

INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION

By Ashby L. Camp

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I. Preface to the Study

A. I have a soft spot in my heart for the Book of Revelation, as it was instrumental in Meg's conversion to Christ.

1. I became a Christian on June 14, 1978. As you can imagine, my conversion dramatically shifted the focus and direction of my life, and Meg was not happy about it. It was as though someone had stolen the irreligious man she had married just two years earlier. That was a tense time in our marriage. Her friends were telling her I had lost my mind, and talking to her about Christ quickly became off limits.

2. A couple of months later, I came home from work one day, and Meg casually said in passing, "I read some of Revelation today." Now, that would not have been my recommendation for a starting place, but at that point for her to open the Bible anywhere was a major thing. She finished Revelation, and I think she will tell you that it frightened her. God used that fear of his judgment to stir her to pursue him, and on September 17, 1978, one of the greatest days of my life, Meg was baptized into Christ.

B. Despite knowing very little about the Bible at that time, Meg absorbed the take home message from the symbolic drama that is the Book of Revelation. There is much in the apocalyptic portion of the book, chapters 4 and following, that is uncertain in terms of details, but it is not necessary to understand the details to profit from the book. What comes through loud and clear is that God is in control of history and that he prevails over every enemy and is going to bring his creation to a perfect eternal state as he has promised. Those who are faithful to him will share in that blessing; those who are not will suffer his terrible wrath.

C. Vern Poythress in his little book on Revelation titled *The Returning King* illustrates the point with a story about some seminary students who had just finished playing basketball in a gym. They noticed a janitor in the corner reading a book, and they asked him what he was reading. He said, "The Bible." They said, "What part of the Bible?" and he said "Revelation." They figured they would help this poor soul, so they asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" and to their surprise he said, "Yes!" In astonishment they asked, "What does it mean?" He responded, "Jesus is gonna win!"

D. Beyond that basic message, however, Revelation can be quite puzzling. It has all kinds of strange symbolism, weird beasts, bizarre imagery, and shifting scenes. It is like a dream in that regard, or a video that bombards you with shifting symbolic imagery, and yet it carries a powerful message from God. Because of its distinctive nature in terms of New Testament writings, it seems it is either ignored or fixated upon. Regarding the

latter, William Barclay lamented that Revelation "has sometimes become the playground of religious eccentrics." And that is certainly true. I would say that we in churches of Christ have been more inclined to ignore it.

E. As always, I am going to give you my understanding of the book. There are things I am not sure about, and I am well aware that there is plenty of room for disagreement with my understanding. I own thirty-three commentaries on Revelation and quite a few other books that discuss it, and there is much disagreement among those scholars. What I ask is that you just hear me out, that you try to understand how I see the book, and then take from that what you are convinced is valid.

F. I want to assure you that my understanding of the book is not novel or eccentric; I am not leading you down some quirky theological path. I may have a few different wrinkles thrown in, but the basic view I will be presenting is squarely in the evangelical mainstream. It may be new to you, but it is well known by others.

G. Now for those who may be invested in a different interpretation to such an extent that listening to me will be distressing, I want to alert you to where I am headed so you can decide if you would be happier in another class. Consider this full disclosure. I am not trying to get rid of you, but I do not want to string you along only to have you realize months down the road that my approach is unbearable for you and that you really do not want to be here. And I certainly do not want you gnashing your teeth at me. I would rather let you know up front my general direction so, if it is anathema to you, you can bail out of the class now and get in on the beginning of another class.

1. I will say more about this shortly, but let me just say now that I think there is a strong futurist element in Revelation.

a. In other words, I think much of the apocalyptic material, much of the visionary material after chapter 3, relates to the end of history, to the Second Coming of Christ and the period of intense distress that will immediately precede that coming. I think the events associated with the opening of the first five seals in chapter 6 represent the birth pains that mark human history until the return of Christ, and the opening of the sixth seal points to the contents of the scroll (see, e.g., Thomas Schreiner, *New Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], 830).

b. The focus of the scroll, the contents of which are not revealed until the breaking of the seventh seal, is the Second Coming and its accompanying circumstances and judgment. So I would probably be described as a modified futurist. I disagree with those who believe that the events symbolized prior to chapter 19 have already been fulfilled.

2. I also am what is known as an amillennialist, which is the common understanding in churches of Christ and in a number of other groups. That means that I believe the 1,000-year (millennial) reign mentioned in Revelation 20 is a picture, a

symbol, of the present reign of Christ and the saints in heaven. Christ's return will mark the end of that period, and then the final state will be ushered in.

a. That is in contrast to premillennialists who believe, among other things, that the Second Coming will *precede* a literal 1,000-year reign on earth. In their view, Christ will return and then rule over a peaceful and prosperous earthly kingdom for 1,000 years, after which time there will be a final rebellion and then the final state will be ushered in. Premillennialists are of two main types: historical and dispensational. These types differ in how they see the relationship between Israel and the church and, at least usually, in whether they think the church will be whisked away to heaven in the rapture prior to the time of intense hardship and persecution known as the Tribulation.

b. Amillennialism also differs, to a lesser extent, from postmillennialism. Postmillennialists believe that the kingdom Christ brought is progressing in history, being extended in the world through preaching and the work of the Spirit, and that this will culminate in a Christianized world. After a long period of righteousness and peace on earth, a golden age, there will be a brief period of apostasy and then Christ's consummating return.

c. Though these millennial disagreements have been prominent at different times in church history, they should not be allowed to obscure the major point that the victory Christ has won over Satan will be fully and finally realized in the end and that even before that time God cares for his saints and blesses them in his triumphant rule.

3. Okay, that is your warning. If neither of those perspectives – futurism or amillennialism – makes you hot under the collar, I think you will be safe. Who knows? You may even learn something.

H. I am going to spend today and probably the next two classes introducing the book. As I always say, introductory material is not filler; it contributes to one's understanding of the writing. But beyond standard introduction issues, I also want to give you an overview of the Bible story because Revelation is part of, indeed the culmination of, that story.

I. When we begin our study of the text, I will try to move things along at a good pace, meaning I will try to strike a balance between getting bogged down in minutia and skimming too quickly over the text. It is a fairly lengthy book, so I feel sure it will take us more than a quarter to work through it.

II. Authorship

A. I believe Revelation was authored by the Apostle John. There are several lines of evidence in support of that view.

1. The author identifies himself simply as John, which suggests he was well known to his readers. Reliable early church tradition places the Apostle John in Ephesus at the end of his life. No other Christian named John would have been better known to the churches of Asia Minor in the late first century. As Donald Guthrie asks, "Was the Asiatic church overrun with brilliant Christians by the name of John, who would only need to announce their name for the Christians to know which was meant?"

2. Ascription of Revelation to the Apostle John is early and widespread. Several second-century writers and works make the claim (Papias of Hierapolis [debated], Justin Martyr, Melito of Sardis, Irenaeus, the Muratorian Canon) and do so without any hint of there being a contrary claim. Their evidence is especially strong given that Papias (if included), Melito, and Irenaeus were in a good position to know about the matter. Papias knew the Apostle John personally; Melito was bishop of Sardis, one of the churches addressed in Revelation; and Irenaeus was from Smyrna, another church addressed in Revelation, and claimed to have heard Polycarp, who had talked with the Apostle John. Third-century Christian writers ascribing Revelation to the Apostle John include Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Origen, and Tertullian.

3. Linguistic and stylistic clues in the text have convinced a majority of scholars that the author was a Jewish Christian originally from Palestine. That, of course, fits the Apostle John.

B. The only significant early dissenting voice regarding the Apostle John's authorship is Dionysius, a third-century bishop of Alexandria. His testimony, however, is not weighty because he makes no claim to be passing on tradition and bases his rejection of apostolic authorship on the content of Revelation. In addition, he had a theological motivation for denying apostolic authorship in that he rejected what he understood to be its teaching about Christ establishing a thousand-year reign on earth (*chiliasm*).

C. Many modern scholars follow Dionysius in rejecting the Apostle John as the author. Their weightiest argument is the difference in the Greek style of Revelation and the Gospel of John and 1 John. Carson and Moo conclude in *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 705:

While the difference in Greek style is a problem, we are not convinced that the arguments of Dionysius or his latter-day followers make it impossible for the same person to have written both the fourth gospel and Revelation. We are thus inclined to accept the testimony of those who were in a position to know about these matters, and we attribute both books to John the apostle, "the beloved disciple."

III. Date

A. The only two serious contenders for the date of Revelation are shortly after the reign of Nero (A.D. 68-69; not 64-67 as some hyper-preterists claim) and near the end of

Domitian's reign (A.D. 95-96). In agreement with a clear majority of scholars, I think the A.D. 95-96 date has considerably stronger support.

1. This date receives the earliest and the most support from early Christian writers. Irenaeus wrote in the second century that Revelation was written toward the end of Domitian's reign. He was in a position to have direct information about the matter in that he was from Smyrna, one of the churches addressed in Revelation, and claimed to have heard Polycarp, who had direct contact with the Apostle John. Eusebius reports that Melito, who was bishop of Sardis in the second century, another church addressed in Revelation, agreed that Revelation was written during Domitian's reign. Others supporting that dating include Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215), Origen (c. 185-254), Victorinus (died c. 304), Eusebius (c. 260-340), and Jerome (c. 354-420).

2. The book indicates that emperor worship was practiced (13:4, 12, 15-16; 14:9, 11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4), and though there were elements of emperor worship going back to Julius Caesar, it reached new heights under Domitian.

a. Bruce Metzger writes in his small commentary *Breaking the Code* (p. 160), "Prior to Domitian the state religion had not discriminated against the Christian faith. Nero's mad acts against Christians were restricted to Rome and had nothing to do with the issue of worship. The first emperor who tried to compel Christians to participate in Caesar worship was Domitian."

b. The Roman historian Seutonius (born c. A.D. 70), who wrote in the early part of the second century, says that "Lord and God" became Domitian's regular title in writing and conversation. "[I]n the accounts of Nero's conflicts with Christians there is no evidence that Nero claimed to be divine" (Andreas Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, [Nashville: B&H Publishing], 817).

c. Carson and Moo state (p. 709-710):

Domitian apparently made this confession a test of loyalty. It is indeed possible that some Christians tried to avoid the predicament this placed them in by taking refuge in the synagogue, where some of the traditional legal exceptions granted Jews in this regard still applied. This may help explain the tensions between Jews and Christians evident in the letters to the seven churches.

3. "Colin Hemer, after an exhaustive study of the local settings of the churches [*The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, 2000], claims that his findings generally confirm the Domitianic date" (Carson and Moo, 710). For example, Laodicea was leveled by a devastating earthquake in A.D. 60. The city was rebuilt without any assistance from Rome, but it was decades before that rebuilding reached a level that would justify Laodicea's depiction in Revelation as a rich and economically flourishing city. Its great stadium was not completed until A.D. 79, and

other of its grand public buildings were constructed around that same time. Its great triple gate and towers probably were finished in A.D. 88-90. Mark Hitchcock remarks (*The End Times Controversy*, p. 149), "[I]f Revelation was written in A.D. 95, the description of Laodicea in Rev. 3:14-22 would fit the situation exactly. By this time the city had been completely rebuilt and was enjoying prosperity and prestige and basking in the pride of its great accomplishment."

4. The lack of any mention of Paul or Timothy in the letter to the church at Ephesus is more compatible with a date in the 90s than the 60s. This is admittedly an argument from silence, but given how long Paul had labored in Ephesus and given that Timothy was combating false teaching there in the mid-60s, it seems likely that a letter written so close to that time would in some way acknowledge their service to that church.

5. To the extent Revelation alludes to the Nero-redivivus myth, which seems likely, it favors a date during Domitian's reign because the return of Nero legend increased significantly in popularity toward the end of the first century (Köstenberger, 820). The more that idea was in the cultural wind, the better suited it would be to serve as a symbolic reference.

B. The reference in Rev. 11:1-2 to the temple and the reference in Rev. 17:9-11 to the sixth king as presently reigning do not require a Neronic date and are not sufficient to overcome the evidence for the Domitianic date. See, e.g., Carson and Moo, 707-712 and Kim Riddlebarger, *The Man of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2006), 179-186.

C. Thus, Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles conclude (p. 824):

The external testimony overwhelmingly favors the late date, which became the established tradition throughout church history. The internal testimony, while less than conclusive, also tends to support a later date. Although some passages may reflect historical circumstances prior to 70, most of the evidence seems to point to a later date. The Book of Revelation was written around 95-96 by John in obedient submission to the vision he received while in exile on Patmos.

IV. John's Situation

A. John is on the island of Patmos, to which he most likely had been temporarily banished by a local Asian official because of opposition to his message (1:9). Exile or banishment to an isolated island was a relatively common form of punishment in the Roman Empire. The sentence could be either perpetual or temporary, the former requiring a verdict from the emperor. According to Tertullian (c. 160-225), John's exile was of the temporary variety, so he was probably sentenced by a local official.

B. The island of Patmos is about ten miles long and six miles wide with rocky terrain. It is about forty miles west of Miletus and almost sixty miles southwest of

Ephesus in the Aegean Sea. The island was inhabited, but John's presence there was a forced separation from the mainland.

V. Recipients

A. Revelation was written at the Lord's command to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (1:4, 10-11), which incorporated approximately the western third of Asia Minor. The cities in which these churches were located were on a postal route in that province. Since the number seven symbolized perfection or completeness, these seven churches could symbolize all the churches of Asia.

B. The saints in these locations were in need of encouragement to remain faithful as they faced the pressure of a culture, and increasingly a political power, that was hostile to Christianity. They were being pressured to compromise their commitment to Christ in order to get along in a world opposed to them.

1. John is in exile, Antipas has been martyred (2:13), and the churches are experiencing tribulation (1:9, 2:9), enduring hardship for Christ's name (2:3), and being pressured to deny him (2:13, 3:8). Some in Smyrna will face imprisonment and even execution in the future (2:10).

2. Christians would be pressured to pay honor to the Emperor as divine and to express loyalty to local patron deities at the annual dinners held by the various trade guilds, associations that were important to one's economic livelihood. They also would come under the microscope regarding their loyalty to the Empire when Jews would insist to local government officials that Christianity was a separate religion from Judaism and that Christians therefore were not entitled to the special right of Jews to practice their religion throughout the Empire. Under this pressure, it seems that some Christians found ways to rationalize participating in the trade guild festivities and sacrificing to the Emperor.

C. God paints a picture of ultimate reality and his final victory to reinforce for them the certainty of their reward and the importance of enduring in faith whatever the enemy may throw at them. The point is not that it will be easy but that it will be worth it.

VI. Apocalyptic Literature

A. Apocalyptic literature, also known simply as apocalypse, refers to a distinctive style or type of literature that was well known among Jews of the first century. There were numerous Jewish apocalypses written from the third century B.C. through the first century A.D. (e.g., 1 Enoch, Jubilees 23, Testament of Levi 2-5, portions of the Sybilline Oracles, Apocalypse of Zephaniah, 2 Enoch, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch). There also were Christian apocalypses other than Revelation that were written in the late first or second centuries A.D. and beyond (e.g., Shepherd of Hermas, Ascension of Isaiah 6-11).

B. This is significant because, even though those apocalypses were not inspired by God, in choosing to communicate in the Book of Revelation through that known literary form God was signaling that his message needed to be understood in accordance with that literary form. Where, for example, God communicates truth in the literary form of a proverb, it would be a mistake to treat that revelation as though it were a legal decree. Proverbs convey general or proverbial truths not absolute truths to which there are no exceptions. The literary form brings with it certain interpretive conventions, and they need to be kept in mind to hear the message accurately.

C. Apocalyptic literature is characterized by a number of things (see Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, 831-833).

1. It reveals some heavenly or spiritual reality through the agency of a seer or prophet. The vision usually is given in the first person and is expressed in a narrative framework, as a course of events. It frequently involves angels or other heavenly beings as guides and interpreters and includes exhortations to behave, choose, and respond in certain ways.

2. It is saturated with symbolic, metaphorical, and figurative language and with symbolic imagery.

3. It portrays a dualism, a sharp contrast, between the temporary situations of earth and the eternal realities of heaven that usually finds expression in the final intervention of the sovereign God to consummate his plans for creation. So there is commonly an eschatological element, an end-time fulfillment, to apocalyptic literature.

VII. Overview of the Bible Story

A. Before elaborating on my interpretive approach to Revelation, let me briefly sketch for you the overarching story of the Bible. The Bible is a collection of writings that were made by many different people in different places at different times over more than a thousand-year period, but it tells one big story. As I said, Revelation is the culmination of that story, which is why it was fixed as the last book of the Christian Bible.

B. God in the beginning miraculously created all things, including human beings (Adam and Eve), during the six days of creation. The creation was at first an ideal place in which all things were acting in the way God desired. But soon Adam and Eve, who were to be God's representatives on earth, rejected his rule by disobeying him.

C. By bringing sin into the human world, they corrupted or spoiled God's very good creation. As a result, creation is not now the way it is supposed to be. It is no longer a paradise where all things work together in peace and harmony under God's rule. Instead our world now includes things like anger, division, hatred, violence, destruction, disease, death, decay, lying, stealing, suffering, sorrow, and pain. In that sense, it is a creation that is sick as a result of sin. It has fallen from its original state of glory, which is why Adam's sinning is known as "the Fall."

D. The story of the Bible is the story of God's work through the people of Israel to rescue his creation, which includes mankind, from its fallen state. People are the high point of God's creation, but his rescue effort includes all of creation because all of creation was harmed as a result of sin. That is why Paul in Rom. 8:19-22 says that creation itself looks forward to the day it will be freed from the consequences of human sin. In the words of "Joy to the World," Isaac Watts's famous Christmas carol, "No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make His blessings flow, far as the curse is found."

E. In reaction to increasing sin on the earth, God flooded the entire world in the days of Noah. Everyone was killed except the eight people from Noah's family who were on the ark. Despite this opportunity for a new beginning, mankind continued on its sinful course, living in rebellion to God.

F. God chose Abraham to be the person through whom all nations would be blessed. This meant that God was going to bless the nations, the people of the world, by using Abraham in his plan for healing the sick creation. The fulfillment of this promise involved Abraham's descendants becoming the nation of Israel. That happened when God led them out of Egyptian slavery under Moses around 1446 B.C., an event known as "the Exodus," and brought them into the Promise Land (Canaan) under Joshua around 1406 B.C., an event known as "the Conquest."

G. Israel was to live in the land God gave them as a holy and obedient people so that the nations around them would see the greatness of God and the goodness and blessedness of life lived under his rule (Deut. 4:6-8; Ezek. 5:5; Isa. 42:6, 49:6). But Israel was unfaithful to God. Because of their continual disobedience, God had Israel's enemies defeat them and sent the Israelites into exile in foreign lands as he had warned them repeatedly that he would do.

H. The O.T. ends on a note of unfulfilled hope. The glorious state of peace, harmony, and complete blessing – the healing of creation – that the O.T. suggested God was going to bring about did not arrive when the Jews returned from Babylonian exile. Israel continued to be ruled by foreign powers instead of a son of David, and the marks of this old fallen creation continued to exist. When Jesus came in the first century and announced "the kingdom of God is at hand," the people were excited. They were hoping that God at long last was going to heal the sick creation and bless his people by having them live in that glorious state.

I. Jesus' claim that he was bringing in God's final state, the kingdom of God, raised a question in the mind of Jews. How could Jesus be bringing in the glorious eternal state of perfect love, peace, and fellowship when the signs of the old fallen order – things like sin, death, sorrow, suffering, and pain – continued to exist? Jesus explained, especially in some of his parables, that people were mistaken in thinking that the coming of the kingdom of God would mean the *immediate* removal of all bad things. He taught that the kingdom, the final state, comes in two stages. He was introducing or inaugurating

In New Testament scholarship a broad consensus emerged . . . [regarding] a position sometimes labeled 'inaugurated' eschatology. There is a tension between the 'already' of experience and the 'not yet' of eschatological fulfillment. The realization of God's final purpose for the world has already begun in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but its completion is still awaited. Believers live in the overlap of the old and new ages, between the resurrection of Jesus understood as an eschatological event and their own bodily resurrection at the future *parousia* of Jesus, participating through the Spirit in the new life of the age to come but in the context of the as yet unredeemed world.

2. This already-not yet concept of the kingdom lies behind many of the seeming paradoxes of the New Testament. That is why the New Testament writers speak of many things as being a present reality but also something that is still to come. Thus, the **kingdom** is now (Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:20; Col. 1:13; Heb. 12:28), but the kingdom is still to come (Mat. 6:10, 7:21-23, 25:34; Mk. 14:25; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Cor. 15:50; Gal. 5:21; 2 Tim. 4:1); **eternal life** is now (Jn. 5:24, 6:47; 1 Jn. 5:11, 5:13), but eternal life is still to come (Mat. 19:29, 25:46; Mk. 10:30, Lk. 18:30, Rom. 6:22; Gal. 6:8; Tit. 3:7; Jude 21); the **end of the ages** is now (1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 9:26), but the end of the age is still to come (Mat. 13:39-40, 13:49-50, 28:20; Mk. 10:30; Lk. 18:30; 1 Cor. 2:6; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 1:21, 2:7, 5:16; Heb. 6:5); **redemption** is now (Rom. 3:24; 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14), but redemption is still to come (Lk. 21:28; Rom. 8:23; Eph. 4:30); **salvation** is now (Rom. 8:24; Eph. 2:5, 2:8; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 3:4-5; 1 Pet. 3:21; Jude 3), but salvation is still to come (Acts 15:11; Rom. 5:9-10, 13:11; 1 Cor. 3:15; 1 Thess. 5:9; Heb. 1:14, 9:28; 1 Pet. 1:5); **adoption** is now (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 3:26, 4:6; Heb. 12:7-8), but adoption is still to come (Lk. 20:36; Rom. 8:23); **death's defeat** is now (2 Tim. 1:10), but death's defeat is still to come (1 Cor. 15:26); **new creation** is now (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15), but new creation is still to come (Rom. 8:19-23; Eph. 1:10; Rev. 21:1-4).

3. As Christians, as participants in the kingdom that has already invaded the present, we now share in the blessings of that kingdom. We now have eternal life, redemption, salvation, adoption, etc. and we have the indwelling Spirit who is transforming us toward the purity and perfection of the Lord Jesus, but there is an aspect of those blessings that will not be realized until Jesus returns. Indeed, the Spirit is a down payment on the fullness of our hope (2 Cor. 1:22; 2 Cor. 5:5; Eph. 1:13-14). It is in that hope that we wait patiently and eagerly for the Lord's return (Rom. 8:23-25; Tit. 2:13).

4. As Christians, we live in the tension between the already and the not yet, and we must maintain the balance between the two.

a. What is called "over-realized eschatology" is the error of thinking that you already have blessings that God has reserved for the future; it is viewing the now too much in terms of the not yet. You can see this attitude reflected in 1 Cor. 4:8-11 and 2 Tim. 2:17-18. You can see it in modern "health and wealth" teachers who claim that God intends us already to be free of all sickness and poverty.

b. What is called "under-realized eschatology" is the error of failing to appreciate the blessings we as Christians already have from God. It is undervaluing the effect of Christ's kingdom-bringing work on the present. You see this in people who think there is no power in Christ for transformed living, who think that a Christian is forgiven but is still trapped in the power of sin. As I often say, a Christian is not the same person in a new situation but a *new* person in a new situation.

L. At his first coming, Jesus not only announced the kingdom's arrival but also demonstrated its character and gave us a foretaste of it. John Piper remarks in a sermon titled "Christ and Cancer":

The answer to why Jesus did not raise all the dead is that, contrary to the Jewish expectation, the first coming of the Messiah was *not* the consummation and full redemption of this fallen age. The first coming was rather to purchase that consummation, illustrate its character, and bring a *foretaste* of it to his people. Therefore, Jesus raised some of the dead to illustrate that he has that power and one day will come again and exercise it for all his people. And he healed the sick to illustrate that in his final kingdom this is how it will be. There will be no more crying or pain any more.

M. As I argued when we looked at Matthew 24, Jesus taught that the time between his ascent and his return is one of birth pains – one of wars, conflicts, disasters, tumult, persecution, false prophets, and lawlessness – that will intensify, as birth pains do, and then ultimately give way (give "birth") to his return. A key figure in the final intensification of persecution and hardship will be Antichrist, also known as the man of lawlessness. He will be a Satan-inspired leader of a violent, anti-Christian empire. His coming was foretold as early as the book of Daniel and was taught by the apostles Paul and John. When he is on the scene, Christ will overthrow him with the splendor of his coming (2 Thess. 2:8).

N. Christ will return with mighty angels and will take vengeance, inflict punishment, on the unbelievers of the world (2 Thess. 1:7-8; Jude 14-15). In conjunction with that coming, the dead will be resurrected, the living will be transformed, creation will be made over into the new heavens and new earth, and the final judgment will be executed, meaning people will be sent to their permanent dwelling places. God's children will spend eternity in the love and joy of the new heavens and new earth. Those who are not God's children, meaning those who sinned and did not receive his forgiveness, will spend eternity in the sorrow of hell.

O. Until Christ's return, dead people exist as conscious, bodiless spirits in a place of blessing or suffering depending on their relationship with God at the time of their death. At Christ's return, they will be resurrected, meaning their spirit will be united with a body that is suited for eternal existence, what Paul describes as an immortal and imperishable body, and they will then be assigned their permanent dwelling place.

P. Revelation, in my view, is largely a symbolic representation of the wrath and judgment that surround Christ's return, but it also contains the grandest depiction of the eternal state of the new heavens and new earth. It is a visionary elaboration of the final chapter of the Bible story. The paradise that was lost in Genesis is regained in Revelation and regained to a transcendent degree, regained in even greater form. Revelation pictures the restoration of all things promised by God through the prophets, the restoration mentioned by Peter in Acts 3:21. The curse that followed sin in Genesis is removed in Revelation, and the creation that was defiled by sin in Genesis is transformed into the new heavens and new earth in Revelation. The tree of life from which mankind was banished in Genesis because of sin is part of the eternal home of the redeemed in Revelation.

Q. Jesus is the center of this entire effort. It was decided from eternity that to solve the sin problem that would infect creation God the Son would become the God-man Jesus Christ and would take on himself the penalty that all human sin deserved. This allows God to forgive sinners without making light of the horror of sin, without trivializing sin. It allows God to forgive in a way that is consistent with his nature, a way that expresses his love without neglecting his holiness and justice.

1. Christ's sacrifice is therefore the key to healing all the consequences of sin, even the damage it caused to the nonhuman creation. Thus Paul in Col. 1:19-20 speaks of Jesus as the one through whom God the Father reconciled *all things* to himself, making peace by the blood of his cross.

2. Andrew Lincoln says of Eph. 1:9-10 (*Ephesians*, WBC, 43-44):

An important part of the eulogy is the middle section which blesses God for revealing that his gracious purpose in history is all-embracing (vv 9, 10). As believers are reminded of the revelation of this mystery, they are brought to realize that the salvation with which they have been blessed centers in the same comprehensive Christ in whom God is working to restore all things. The divine election which has grasped them is shown to be God's decision to sum up all things in Christ. To be in Christ, therefore, is to be part of a program which is as broad as the universe, a movement which is rolling on toward a renewed cosmos where all is in harmony.

VIII. Interpretive Approach

A. As I already indicated, my interpretive approach to Revelation is probably best labeled a modified futurist view. I see John's visions as referring primarily to the last days of human history that are brought to an end with Christ's return in judgment. It is a "modified" futurism because, unlike some others, I believe the events associated with the opening of the seals are a depiction of the birth pains that will characterize history until Christ's return. The events of the sixth seal indicate the coming of Christ, the subject of the scroll, the contents of which are revealed after the breaking of the seventh seal.

B. There are several other basic interpretive approaches.

1. Virtually everyone agrees that the visions from the latter part of chapter 19 to the end of the book relate to a still future coming of Christ that will include the consummation of the kingdom – the general resurrection, making of the new heavens and new earth, and the final judgment. But some think the visions prior to chapter 19 were fulfilled in the fall of the Roman Empire or in the fall of Jerusalem, the latter being an option only for that minority that believes Revelation was written prior to A.D. 70. This is known as the *preterist approach*, from the Latin word *praeter* meaning past. It is not to be confused with what is known as full or hyper-preterism, the eccentric view that the Second Coming has already occurred.

2. Some see John's visions prior to chapter 19 as a historical roadmap, a chronological outline referring to people, countries, and events throughout history from the first century. This is known as the *historical approach*. It is illustrated by certain early Protestant theologians who equated the Pope with the Antichrist. This view has very few adherents today.

3. Some see John's visions as symbolic depictions designed to teach us generally about God's person and ways in the world; they teach principles of spiritual war rather than symbolize actual events. These principles operate throughout the church age and may have repeated embodiments. This is known as the *idealist approach*.

C. In taking a predominantly futurist view, I am in some good scholarly company. I know some of you do not care about that, but let me quote just a few scholars who share that basic perspective. That does not prove the perspective is correct, of course, but it shows it is a mainstream understanding.

1. D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo state in *An Introduction to the New Testament* (p. 720), "[I]t is the futurist approach that comes closest to doing justice to the nature and purposes of Revelation. . . . Revelation is about eschatology, not history."

2. Andreas Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles Quarles state in their introduction to the New Testament titled *The Cradle, The Cross, and the Crown* (p. 849), "In modern times, the futurist position enjoys pride of place among most evangelical Christians" and (p. 852), "Since the book itself explicitly claims to be about future events surrounding the return of Christ (1:19; 22:18-20), preference should be given to a form of the futurist approach."

3. Craig Blomberg states in *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts Through Revelation* (Nashville: B&H 2006), 519, "But to the extent that all three of these views [preterism, historicism, and idealism] typically deny a still-future, more-awful fulfillment of the judgments depicted throughout this book or a discrete period of unparalleled tribulation ushering in the parousia, we have to demur and adopt a primarily *futurist* perspective."

4. Grant Osborne writes in his commentary on Revelation (p. 22):

My study of ancient apocalyptic and the Book of Revelation has led me to believe that John's visions (esp. chaps. 4-22) were primarily intended to describe the events that will end world history. The saints in these chapters are believers alive in that final period, and the beast is the Antichrist who will lead the "earth dwellers"/unbelievers in a final pogrom against all the people of God.

D. Many early Christian writers held to some form of the futurist view, including Justin Martyr (c. 100-165), Irenaeus (c. 130-200), Tertullian (c. 160-225), Hippolytus (c. 170-236), and Victorinus (died c. 304).

E. Not only is it "the nature of apocalyptic writings to be concerned primarily with the consummation of God's redemptive purpose and the eschatological end of the age" (Ladd, *Revelation*, 14), but the internal indications that John's visions are eschatological (end time) strike me as overwhelming.

1. The statement in 1:7 that Jesus is coming with the clouds, every eye will see him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn matches the signs of Christ's return in glory in Mat. 24:30, which verse commentators overwhelmingly recognize refers to the *parousia*.

2. I think the reference in 3:10 to the hour of trial coming on *the whole world* probably is to the final judgment on the ungodly world at Christ's return.

3. The souls of Christian martyrs under the heavenly altar, which come into view with the opening of the fifth seal in 6:9, cry out for God to judge and avenge their blood on those who dwell on the earth. The fact they are told to wait until the full number of martyrs has been reached means that the judgment in mind coincides with the cessation of Christian martyrdom. Since Christians have been martyred throughout history and continue to be martyred today, the full number of martyrs was not reached in the past and thus the judgment referred to could not have come in the past.

4. At the signs of Christ's immediate arrival in 6:12-14 (compare Mat. 24:29), people call out to the mountains and rocks in 6:16-17, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

5. The "great tribulation" mentioned in 7:14 is a reference to the period of intensified hardship and persecution that Daniel (7:21-27, 12:1) and Jewish apocalypses indicated God's people would undergo immediately before the coming of the final eternal state. That intensification is implicit in Jesus' referring in Matthew 24 to the tumult of the world as "birth pains" that precede his return. Birth pains intensify as delivery approaches. Paul also indicates that the hardship and persecution right before Christ's

return will be intensified by stating in 2 Thess. 2:8 that the man of lawlessness will be on the scene when Christ returns.

6. The half-hour of silence in heaven that follows the opening of the seventh seal (8:1) indicates something of utmost gravity is about to occur, which fits the judgment that accompanies Christ's return, and the scope and intensity of the judgments associated with the six trumpets (8:6-9:21) give them an eschatological flavor.

7. The great angel swears in 10:6-7 that there would be no more delay and that mystery of God would be fulfilled with the seventh trumpet as announced by the prophets.

8. When the seventh angel blows his trumpet in 11:15, loud voices declare, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." In 11:17 (and 16:5) God is no longer described as the one "who is and who was and who is to come," as in 1:4 and 1:8, but simply as the one "who is and who was." The "who is to come" is dropped because he is there depicted as having already come.

9. In the next verse (11:18), the twenty-four elders who sit on the thrones before God and who had fallen on their faces say, "The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth." This is consummation language if I ever heard it.

10. In 14:7 a flying angel declares in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

11. Another angel says in 14:10-11 that those who cast their lot with the beast, "also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night."

12. In 14:15 an angel announces "the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." Verse 16 says "and the earth was reaped." Reaping of the earth refers to the end of the age in Mat. 13:38-40.

13. Revelation 14:19-20 says that the grape harvest of the earth was thrown "into the great winepress of God's wrath. And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia." We are told in 19:15 that it is Christ who "will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty."

14. Revelation 15:1 declares "the wrath of God is finished" with the seven plagues of the seven angels. This is consistent with the scope and intensity of the wrath that is poured out in 16:1-21 from the bowls of those seven angels. Revelation 16:14 speaks of "the great day of God the Almighty," 16:15 has the parenthetical declaration "Behold, I am coming like a thief!" and with the pouring out of the seventh bowl a loud voice from the temple proclaims in 16:17 "It is done!"

15. In 19:7 a great multitude declares that the marriage of the Lamb has come. In 20:12 the dead are judged; in 20:14 death and Hades thrown into lake of fire; in 21:1 he sees a new heaven and a new earth; in 21:4 it is announced that there will no longer be any death, mourning, crying or pain; in 22:3 it is said that there will no longer be anything accursed; in 22:5 it is said that God's servants reign forever; and in 22:20 there is the prayer "come Lord Jesus."

F. It is true that Christ can "come" in a figurative sense by bringing a localized judgment, as distinct from his literal return from heaven, but as Robert Shank notes in *Until: The Coming of Messiah and His Kingdom* (Springfield, MO: Westcott Publishers, 1982), 394:

But (say some) Christ warned the churches at Ephesus, Pergamos, and Sardis that he would come to them unless they repented of their faults and mended their ways (2:5,16, 3:3), and his "coming" would have been a visitation of judgment and only in spirit, rather than "bodily, visible, and glorious." True, as context clearly indicates. But the meaning of Christ's coming in 2:5,16 and 3:3 establishes nothing concerning the meaning of his coming in 3:11 and 22:7,12,20. In both groups of passages, the meaning of Christ's coming is clearly established by context, and the contexts of the two groups are altogether different. We repeat: the personal, bodily, visible, glorious Advent of Christ, everywhere anticipated in the NT, is a terminus integral in the structure of the eschatology of Revelation. Any interpretation which ignores or denies this fact is without premise in Revelation.

G. Some object to the futurist view on the grounds it would be meaningless to first-century Christians, but I disagree with that.

1. In revealing God's triumph over the *ultimate* evil and hostility, and thus the triumph of the faithful in Christ, John makes clear that the faithful have nothing to fear from any *lesser* manifestation of evil and hostility. This powerful portrayal and confirmation of the ultimate, end-time victory makes certain that the reward of faithfulness is secure and thereby strengthens us in whatever battle we face prior to that time.

2. Certainly the Old Testament prophecies that were to be fulfilled in the distant future, like those of Daniel, were meaningful to those who heard them. 2 Peter 3:10-13 refers to the ultimate transformation of creation into the new heavens and new

earth at the end of history, and then the very next verse shows its relevance for current life.

3. Moreover, the fact Revelation (and the N.T. generally) portrays the end as "soon," rather than declaring that centuries or millennia would pass before its occurrence (which is known only in hindsight), means that each generation lives on the verge of Christ's coming. The relevance of the end is magnified by the fact that, ever since Christ's inauguration of the "last days," the end is in some sense always near. I will say more about this in a moment.

H. Part of the confusion in reading Revelation from a futurist perspective is that the eschatological climax is revealed against the backdrop of John's day.

1. In other words, the first-century manifestations of evil and opposition are taken up in the portrait of the end-time evil and opposition. They provide some of the imagery through which to convey the climactic assault. The end is portrayed as a magnified form of what is known, which reinforces the connection between the final victory and the struggle that John's immediate audience was experiencing.

2. Here is how Grant Osborne expresses it in *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 22:

My study of ancient apocalyptic and of the Book of Revelation has led me to believe that John's visions (esp. chaps. 4-22) were primarily intended to describe events that will end world history. The saints in these chapters are believers alive in that final period, and the beast is the Antichrist who will lead the "earth-dwellers"/unbelievers in a final pogrom against all the people of God. . . . But the preterist school also is correct, because the visions use the events of the future to address John and his readers in the present. Most of the imagery used to describe the beast and Babylon the Great comes from actual first-century parallels. The beast is a final Nero-like figure, and Babylon is the final unholy Roman Empire. One of my definitions for apocalyptic is "the present addressed through parallels with the future."

3. Carson and Moo put it this way (p. 720-721):

Revelation is about eschatology, not history.

Nevertheless, the peculiar eschatological stance of the early church demands that we not ignore the degree to which John pictures this eschatological climax against the backdrop of events in his own day. It is likely, for instance, that John's depiction of the "great prostitute," "Babylon," that is doomed to fall (18:1-4), has some reference to the Roman Empire of his own day, and that the terrible persecution described in Revelation would remind John's readers of their own oppression. To some extent, then, John, while describing the end, describes it against the

background of his first-century situation. . . . [B]iblical prophets have always pictured "the day of the Lord," the eschaton, in terms of their own time.

I. Some claim that the futurist approach is incompatible with indications in Revelation that the fulfillment would be "soon" – things that must soon take place (1:1); time is near (1:3); I am coming soon (3:11); what must soon take place (22:6); I am coming soon (22:7); do not seal up words of the prophecy for time is near (22:10); I am coming soon (22:12); I am coming soon (22:20).

1. But these texts also present difficulties for the view that the prophecy "soon" was fulfilled in the fall of the Roman Empire (preterist view). (Dating Revelation to A.D. 95-96 eliminates the fall of Jerusalem as a possible fulfillment, as does the portrayal of the judgment and the empire that is judged.)

a. The Roman Empire lasted for several hundred years (into the fifth century) and changed its attitude toward the church before its fall (Constantine became emperor in A.D. 306 and converted to Christianity in 312). If "soon" can mean several centuries it can by the same principle mean a couple millennia. And if the Roman Empire was favorably disposed to Christians long before it fell, it does not fit the picture of the empire that falls in Revelation.

b. The indications noted above that the fulfillment is eschatological are inconsistent with the fulfillment being the fall of the Roman Empire within history.

2. The "soon" statements in chapter 22 are after the clearly eschatological descriptions in 20:11 - 22:6 – the dead are judged, death is eliminated, and the new heavens and new earth is brought into being. So whatever "soon" means, it must fit with the fact it applies to the coming of the ultimate end at the return of the Lord Jesus.

3. Because Jesus does not know the time of his return (Mat. 24:36; Mk. 13:32), some claim his statements that he is "coming soon" must refer to a coming other than the *parousia* (e.g., his coming figuratively in a temporal judgment). The argument is that if one does not know when something will occur one cannot know that it will occur soon. But that misses the sense in which he says his coming is "soon."

a. It is precisely because Jesus does not know the time of his return (which implies that God is not going to reveal it in advance) that this cannot be a statement of absolute timing. Rather, it is an indication of a perspective with which this future event of uncertain timing is to be viewed. It means something like, "The time of my coming is uncertain, so you are to live in the expectation that I am coming soon."

b. It is like someone saying to leaders of a city that must maintain levies to prevent flooding in the event of a catastrophic storm, "The storm is coming soon." That is not intended as a literal assertion of timing, because nobody knows when

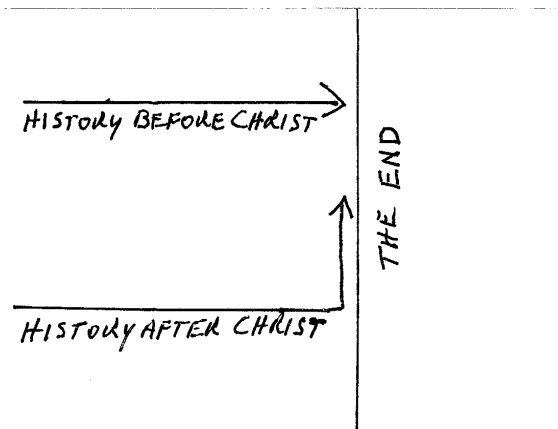
such a storm will come. Rather, it is a statement about the need for constant readiness in light of the uncertainty as to when the storm will come.

4. The nearness of the *parousia* is indicated in a number of places in the New Testament in addition to Revelation (e.g., Rom. 13:11-12 [?], 16:20 [?]; Jas. 5:7-9; 1 Pet. 4:7). From the time of Jesus' death, resurrection, and Pentecost, each generation lives on the verge of Christ's return. The next and final step in salvation history is the consummation, and though we do not know the day or hour of his coming, we know he could come swiftly in any generation. Here's how Douglas Moo puts it in *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 224:

With the death and resurrection of Jesus and pouring out of the Spirit, the "last days" have been inaugurated. This final age of salvation will find its climax in the return of Christ in glory. But – and here is the crucial point – the length of the age is unknown. Not even Jesus knew how long the "last days" would last (cf. Mark 13:32). What this means is that the return of Christ, as the next event in the salvation-historical timetable, is, from the time of the early church to our own day, "near," or "imminent." Every generation of Christians lives (or should live!) with the consciousness that the *parousia* could occur at any time and that one needs to make decisions and choose values based on that realization. So it was as true in James's day as it is in ours: we need to *be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near*.

5. So in this sense, Christ's coming, his return in glory, was "soon" in every generation even though it still has not happened.

a. I have on a number of occasions used this (poorly drawn) diagram to help communicate the idea. It is from J. H. Newman, a 19th-century pastor, and has been cited in a number of commentaries. As long as this reality, history as we know it, continues, it does so on the brink of Christ's return and the consummation of all things. However long God in his purposes extends the time since Christ, Christ's coming is ever at our door.



b. As Alan Johnson states in his commentary on Revelation (EBC, 13:525), "Therefore, 'soonest' means imminency in eschatological terms. The church in every age has always lived with the expectancy of the consummation of all things in its day. Imminency describes an event possible any day, impossible no day."

c. Craig Keener states in his commentary on Revelation (NIVAC, 519):

[T]he rhetorical function of the language [of imminent fulfillment in chapter 22] is not to give times or seasons (no date is offered), but to summon us to preparedness. The text teaches what many of us mean by imminence: Until he comes, Jesus' return is always potentially near, and we must always remain watchful, for inevitably he will come, catching the morally unprepared.

d. Robert Shank writes in *Until: The Coming of Messiah and His Kingdom* (Springfield, MO: Westcott Publishers, 1982), 395-396:

Said a professor of theology whom I know

The apostolic Church believed Christ would return in their day. He did not, and they were wrong. Other generations of the Church believed that Christ would come in their day, but time proved them all wrong. If we expect Christ to return in our day, time will no doubt prove us wrong.

Not at all. In every generation of the Church, all who expected Christ to return in their time were right, and all who did not were wrong, terribly *wrong*. Christ, the apostles, and the entire NT enjoin upon us no other attitude than to expect Jesus to return in our time. Whether he returns in our day is God's responsibility; whether we expect his return is our responsibility, for which we must give account. Whether he returns in our generation or not, we are wrong if we fail to expect him. In every generation of the Church, "the Lord is at hand." This is the time frame of the NT, including the Revelation.

6. The seemingly absolute declaration that the things revealed are "what must *soon* take place" (Rev. 1:1, 22:6) is not an independent assertion but a reference to the LXX of Dan. 2:28, which speaks of God having revealed to Nebuchadnezzar "what must take place *in the last days*," a revelation that encompassed both the inauguration and consummation of the kingdom (Dan. 2:34-35, 2:44) without sharp distinction. Changing "in the last days" in Dan. 2:28 to "soon" in Revelation is a way of indicating the impact of Christ's having come. His coming ushered in the "last days" and from that time we have lived on the brink of his consummating return. As a result of his coming, the kingdom in its consummated form moved from distant to "soon," not in terms of absolute timing but

in the sense it could now occur quickly at any time (as distinct from any moment). It moved from distant to soon perspectively, in terms of what our expectations are to be.

J. Does the fact Daniel is told to seal up the vision for it refers to many days from now (Dan. 8:26) whereas John is told *not* to seal up words of the prophecy for the time is near (Rev. 22:10) prove that John's prophecy must be fulfilled in a shorter time than Daniel's prophecy was fulfilled? In other words, if the time between Daniel's prophecy and its fulfillment was so great as to prompt sealing of his prophecy, how can a greater time between John's prophecy and its fulfillment not likewise prompt sealing of his prophecy?

1. First, Rev. 22:10 follows the clearly eschatological descriptions in 20:11 – 22:6, so the prophecy that is not to be sealed includes the consummation of the kingdom at the Second Coming of Christ. Therefore, unless one claims that Christ has already returned (hyper-preterists), which has is almost universally rejected because of its insurmountable problems, one recognizes that the command not to seal the prophecy does not exclude a fulfillment more than 1900 years later.

2. The "nearness" of the fulfillment of the Revelation prophecy and the "distance" of the fulfillment of the prophecy in Dan. 8:26 apparently relate to something other than a strict time measurement. That is, in some sense Christ's return was "near" despite, as it turns out, being more than 1900 years away and Antiochus Epiphanes' arrival was "distant" despite being only centuries away.

a. I believe Christ's return was "near" in the sense noted above. It was near as a constant expectation that shaped and reinforced Christian faith and ethics. Antiochus Epiphanes' arrival, on the other hand, was revealed as something that would not occur for centuries and which had no comparable devotional relevance.

b. Whatever the correct solution, it must harmonize the fact that a complete fulfillment of the Revelation prophecy that exceeds 1900 years *is not* so long as to prompt sealing of the prophecy whereas a significantly shorter time in fulfilling the Daniel prophecy *is* so long as to prompt sealing.