

Reading Revelation

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Excerpt from Adam Hamilton *Making Sense of the Bible*:

“There are four views on how we are to read Revelation. The first view is called the futurist view. It is a favorite of TV evangelists and has become very popular in the last 150 years in the United States. This approach sees nearly everything in the Book of Revelation as pointing to the events of the last days before and just after Christ returns. The Left Behind series of books that was so popular a few years back was based upon this view of Revelation. Many people today, when they think of the Book of Revelation, believe that the book primarily describes events of the decade leading up to the Second coming of Christ – and many of these believe we’re living today in the last days.

The second view is called the historicist view. This approach sees Revelation as foretelling the future, starting from the time of John, so that each vision is about a time to come, starting around AD 95. For example, chapters 6, 7, and 8 are said to describe the decline of Rome and the spread of Christianity. Chapter 9 is said to describe the rise of Islam. Chapter 10 describes the Protestant Reformation. This view was held by many Christians up to the 1800s.

The third view is called the preterist view. “Preterist” means “past,” and this approach sees most of the events described in Revelation as pertaining to the people who lived in John’s time, with the visions describing events in the Roman Empire of the late first and early second centuries. Most mainline and a large number of evangelical scholars today hold this view. A fourth view is the idealist perspective. This view sees most of revelation as describing the perpetual struggle between good and evil, the perpetual challenges of living for God in a pagan culture, and the hope God offers to all who are persecuted for remaining faithful. Every age and generation can find itself somewhere in the book.

I’ve got ten commentaries on Revelation in my library, written by some of the foremost scholars to study this book, and every one of them holds some combination of the preterist and idealist perspectives. This is in stark contrast to the views of most television evangelists and many conservative preachers, who favor the futurist view. Most mainline scholars see the book as describing events of the author’s day.”

End Times Glossary

Antichrist

The word “Antichrist” is used only 4 times in 1 John (2:18, 2:22, 4:3) and 2 John (1:7). It is NOT used in Revelation. John indicates that an Antichrist is coming, but also that the spirit of the Antichrist is already in the world, and even speaks of “antichrists” already in the world. Many identify “the Antichrist” with the greater Beast of Rev. 13, though this is somewhat arbitrary. It seems that being an antichrist is to actively deny or reject belief in Jesus and to actively deceive others about who Jesus is or oppose the Church. Identifying “The Antichrist” is less a matter of End Times as it is about understanding the ways Jesus is opposed in our lives and societies now.

The Millenium/Millennial Reign of Christ

This concept, described in Revelation 20 (and only there). It is a period in which Christ reigns in some sense with the saints on earth. Read in the context of Revelation, the 1,000 is probably a symbol for a complete age rather than a literal time period of one millennium. There are basically 3 beliefs about this:

- ◇ ◇ Pre-Millennialism: believes that Jesus will return to inaugurate the millenium and reign on earth for 1000 years before Satan and evil are finally defeated. This has a long past, but a more modern form is the Dispensational Millennium of Darby, Scofield, and Ryrie. In this view, Christians are raptured out of earth so Christ can fulfill God’s literal promises to the Jewish people on earth before the Judgment. Often, there is seen to be a deteriorating moral state of the world which triggers Christ’s return. In other words, it tends to be pessimistic about human progress.
- ◇ ◇ Post-Millennialism: believes that we are currently in the Millennium and that Jesus will return as a consummation to the ways the Gospel has transformed the world into the image of his Kingdom. In other words, this view tends to be optimistic about human progress and it is that progress that in some way triggers Christ’s return.
- ◇ ◇ Amillennialism: this view, like PostMill, believes that the symbol of the Millennium relates to the current “Church Age” with the Risen Christ currently reigning from heaven and by his Spirit within the Church. Satan is currently, in some sense bound, and the Gospel can be spread to all nations. Final Judgment and the New Heavens and New Earth will be ushered in upon Jesus’ return. Amill tends to be less optimistic about the power of humans to fulfill the ultimate reign of Christ as Postmill, but less convinced that it’s all getting worse like Premill, though there may indeed be a worsening/intensification of Tribulation prior to Christ’s return.

Great Tribulation

This takes the symbolic periods of suffering and injustice described in Daniel, Revelation and infuses them with the sufferings predicted by Jesus in the Gospels. Generally, this is believed to be a 7-year period of intense suffering. Jesus, however, does not describe a particular time period, but describes forms of suffering that have happened at many times and places since his life on earth.

Rapture:

Not only is this whole concept based on one verse (1 Thessalonians 4:17)—which happens to be about comforting and encouraging believers about the death of their sisters and brothers in Christ—but it is a recent doctrine, dating back less than 150 years. It relates to the Great Tribulation, and many people debate whether Christians will be raptured (snatched away) before (Pre-Trib), in the middle of (Mid-Trib), or after (Post-Trib) the Great Tribulation.