing it with other prophetic writings, and the history of past times, by which many things in it will appear to have had their accomplishment; and it ought to be observed, that it is a revelation, and not a hidden thing; that it is now not a sealed book, but an open one; and that such are pronounced blessed that read and hear it, and observe the things in it,” (Revelation 1:3).

Structure of the Book

Recurring Themes. Certain recurring themes, many of which we see in other portions of Scripture, obviously have symbolic meaning, and should be noted even if not fully understood. These include:

1. Things in Nature. Natural forces (wind, fire, earthquakes, etc.), animals, and the Tree of Life, most of which are found in the O.T. illustrating spiritual concepts.

2. Numbers, including

- seven, representing completeness & divine perfection;
- six, representing Satan's failure to reach God's perfection (hence the number of the beast is 666);
- four, the number of creation;
- ten, representing Satan's servants & their activities
- twelve, representing God's elect & their activities

3. Contrasts, such as Christ versus Satan, light versus darkness, purity vs. corruption, beauty vs. ugliness.

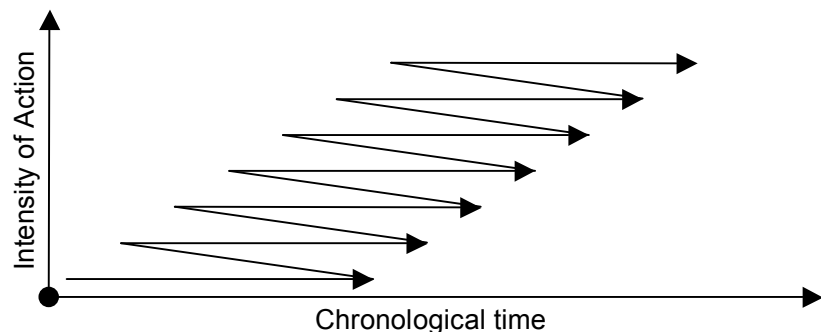
4. Colors, such as

- White, the color of holiness, purity
- Red, the color of warfare
- Black the color of darkness and famine
- purple the color of wealth
- gold the color of heaven's perfection

Repetition & Progression. Time and action in Revelation are both:

1. Repetitive. The book recapitulates themes and time frames, each time reporting them from a different perspective.

2. Progressive. As the conflict intensifies (from divine warnings, to consequences, to cataclysmic judgments), the book progressively moves closer to the end of the Age and the 2nd Coming of Christ.



The Millennium in Revelation

Though the issue of a millennium, or thousand-year reign of Christ, is a significant factor in one's eschatology (view of the end times), there is no specific mention of such a thousand-year period in all of Scripture until

Revelation 20:1-7. At that point, one's understanding of the structure of the entire book of Revelation forms the basis for interpreting those verses.

There are four traditional views of the Millennium (Postmil, Historic Premil, Dispensational Premil, and Amil), but when classifying them in relation to Christ's return there are only two: those which place Christ's return *before* the millennium ("*pre*millennial-ism"), or those which place His return *after* it ("*post*millennialism"). Arguments for and against each will accompany our study of the latter chapters of Revelation.

A. Premillennial Views:

1. *Historic Premillennialism*: Christ returns at the end of a period of intensified opposition to the people of God, and just *prior* to His thousand year reign on the earth.

2. *Dispensational Premillennialism* (originated about 1825): Christ returns twice, first in a secret "Rapture," and then, following a 7-year period of tribulation, He returns publicly to set up His millennial Jewish kingdom on earth.

B. Postmillennial views:

1. *Traditional Postmillennialism*, most popular in the 17th-18th centuries. The preaching of the gospel brings about, through a great working of God's Spirit, a world-wide conversion of the nations to Christ, at the end of which is Christ's return.

2. *Reconstructionist Postmillennialism* (also called *Christian Reconstruction* or *Theonomy*), primarily a 20th century movement. The church's obedience to Christian social and political movements brings about the reconstruction of society along biblical norms, which in turn ushers in Christ's return.

3. *Amillennialism*, originating in the early Christian era. The millennium of Revelation 20 is not a literal reign of 1,000 years but a reference to the Christian era, during which Satan is "bound" and powerless to prevent Christ from building His church by drawing disciples out of every nation. After a period of intensified opposition to God's people at the end of the age, Christ returns to create a new heavens and a new earth, and thus set up His eternal kingdom.