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FOUR VIEWS ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION

• Kenneth L. Gentry Jr.
• Sam Hamstra Jr.
• Robert L. Thomas
• C. Marvin Pate

• Stanley N. Gundry series editor
• C. Marvin Pate general editor
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One sage defined a classic as “a book everybody talks about, but which almost nobody reads.” Unfortunately, that description could be applied to the last book of the Bible—Revelation. Who has not been captivated by the power of its drama and the poignancy of its message? And yet how many actually read the Apocalypse? Undoubtedly, there is a vast difference in the answers to those questions. The purpose of this volume is to help bridge the gap between the preceding responses; that is, to move people from being merely enamored with Revelation to engaging it through personal interaction. To this end, the present contributions offer four, we think, well-argued alternative viewpoints of the last book of the Bible.

All of the authors in this volume are evangelical scholars in theological studies. For each, the inspiration of the Scriptures is their framework for understanding the Apocalypse. Furthermore, while the contributors present their viewpoints with conviction, they do so in an irenic and Christian spirit. With that in mind, this book is dedicated to all those “who love his [Christ’s] appearing,” regardless of their eschatological persuasion.

I would like to acknowledge those who have assisted in this project. My sincere appreciation goes to the other participants—Ken Gentry, Sam Hamstra, and Robert Thomas—who have helped to transfer the vision for this work into reality. Personally this endeavor has afforded me the benefit of new friends and stimulating ideas. I hope my colleagues feel the same. I also wish to thank those of the Zondervan editorial staff who approved and guided the project to its completion—Ed van der Maas, Verlyn D. Verbrugge, and Stanley N. Gundry. Their input was enthusiastic and invaluable.

C. Marvin Pate,
General Editor
ABBREVIATIONS

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<tr>
<th>AB</th>
<th>Anchor Bible Commentary</th>
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<tr>
<td>BAR</td>
<td>Biblical Archaeology Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>BASOR</td>
<td>Bulletin of the American Society for Oriental Research</td>
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<td>BSac</td>
<td>Bibliotheca Sacra</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICC</td>
<td>International Critical Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>JETS</td>
<td>Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>KJV</td>
<td>King James Version</td>
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<td>LXX</td>
<td>Septuagint (Greek version of the Old Testament)</td>
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<td>NASB</td>
<td>New American Standard Version</td>
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<td>NICNT</td>
<td>New International Commentary on the New Testament</td>
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<td>NIV</td>
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<td>NKJV</td>
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<td>NovTSup</td>
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INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION

Of modern responses to the book of Revelation, three quickly come to mind. "Obsession" is the appropriate word to describe some eight million prophecy buffs today, who pore over the prophecies of the Apocalypse in Nostradamus style, anachronistically correlating current events with its ancient cryptic warnings. Pursuing this angle, these interpreters equate Red China with the "kings from the East" (Rev. 16:12–16), the European Common Market with the "ten horns of the beast" (13:1–10), the mark of the beast (666) of Revelation 13 with everything from credit cards to the Internet, and the Antichrist with a parade of prominent people, including Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Henry Kissinger, and Mikhail Gorbachev. This intense fascination with Revelation by the doomsayers shows no sign of decreasing as the year 2000 approaches. Such a crystal ball reading of the last book in the Bible, however, has undoubtedly caused more harm than good and is best avoided by responsible hermeneuticians.

A second modern response to Revelation can be expressed by the word "irrelevance." As the term indicates, too many consider the Apocalypse to be an antiquated anthology of bizarre images born out of paranoia and designed to moralize people by appealing to divine scare tactics. As a professor of religion once put it when speaking of apocalyptic literature, of which Revelation is a part, "It is foolishness!" One suspects that the first response of obsession might have contributed to the second response of irrelevance.

Many contemporary Christians, however, find themselves somewhere in between the two extremes, approaching Revelation with "dutiful, but hesitant" concern. On the one hand, they

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2 For a critique of the doomsday mentality, see C. Marvin Pate and Calvin B. Haines Jr., Doomsday Delusions: What's Wrong With Predictions About the End of the World (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995).
revere the book as inspired of God and therefore pertinent to their lives; on the other hand, they find its meaning confusing and even potentially divisive. In large part, we hope that this work addresses these people—to bring clarity to a confusing but vital topic.

Yet we cannot gain perspicuity on any given subject simply by examining it from only one perspective. Such an approach runs the risk of being myopic and provincial. Rather, what is needed in examining Revelation is an interpretive reading of that book such that the sum total of the whole is greater than the individual parts. Not that an ancient text, biblical or otherwise, has more than one meaning, which is the claim of postmodernity. Instead, what is called for is the realization that we as humans, with finite understanding, need each other's insights, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, in order to grasp the intent of God's Word. Applying the analogy of the parts and the whole to Revelation permits one to state it this way: The four interpretations in this volume represent the interpretive parts while its readership, aided by the Spirit, forms the whole.

Before turning to the various perspectives offered in this book, however, we first need to survey introductory matters relative to the Apocalypse—namely, a general introduction, followed by a summary of the leading interpretations of the document. The bulk of this volume, then, will address the latter point, covering four current views: the preterist; the futurist, which can be delineated into classical dispensationalism and progressive dispensationalism; and the idealist. Hopefully, the sum total of the individual parts will extricate us from the hermeneutical criticism reflected in the famous quip by Mark Twain: "The researches of many commentators have already thrown much darkness on this subject, and it is probable that, if they continue, we shall soon know nothing at all about it!"

I. A GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION

A. Genre

Before one can properly interpret any piece of literature, the Bible included, one must determine its genre or literary
Introduction to Revelation

This principle is acutely important for Revelation, and its neglect has resulted in a morass of conflicting viewpoints. The difficulty is heightened by the fact that Revelation consists of a mixture of three genres: apocalyptic, prophetic, and epistolary. Alan F. Johnson succinctly describes the first of these genres:

Revelation is ... commonly viewed as belonging to the body of nonbiblical Jewish writings known as apocalyptic literature. The name for this type of literature (some nineteen books) is derived from the word “revelation” (apocalypsis) in Revelation 1:1 ... The extrabiblical apocalyptic books were written in the period from 200 B.C. to A.D. 200. Usually scholars stress the similarities of the Apocalypse of John to these noncanonical books—similarities such as the use of symbolism and vision, the mention of angelic mediators of the revelation, the bizarre images, the expectation of divine judgment, the emphasis on the kingdom of God, the new heavens and earth, and the dualism of this age and the age to come.

While significant parallels do indeed exist between Revelation and early Jewish and Christian apocalyptic materials, there are critical differences between them as well, none the least of which is that Revelation is a prophetic book (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19), while the others make no such claim. As such Revelation is not pseudonymous (1:1; 22:8); neither is it pessimistic about God’s intervention in history. Furthermore, while many apocalyptic writers recast past events as though they were futuristic prophesies (vaticinia ex eventu), thus lending credibility to their predictive prowess, John (the author of Revelation) does not follow this procedure. On the contrary, he places himself in the contemporary world of the first century A.D. and speaks of the coming eschatological consummation in the same manner as did the Old Testament prophets—a consummation that, for John, has already begun to break into history in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1:4–8; 4–5).

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3For an excellent "genre" approach to the Bible, see Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

4Alan F. Johnson, "Revelation," in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gabelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 12:400. See also Johnson’s helpful bibliography on the topic of apocalypticism, 400–401, n. 3.
In addition to being apocalyptic and prophetic in nature, Revelation is encased by an epistolary framework (1:4-8 and 22:10-21). This convention alone sets it apart from apocalyptic materials. The prescript (1:4-8) contains the typical epistolary components—sender, addressees, greetings, and the added feature of a doxology. The postscript (22:10-21), in good ancient letter form, summarizes the body of the writing, as well as legitimates John as its divinely inspired composer. The combined effect of the prescript and the postscript, not to mention the letters to the seven churches of the Roman province of Asia (chaps. 2-3), is to root Revelation in the real history of its day. How different from other ancient non-canonical apocalypses. Consider, for example, the opening statement in 1 Enoch, that what the author saw was “not for this generation but the distant one that is coming” (1 Enoch 1:2).

B. Authorship

In ascertaining the identity of the author of Revelation, two lines of evidence need to be assessed: external and internal. The external evidence consists of the testimony of the church fathers, which is nearly unanimously in favor of the opinion that the apostle John was the author of the Apocalypse. These include Papias, Justin Martyr, the Muratorian Fragment, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, and Methodius. The notable exceptions to this testimony are Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria (247-264), and Eusebius, the church historian, who himself was persuaded by Dionysius’ arguments against Johannine authorship of the book (though Eusebius expressed his doubts less vigorously than did Dionysius).

In turning to the internal evidence for determining the authorship of Revelation, Dionysius’ four categories continue to convince many against Johannine authorship, which we sum-

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8The following discussion is indebted to Robert L. Thomas’ work, Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary, ed. Kenneth Barker (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 2-19. The question of the authorship of Revelation is closely related to its canonicity, at least in terms of the discussion of the church fathers. Thus those who accepted the Johannine authorship of Revelation accepted its canonicity. Those, however, who questioned or even denied Johannine authorship, questioned or rejected its canonicity (notably Dionysius and, to a lesser degree, Eusebius).

marize here: (1) the writer’s self-identification; (2) the construction of Revelation as compared with the genuine writings of John the apostle; (3) the character of these writings; and (4) the writing style of these materials.

(1) The first internal argument offered by Dionysius is that whereas Revelation identifies its author as “John” (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), neither the Gospel of John nor the letters of John do. The assumption here is that if the apostle John had written Revelation, he would not have felt any compulsion to identify himself as its author. This reasoning, however, is an argument from silence and therefore is not convincing. Moreover, the apocalyptic nature of the book may have necessitated the author identifying himself, even as other works fitting that genre do.

(2) With regard to the construction of Revelation and that of John’s Gospel and letters, Dionysius argued that the former does not begin with the identification of Jesus as the “Word” nor with the author’s eyewitness vantage point whereas the latter do (cf. John 1:1–18 with 1 John 1:1–4). But this observation overlooks Revelation 1:2 and its connection of the word of God with Christ. It also misses the significance attached to the concept of “witness” in Revelation and in the other Johannine literature (cf. Rev. 1:2; 22:16 with John 1:19ff.; 5:32; 8:18; 15:26; 1 John 1:1–4; 5:6–11).

(3) Dionysius also maintained that the vocabulary of Revelation differs significantly from the genuine Johannine writings. Yet Dionysius’ assertion does not hold up under careful scrutiny. Twelve of the nineteen Johannine terms that are supposedly not found in Revelation do in fact occur (e.g., “life,” “blood,” “judgment,” “devil”). Moreover, three of the terms not occurring in Revelation are also absent from the Gospel of John (“forgiveness,” “Antichrist,” “adoption”), and one of them (“conviction”) is not present in 1 John. Furthermore, while “truth” is not in the Apocalypse, its synonym, “genuine,” is. Also, while “joy” is absent in the Apocalypse, it only occurs once each in the three letters of John. We are left then with one term, “darkness,” that occurs frequently in the other Johannine writings and not in Revelation—hardly enough evidence upon which to base a major distinction.

(4) Finally, Dionysius claimed that Revelation is written in poor Greek, in contrast to the good Greek style of the other Johannine materials. However, this overlooks two factors: (a) an
author's writing style is not always consistent; (b) John, like his contemporaries, may well have used an amanuensis (a professional secretary), through whom he composed his Gospel and the letters (cf. Rom. 16:22; 1 Peter 5:12). Exiled on the island of Patmos, however (cf. 1:9), he presumably did not have access to such an individual.

On balance, then, the external and internal evidence seems to point to the apostle John as the author of the Apocalypse or, at the very least, to a member of the Johannine School. 7

C. Date

We will analyze the theories of the date of the Apocalypse later in this introduction with reference to the interpretive schemes of the book, but for the moment we note that two major periods qualify as candidates: emperor Nero's reign (A.D. 54–68) and Domitian's rule (A.D. 81–96). As will be developed later, the preterist school of interpretation argues for the former, while the futurist approach, especially classical dispensationalism, aligns itself with the latter. Progressive dispensationalism sees a combination of the two dates as operative in the book, while the idealist perspective is not bound by either time frame.

D. Unity

A generation or so ago some interpreters, enamored with source criticism, put forth the theory of multiple authorship for the Apocalypse, notably R. H. Charles and J. Massyngberde Ford. 8 Evidence that supposedly militates against single authorship falls into four categories: (1) the presence of doublings—the same scene or vision described twice; (2) sequence problems—persons or things introduced apparently for the first time when, in actuality, they had earlier been mentioned; (3) seemingly misplaced verses and larger sections; (4) distinc-

7The view that the Revelation and the Gospel of John were written by members of a Johannine school is argued by Elisabeth S. Fiorenza, "The Quest for the Johannine School: The Apocalypse and the Origin of Both Gospel and Revelation," NTS 23 (April 1977): 402–27.

tive content within certain sections that does not fit the rest of the book.⁹

But, as Johnson observes, in each case there are satisfying alternative explanations. Moreover, there is an artificiality about assigning certain passages to an "interpolator" when they do not fit with the perceived unity of the book.¹⁰ Even Charles, who applies a fragmentary approach to the document, admits to an overall unity of the work.¹¹ Likewise Ford who, although delineating three different authors for the Apocalypse, nevertheless ascribes the "final redaction" to a single editor.¹² In light of this, Johnson’s conclusion about the unity of the Apocalypse seems justified:

We may affirm that the book everywhere displays both the literary and conceptual unity to be expected from a single author. This does not eliminate certain difficult hermeneutical problems nor preclude the presence of omissions or interpolations encountered in the extant MSS of the book. Nor does the view of single authorship preclude that John in expressing in written form the revelation given to him by Christ used various sources, whether oral or written…. Yet, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who is of course the primary author, John has everywhere made these materials his own and involved them with a thoroughly Christian orientation and content.¹³

E. Structure

Like the question of the date of the Apocalypse, so too the issue of its structure is intimately related to one’s interpretation of the book. Therefore, because we will cover the subject more extensively in the second part of this introduction, we only offer here the lowest common denominator among the various schools of thought, which consists of two structural elements.¹⁴

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⁹See Johnson, "Revelation," 403.
¹⁰Ibid.
¹²Ford, Revelation, 46.
(1) In terms of content, after an introductory chapter, four series of sevens follow: seven letters (chaps. 2–3); seven seals (5:1–8:1); seven trumpets (8:2–11:19); and seven bowls (15:1–16:21). Interrupting these four series are several interludes (7:1–17; 10:1–11:13; 12:1–14:20). The book concludes with the judgment of "Babylon," worldwide apostasy, and the final triumph of God's kingdom (chaps. 17–21). (2) In terms of literary structure, Revelation consists of four visions, each of which involves John "seeing" the plan of God unveiled (1:19; 4:1; 17:1; 21:9). An epilogue concludes the book (22:6–21).

F. Traditional Materials in Revelation

While Revelation draws on various traditional materials (e.g., Greco-Roman court ceremonial, chaps. 4–5; Jewish apocalyptic, chaps. 4–5; the Olivet Discourse, chap. 6; the dragon drama, chap. 12; the Neronian story, chap. 13), by far the dominant source of its information is the Old Testament. While Revelation does not contain a single specific quotation of the Old Testament, nevertheless out of 404 verses in it, 278 contain allusions to the Old Testament. Johnson well summarizes the apostle John's usage of that material:

The OT used by John is primarily Semitic rather than Greek, agreeing often with the Aramaic Targums and occasionally reflecting Midrashic background materials to the OT passages; and it can be shown that he used a text other than the Masoretic that has a close affinity with the Hebrew text of the Qumran MSS. From the Prophets, John refers quite frequently to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. John also refers repeatedly to the Psalms, Exodus, and Deuteronomy. Especially important are John's Christological reinterpretations of OT passages he alludes to. He does not simply use the OT in its pre-Christian sense but often recasts the images and visions of the OT. While there is an unmistakable continuity in Revelation with the older revelation, the new emerges from the old as a distinct entity.\(^5\)


\(^6\)Johnson, "Revelation," 411. For further analysis of John's employment of the Old Testament in Revelation, see Austin Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St.*
G. The Text of Revelation

From a text-critical point of view, there are fewer extant Greek manuscripts for reconstructing the original reading of the Apocalypse than any other part of the New Testament. Nevertheless, there is a sufficient amount to accomplish the task with assurance (approximately 230 Greek manuscripts). The major witnesses to Revelation are: the uncial-Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century), Codex Alexandrinus (fifth century), Codex Ephraemi (fifth century); the papyri, the most important of which is p47 (third century); the minuscules (eighth to tenth centuries); the church father quotations (second to fifth centuries); and a Greek commentary on Revelation by Andreas (sixth century).^16

II. A SURVEY OF LEADING INTERPRETATIONS OF REVELATION

Traditionally, four major interpretations have been put forth in attempting to unravel the mysteries of the Apocalypse: preterist, historicist, futurist, and idealist. The names encapsulate the essence of the respective approaches. The preterist (past) interpretation understands the events of Revelation in large part to have been fulfilled in the first centuries of the Christian era—either at the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 or at both the falls of Jerusalem in the first century and of Rome in the fifth century. In effect the book was written to comfort Christians, who suffered persecution from both the imperial cult and Judaism.

The historicist school views the events of Revelation as unfolding in the course of history. This perspective was especially compatible with the thinking of the Protestant Reformers, who equated the papal system of their day with the Antichrist.

The futurist scheme argues that the events of Revelation are largely unfulfilled, holding that chapters 4–22 await the end times for their realization. If the preterist interpretation has dominated

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^16 For further discussion of the manuscript evidence, consult Thomas, Revelation 1–7, 42–43.
among biblical scholars, then it may be said that the futurist reading is the preference of choice among the masses.

The idealist viewpoint, by way of contrast to the previous three theological constructs, is reticent to pinpoint the symbolism of Revelation historically. For this school of thought, Revelation sets forth timeless truths concerning the battle between good and evil that continues throughout the church age.

This volume incorporates the current, prevailing interpretations of Revelation. Thus, while the historicist approach once was widespread, today, for all practical purposes, it has passed from the scene. Its failed attempts to locate the fulfillment of Revelation in the course of the circumstances of history has doomed it to continual revision as time passed and, ultimately, to obscurity (a situation, one might add, if Jesus tarries, that contemporary doomsday prophets may eventually find themselves in!). Moreover, the lack of consensus among interpreters as to the identification of historical details that supposedly fulfill the prophecies of the Apocalypse contributed to the school’s demise.

On the other hand, the other three interpretive approaches merit careful attention. The preterist view, always the favorite among scholars, has enjoyed a revival of interest at the popular level, thanks to the rise of Christian Reconstruction (more on this shortly). The futurist view, especially classical dispensationalism, will undoubtedly continue to hold the interest of many. Progressive dispensationalism, the “newest kid on the eschatological block,” is beginning to capture the imagination of those who have grown weary over a sensationalist treatment of prophecy. Finally, the idealist approach continues to hold considerable appeal because of the power of application to daily life that its system encourages. Those who are “burned out” by prophecy in general find in its schema a refreshing alternative for grasping the ever-present significance of Revelation.

We turn now to a survey of these four hermeneutical formats, covering the following points on each: its distinction; its origin; the time frame it presumes for the prophecies in Revelation; the structure that results for the book; and the philosophy of history operative in the approach. Handling these matters in

\[17\] That is not to say, however, that classical dispensationalism is to be equated with the doomsday mentality. Even though a good number of doomsayers come from this tradition, as we shall see, they need not be the same.
Introduction to Revelation

Advance will better equip the reader to grasp the respective systems as a whole before analyzing the document in more detail. If the reader will permit us a little poetic license, we propose to treat these approaches according to the chronological order found in Revelation 1:19: "Write, therefore, what you have seen [preterist], what is now [idealist], and what will take place later [futurist]."

A. The Preterist Interpretation

The preterist viewpoint wants to take seriously the historical interpretation of Revelation by relating it to its original author and audience. That is, John addressed his book to real churches who faced dire problems in the first century A.D. Two quandaries in particular provided the impetus for the recording of the book. Kenneth L. Gentry Jr. writes of these:

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

Thus, the sustained attempt to root the fulfillment of the divine prophecies of Revelation in the first century A.D. constitutes the preterist's distinctive approach.

18 Ken Gentry Jr., Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), 15–16. It should be remembered, however, that preterism is comprised of two camps—one that locates the fulfillment of Revelation largely in the first century relative to the fall of Jerusalem, and another that sees the fulfillment of Revelation in both the first century (the fall of Jerusalem) and in the fifth century (the fall of Rome).
The origin of preterism can be traced to the theological system known as postmillennialism, which teaches that Christ will return after the Millennium, a period of bliss on earth brought about by the conversion of the nations because of the preaching of the gospel. The credit for formulating the postmillennial doctrine is usually given to Daniel Whitby (1638–1726), a Unitarian minister from England. Whitby’s view of the Millennium was embraced by conservative and liberal theologians. John F. Walvoord observes:

His views on the millennium would probably have never been perpetuated if they had not been so well keyed to the thinking of the times. The rising tide of intellectual freedom, science, and philosophy, coupled with humanism, had enlarged the concept of human progress and painted a bright picture of the future. Whitby’s view of a coming golden age for the church was just what people wanted to hear. . . . It is not strange that theologians scrambling for readjustments in a changing world should find in Whitby just the key they needed. It was attractive to all kinds of theology. It provided for the conservative a seemingly more workable principle of interpreting Scripture. After all, the prophets of the Old Testament knew what they were talking about when they predicted an age of peace and righteousness. Man’s increasing knowledge of the world and scientific improvements which were coming could fit into this picture. On the other hand, the concept was pleasing to the liberal and skeptic. If they did not believe the prophets, at least they believed that man was now able to improve himself and his environment. They, too, believed a golden age was ahead.

Such an acceptance on the part of many resulted in two types of postmillennialism, as Paul N. Benware notes: “liberal postmil-

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*John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1963), 22–23. In a recent correspondence, Ken Gentry helpfully provides two clarifications of the presentation we have been providing here regarding the connection between preterism and postmillennialism. First, it is simplistic to restrict the preterist view to postmillennialism. Many amillennialists also align themselves with this interpretation (e.g., Jay Adams, Cornelis Vanderwaal). Second, although Whitby is credited as popularizing postmillennialism, actually it is Thomas Brightman (1562–1607) who deserves that credit. Moreover, there is a nascent postmillennialism/preterism in some of the church fathers (e.g., Origen, Eusebius, Athanasius, Augustine).
lennialism” and “biblical postmillennialism.”20 The former had its heyday in the nineteenth century in association with the “social gospel,” whose mission was the liberation of humanity from societal evil (poverty, racism, disease, war, and injustice). The presupposition of this school of thought was that humanity was basically good and that ultimately society would get better and better, resulting in a golden age on earth. Laudable as this attempt was, however, the social gospel suffered from two flaws: It abandoned the preaching of the gospel, and it naively based its view of history on the evolutionary process. Time dealt a mortal blow to liberal postmillennialism—the catastrophic events of the twentieth century rendered it an untenable position (e.g., two world wars, the Great Depression, the threat of nuclear destruction).

Alongside liberal postmillennialism was its biblical counterpart. Those theologians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries following this approach maintained their commitment to the gospel and to its transforming power. Stanley J. Grenz writes of them:

Their outlook differed fundamentally from both secular and liberal Christian utopianism. They were optimistic concerning the future to be sure. But their optimism was born out of a belief in the triumph of the gospel in the world and of the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing in the kingdom, not out of any misconception concerning the innate goodness of humankind or of the ability of the church to convert the world by its own power.21

Today, biblical postmillennialism has rebounded from the catastrophes of history and is currently experiencing a resurgence of influence, especially Christian Reconstructionism. Its conviction is admirable—as the church preaches the gospel and performs its role as the salt of the earth, the kingdom of God will advance until the whole world will one day gladly bow to the authority of Christ. The means for accomplishing this goal will be the law of God, which impacts the church and, in return, the world.22

20The following synopsis is taken from Paul N. Benware, Understanding Endtimes Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 120–22.
21The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 66.
22Authors who identify themselves with the preterist interpretation of Revelation include David Chilton, The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation
Preterists locate the timing of the fulfillment of the prophecies of Revelation in the first century A.D., specifically just before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (though some also see its fulfillment in both the falls of Jerusalem [first century] and Rome [fifth century]). Despite the opinion of many that Revelation was written in the 90s during the reign of Domitian (81–96), much of preterism holds the date of the book to be Neronian (54–68).

Three basic arguments are put forth to defend that period. (1) There are allusions throughout Revelation to Nero as the current emperor (e.g., 6:2; 13:1–18; 17:1–13).

(2) The condition of the churches in Asia Minor to which John writes his letters (chaps. 2–3) best correlates with pre-70 Jewish Christianity, a time that witnessed the rupture between Christianity and Judaism. In effect, Revelation attests to the twofold persecution of Jewish Christianity—by the Jews and by the Romans. The former persecuted Jewish believers because of their faith in Jesus as the Messiah, so that they were consequently expelled from the synagogues, thus exposing them to Caesar worship. The latter, subsequently, tried to force Jewish Christians to revere Caesar. As judgment on the first-century Jews for persecuting Christians, John predicts that Christ will come in power to destroy Jerusalem, using the Roman empire to do so (e.g., 1:7–8; 22:20; chaps. 2–3; 11; 17–18)—a warning that came true with Jerusalem’s fall in A.D. 70.

(3) According to Revelation 11, the temple seems still to be standing (that is, at the time of the writing of the book).

Based on the preceding arguments, we might outline Revelation as follows:

Chap. 1: John’s Vision of the Risen Jesus
Chaps. 2–3: The Situation of Early Jewish Christianity
Chaps. 4–5: The Heavenly Scene of Christ’s Reign
Chaps. 6–18: Parallel Judgments on Jerusalem
Chap. 19: The Coming of Christ to Complete the Judgment of Jerusalem
Chaps. 20–22: Christ’s Rule on Earth

(Fort Worth, Tex.: Dominion, 1987); Gary DeMar, Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church (Atlanta: American Vision, 1994).

Judais was permitted freedom of worship by Rome. To be separated from it was to lose that privileged status.
With regard to the philosophy of history presumed by most preterists, as noted before, it is a positive one (contra Jay Adams and Cornelis Vanderwaal). The world will get better and better because of the triumph of the gospel. In that sense, postmillennialism aligns itself more with the role of the Old Testament prophet, whose message proclaimed the intervention of God in history, than with the apocalypticist's doom and gloom forecasts of the future.

B. The Idealist Interpretation

The idealist approach to Revelation has sometimes been called the "spiritualist" view in that it interprets the book spiritually, or symbolically. Accordingly, Revelation is seen from this perspective as representing the ongoing conflict of good and evil, with no immediate historical connection to any social or political events. Raymond Calkins well describes this interpretation:

If we understand the emergency which caused the book to be written, the interpretation of it for its time, for our time, and for all time, it becomes as clear as daylight. In the light of this explanation, how far from the truth becomes that use of it which finds the chief meaning of the book in the hints it gives us about the wind-up of creation, the end of the world, and the nature of the Last Judgment. ... To use Revelation in this way is to abuse it, for the book itself makes no claim to be a key to the future.\textsuperscript{24}

Consequently, Calkins captures the chief message of Revelation in terms of five propositions:

1. It is an irresistible summons to heroic living.
2. It contains matchless appeals to endurance.
3. It tells us that evil is marked for overthrow in the end.
4. It gives us a new and wonderful picture of Christ.
5. It reveals to us the fact that history is in the mind of God and in the hand of Christ as the author and reviewer of the moral destinies of men.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 3–9.
While all four of the schools of interpretation surveyed here resonate with these affirmations, the idealist view distinguishes itself by refusing to assign the preceding statements to any historical correspondence and thereby denies that the prophecies in Revelation are predictive except in the most general sense of the promise of the ultimate triumph of good at the return of Christ.  

The origin of the idealist school of thought can be traced back to the allegorical or symbolic hermeneutic espoused by the Alexandrian church fathers, especially Clement and Origen. R. H. Charles writes of these Alexandrians that:

under the influence of Hellenism and the traditional allegorical school of interpretation which came to a head in Philo, [they] rejected the literal sense of the Apocalypse, and attached to it a spiritual significance only. This theory dominates many schools of exegesis down to the present day. Thus Clement saw in the four and twenty elders a symbol of the equality of Jew and Gentile within the Church, and in the tails of the locusts the destructive influences of immoral teachers. Origen as well as his opponent Methodius rejects as Jewish the literal interpretation of chap. XX and in the hands of his followers the entire historical contents of the Apocalypse were lost sight of.  

Akin to the Alexandrian interpretation of Revelation was the amillennial view propounded by Dionysius, Augustine, and Jerome. Thus the Alexandrian school, armed with the amillennial method, became the dominant approach to Revelation until the Reformation.  

As mentioned above, the idealist does not restrict the contents of Revelation to a particular historical period, but rather sees it as an apocalyptic dramatization of the continuous battle between God and evil. Because the symbols are multivalent in meaning and without specific historical referent, the application of the book’s message is limitless. Each interpreter can therefore find significance for their respective situations.

Merrill C. Tenney provides a helpful summary of the idealist interpretation of Revelation, as well as the other viewpoints, _Interpreting Revelation_ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 143–44.  

Introduction to Revelation

Two recent commentaries on Revelation nicely illustrate this method. The first is the work by Paul S. Minear, whose interpretation of the symbols of Revelation is stimulating. For him the purpose of Revelation is to warn Christians of the enemy within—"the false Christian." The whole of the book is viewed from that perspective. The seven letters provide the context of the book—it is a divine challenge to the church to be faithful to Christ. The judgments thereafter are designed not to effect the ruination of those outside of Christendom, but of the unfaithful within it. But those who persevere in righteousness receive the promise of the new heaven and new earth. Read in this way, Revelation is to be taken not as an apocalyptic invective against the non-Christian but rather as a prophetic warning to the Christian.

A second work on Revelation illustrating the idealist interpretation is the challenging commentary by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, whose purpose in writing it is to "liberate the text from its historical captivity and rescue the message of Revelation for today." In other words, the meaning of Revelation is not to be sought in the first century nor in the remote events of the end time, but rather in the ongoing struggle between those disadvantaged sociopolitically and their oppressors. Thus understood, Revelation is a powerful tool in the hands of liberation and feminist theologians for throwing off the yoke of capitalism and chauvinism, respectively.

The best way to appreciate Fiorenza's approach is to see her method at work. For example, she approvingly quotes from the poem, "Thanksgiving Day in the United States" by Julia Esquivel, which reworks Revelation 17-18 by applying it to her own third-world experience:

In the third year of the massacres
by Lucas and the other coyotes
against the poor of Guatemala
I was led by the Spirit into the desert
And on the eve
of Thanksgiving Day

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29Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Revelation: Vision of a Just World (Proclamation Commentaries; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1991), 2.
I had a vision of Babylon:
The city sprang forth arrogantly
from an enormous platform
of dirty smoke produced
by motor vehicles, machinery
and contamination from smokestacks.

It was as if all the petroleum
from a violated earth
was being consumed
by the Lords of capital
and was slowly rising
obscuring the face
of the Sun of Justice
and the Ancient of Days. . . .

Each day false prophets
invited the inhabitants
of the Unchaste City
to kneel before the idols
of gluttony,
money,
and death:
Idolaters from all nations
were being converted to the American Way of Life. . . .

The Spirit told me
in the River of death
flows the blood of many peoples
sacrificed without mercy
and removed a thousand times from their lands,
the blood of Kekchis, of Panzos,
of blacks from Haiti, of Guaranis from Paraguay,
of the peoples sacrificed for “development”
in the Trans-Amazonic strip,
the blood of the Indians’ ancestors
who lived on these lands, of those who
even now are kept hostage in the Great Mountain
and on the Black Hills of Dakota
by the guardians of the beast. . . .
My soul was tortured like this
for three and a half days
and a great weariness weighed upon my breast.
I felt the suffering of my people very deeply!
Then in tears, I prostrated myself
and cried out: “Lord, what can we do? . . .
Come to me, Lord, I wish to die among my people!”
Without strength, I waited for the answer.
After a long silence
and a heavy obscurity
The One who sits on the throne
to judge the nations
spoke in a soft whisper
in the secret recesses of my heart:
You have to denounce their idolatry
in good times and in bad.
Force them to hear the truth
for what is impossible to humans
is possible for God.  

Whether or not one agrees with the ideology informing this poem or, for that matter, with Fiorenza’s radical feminist persuasion, the attempt here to capture and apply the symbolism of Revelation is engaging, if not arresting.

There does not seem to be a hard-and-fast rule for the idealist in delineating the structure of Revelation. For Minear, the key to outlining the book is to be aware that the running contrasts between the visions of heaven and earth are symbolic of the struggle within Christians between faithfulness to Christ (heaven) and unfaithfulness (earth). For Fiorenza, Revelation is chiastically structured such that the key to the book is to be found in 10:1–15:4, with its description of the struggle and liberation of the oppressed communities of the world. The only notable structural feature in the idealist interpretative agenda is its disavowal of a literal and chronological reading of Revelation 20. Rather, in good amillennial fashion, that chapter is to be viewed as a symbolic description of the church’s potential to reign with Christ in this age.

As to the worldview of the idealist school of thought, “realism” is its preferred perspective. Stanley Grenz encapsulates this mind-set of the idealist, amillennial position:

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*Quoted in ibid., 27–28.
*Ibid., 35–36.
The result is a world view characterized by realism. Victory and defeat, success and failure, good and evil will coexist until the end, amillennialism asserts. The future is neither a heightened continuation of the present nor an abrupt contradiction to it. The kingdom of God does not come by human cooperation with the divine power currently at work in the world, but neither is it simply the divine gift for which we can only wait expectantly.32

Consequently, both unbridled optimism and despairing pessimism are inappropriate, amillennialism declares. Rather, the amillennialist worldview calls the church to "realistic activity" in the world. Under the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, the church will be successful in its mandate; yet ultimate success will come only through God's grace. The kingdom of God arrives as the divine action breaking into the world; yet human cooperation brings important, albeit penultimate, results. Therefore, God's people must expect great things in the present; but knowing that the kingdom will never arrive in its fullness in history, they must always remain realistic in their expectations.

C. Classical Dispensationalism

The most popular interpretation of Revelation among the masses during the twentieth century has been dispensationalism, one of the varieties of premillennialism. The name of the movement is derived from the biblical word "dispensation," a term referring to the administration of God's earthly household (KJV, 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2; Col. 1:25). Dispensationalists divide salvation history into historical eras or epochs in order to distinguish the different administrations of God's involvement in the world. C. I. Scofield, after whom the enormously popular Scofield Bible was named, defined a dispensation as "a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God."33 During each dispensa-

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33The Scofield Reference Bible (New York: Oxford, 1909), note to Genesis 1:28, heading. For an updated definition that emphasizes faith as the means for receiving the revelations in the various dispensations, see Charles C. Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 74.
tion, humankind fails to live in obedience to the divine test, con­sequently bringing that period under God's judgment and thus creating the need for a new dispensation. Read this way, the Bible can be divided into the following eight dispensations (though the number of names vary in this school of thought): innocence, conscience, civil government, promise, Mosaic law, church and age of grace, tribulation, millennium.34

The hallmark of dispensationalism has been its commitment to a literal interpretation of prophetic Scripture. This has resulted in three well-known tenets cherished by adherents of the movement. (1) A distinction between the prophecies made about Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Test­ament must be maintained. In other words, the church has not replaced Israel in the plan of God. The promises he made to the nation about its future restoration will occur. The church is, therefore, a parenthesis in the outworking of that plan. The dispensational distinction between Israel and the church was solid­ified in the minds of many as a result of two major events in this century: the holocaust (which has rightly elicited from many deep compassion for the Jewish people) and the rebirth of the State of Israel in 1948.

(2) Dispensationalists are premillennialists; that is, Christ will come again and establish a temporary, one-thousand-year reign on earth from Jerusalem.

(3) Dispensationalists believe in the pretribulation rapture; that is, Christ's return will occur in two stages: the first one for his church, which will be spared the Great Tribulation; the sec­ond one in power and glory to conquer his enemies.

Dispensationalism seems to have been first articulated by the Irish Anglican clergyman John Nelson Darby, an influential leader in the Plymouth Brethren movement in England during the nineteenth century. The movement was imported to the United States, receiving notoriety with the publication in 1909 of the Scofield Reference Bible. At least three developments have unfolded within the movement during this century. (1) The ear­liest stage was propounded by Darby and Scofield, a period that

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34C. I. Scofield, Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1896). Many modern dispensationalists, however, have grown uncomfortable with these periodizations, preferring rather to talk about the Bible in terms of its two divisions—the old and new covenants.
emphasized the dispensations themselves. (2) A second stage emerged in the 1960s, thanks to the work by Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*. With this second development two noticeable changes transpired: (a) Faith was highlighted as the means of salvation in any of the dispensations (*contra* the old Scofield Bible's statement about works being the means of salvation in the Old Testament; see the footnote on John 1:17), (b) The individual dispensations were no longer the focal point; rather, the emphasis now lay on the literal hermeneutic of dispensationalism. (3) In the 1980s a third development arose, commonly called progressive dispensationalism (more on this later). The middle stage, often labeled traditional dispensationalism, continues to find strong support today; it constitutes the fourth view offered in this volume on Revelation.

The classical dispensationalist's understanding of the time frame of Revelation and its structure go hand in hand. Because this school of thought interprets the prophecies of the book literally, their fulfillment, therefore, is perceived as still future (esp. chaps. 4–22). Moreover, the magnitude of the prophecies (e.g., one-third of the earth destroyed; the sun darkened) suggests that they have not yet occurred in history. The key verse in this discussion is 1:19, particularly its three tenses, which are thought to provide an outline for Revelation: “what you have seen” (the past, John’s vision of Jesus in chap. 1); “what is now” (the present, the letters to the seven churches in chaps. 2–3); “what will take place later” (chaps. 4–22). In addition, the classical dispensationalist believes that the lack of mention of the church from chapter 4 on indicates that it has been raptured to heaven by Christ before the advent of the Great Tribulation (chaps. 6–18).

Intimately associated with premillennialism as dispensationalism is, one is not surprised that this perspective views the history of the world pessimistically. Grenz summarizes this interpretation:

In contrast to the optimism of postmillennialism, premillennialism displays a basic pessimism concerning history and the role we play in its culmination. Despite all our attempts to convert or reform the world, prior to the end antichrist will emerge and gain control of human affairs, premillennialism reluctantly predicts. Only the catastrophic action of the returning Lord will bring about the
reign of God and the glorious age of blessedness and peace.

In keeping with this basic pessimism concerning world history, premillennial theologies emphasize the discontinuity, or even the contradiction between, the present order and the kingdom of God, and they elevate the divine future over the evil present. The kingdom is the radically new thing God will do. However it may be conceived, the “golden age”—the divine future—comes as God’s gracious gift and solely through God’s action.35

D. Progressive Dispensationalism

In discussing “progressive dispensationalism,” the newest of the four interpretations surveyed here, we combine its origin and description. In the 1980s certain dispensational theologians launched a rethinking of the system and developed what has been called “progressive” or “modified” dispensationalism.16 While it is too soon to call this approach a “school of thought,” all the evidence indicates that this viewpoint will gain influence with time.

The umbrella concept informing this interpretation is its adherence to the “already/not yet” hermeneutic. First popularized by Oscar Cullmann, a Swiss theologian of a generation ago, this system views the first and second comings of Christ through the lens of eschatological tension. The former witnessed the inauguration of the kingdom of God, while the latter will result in its full realization. Until then, the Christian lives in the tension between the age to come (which dawned at the first coming of Christ) and this present evil age (which will only be transformed at the Parousia, or the second coming of Christ). Gordon D. Fee captures the essence of this approach:

The absolutely essential framework of the self-understanding of primitive Christianity . . . is an eschatological one. Christians had come to believe that, in the

3Grenz, The Millennial Maze, 185.
4Proponents of this approach include Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, Progressive Dispensationalism (Wheaton: Victor, 1993); Robert L. Saucy, The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).
event of Christ, the new (coming) age had dawned, and that, especially through Christ’s death and resurrection and the subsequent gift of the Spirit, God had set the future in motion, to be consummated by yet another coming (Parousia) of Christ. Theirs was therefore an essentially eschatological existence. They lived “between the times” of the beginning and the consummation of the end. Already God had secured their . . . salvation; already they were the people of the future, living the life of the future in the present age—and enjoying its benefits. But they still awaited the glorious consummation of this salvation. Thus they lived in an essential tension between the “already” and the “not-yet.”

As a result of interpreting the Bible in this manner, progressive dispensationalists part company with some of the points espoused by classical dispensationalism. (1) “Progressives” believe that Jesus began his heavenly, Davidic reign at the resurrection. Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock express this well:

Peter argues in Acts 2:22–36 that David predicted in Psalm 16 that this descendant would be raised up from the dead, incorruptible, and in this way He would be seated upon His throne (Ac. 2:30–31). He then argues that this enthronement has taken place upon the entrance of Jesus into heaven, in keeping with the language of Psalm 110:1 that describes the seating of David’s son at God’s right hand. Peter declares (Ac. 2:36) that Jesus has been made Lord over Israel (Ps. 110:1 uses the title Lord of the enthroned king) and Christ (the anointed king) by virtue of the fact that He has acted (or been allowed to act) from that heavenly position on behalf of His people to bless them with the gift of the Holy Spirit. . . . Enthronement at the right hand of God, the position promised to the Davidic king in Psalm 110:1, is ascribed to Jesus in many New Testament texts. It is, of course, proclaimed in Acts 2:33–36.38

(2) The church is not a parenthesis in the plan of God; rather, like believing Jews in the Old Testament, it forms a part of the one

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38Blaising and Bock, Progressive Dispensationalism, 177–78.
people of God (e.g., Rom. 2:26–28; 11; Gal. 6:16; Eph. 2:11–22; 1 Peter 2:9–10).

(3) The new covenant is beginning to be fulfilled in the church (e.g., 2 Cor. 3:1–4:6; cf. also the book of Hebrews).

(4) Old Testament promises about the Gentiles’ coming to worship the true God at the end of history is also experiencing partial realization in the church (e.g., Rom. 15:7–13).

With regard to the essentials of classical dispensationalism, however, progressives are in complete agreement, of which there are three: (1) Israel will be restored to God in the future (that is to say, there is a distinction, though not a dichotomy, between Israel and the church); (2) Christ will return to establish his millennial reign on earth (the premillennial view); (3) the church will not go through the Great Tribulation (the pretribulation interpretation).

Concerning Revelation in particular, progressives apply the already/not yet hermeneutic to its time frame as follows: The already aspect surfaces in the book in terms of historical fulfillment in the first century A.D. vis-à-vis Caesar worship and Jewish persecution of Christians (not unlike, though not to be equated with, the preterist approach). The not yet aspect of Revelation is to be found in those prophecies (the majority of the book) that await realization at the Parousia (the Great Tribulation, Antichrist, Parousia, Millennium).

Like classical dispensationalism, progressives also focus on Revelation 1:19 as the key to the book’s structure, except, rather than view the verse as delineating three time frames (past, present, future), this viewpoint perceives only two periods at work. John is to write what he has seen (the visions of Revelation as a whole), which divide into two realities: the things that are—the present age; and the things that will be—the age to come. For John the church of his day lives in the present age (chaps. 1–3), but in heaven, by virtue of Jesus’ death and resurrection, the age to come has already dawned (chaps. 4–5). In the future the age to come will descend to earth, effecting the defeat of the Antichrist (chaps. 6–19), the establishment of the temporary messianic kingdom on earth (chap. 20), and subsequently the eternal state (chaps. 21–22). Thus the overlapping of the two ages accounts for the continual shifting of scenes between earth (this age) and heaven (the age to come) in Revelation.
Because it is premillennial in perspective, progressive dispensationalism also views the unfolding of history pessimistically. However, the already/not yet hermeneutic tempers that pessimism with the optimistic belief that the kingdom of God has dawned spiritually, thereby giving great hope to the people of God. Progressive dispensationalists, therefore, are circumspect about not necessarily equating this current generation with the last one before Christ’s return. It may be, or it may not be. Tony Campolo pinpoints the realism of the eschatological tension inherent in this mentality:

Any theology that does not live with a sense of the immediate return of Christ is a theology that takes the edge off the urgency of faith. But any theology that does not cause us to live as though the world will be here for thousands of years is a theology that leads us into social irresponsibility.39

Chapter One

A PRETERIST VIEW OF REVELATION

Kenneth L. Gentry Jr.
INTRODUCTION

The closer we get to the year 2000, the farther we get from the events of Revelation. This claim, as remarkable as it may sound, summarizes the evangelical preterist view of Revelation. "Preterism" holds that the bulk of John's prophecies occur in the first century, soon after his writing of them. Though the prophecies were in the future when John wrote and when his original audience read them, they are now in our past.

The format of the present book precludes a thorough analysis of Revelation and its intricate structure. Yet I am firmly convinced that even an introductory survey of several key passages, figures, and events in John's majestic prophecy can demonstrate the plausibility of the preterist position. As to structure, suffice it to say that its movement suggests a spiraling forward of events, involving the recasting of earlier prophecies (e.g., notice the strong similarities between the seals and the trumpets, Rev. 6

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1The word "preterist" is based on a Latin word "praeteritus," meaning "gone by," i.e., past.
and 8). John’s spiral structure allows occasional backward glances and a reconsidering of events from different angles, rather than a relentless chronological progression.

The reason for such a structure is interesting: Hermeneutics authority Milton S. Terry, a noted advocate of the grammatical-historical method of interpretation, a strong preterist, and a hermeneutics authority cited by Robert L. Thomas in his chapter (below), notes that “all such apocalyptic repetitions serve the twofold purpose of intensifying the divine revelation and showing ‘that the thing is established by God and that he will shortly bring it to pass.”3 Of course, no interpreter takes the progress of Revelation as relentlessly forward working—even classic dispensationalist Robert Thomas allows some mingling of past and future, disjunctive intercalations, and so forth (e.g., in Rev. 11:15–19; 12:1ff.; 19:1–4, 7–9).4

Before beginning my survey, I must note what most Christians suspect and what virtually all evangelical scholars (excluding classic dispensationalists) recognize regarding the book: Revelation is a highly figurative book that we cannot approach with a simple straightforward literalism. That having been stated, however, the preterist view does understand Revelation’s prophecies as strongly reflecting actual historical events in John’s near future, though they are set in apocalyptic drama and clothed in poetic hyperbole. As even premillennialist commentator Robert Mounce notes: “That the language of prophecy is highly figurative has nothing to do with the reality of the events predicted. Symbolism is not a denial of historicity but a matter of literary

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4Robert L. Thomas, Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 43, 103, 104, 106–7, 113, 355, 365–66. For example, “this passage is part of an intercalation which is not a part of Revelation’s strict chronological sequence” (366). A remarkable peculiarity exists within classic dispensationalism’s system of literalistic, chronological analysis of prophecy: Intercalations appear unexpectedly anywhere the system needs them. For example: (1) The unified image of Daniel 2 involves four successive world empires progressively developing one after the other, but with the fourth in two stages, including a “revived Roman empire” separated from its ancient Roman predecessor by 1500 years—so far (see ibid., 153). (2) The unified seventy weeks of Daniel, after developing progressively through the first sixty-nine weeks, suddenly stop in the first century, then picks up again at the Great Tribulation thousands of years later (see Thomas, Revelation 1–7 [Chicago: Moody, 1992], 426).
genre.” Note the following impediments to a preconceived literalism:

(1) The statement as to content. In his opening statement John informs us that his revelation has been given “to show” (Gk. deixai) the message being “signified [Gk. esēmanen] by His angel” (Rev. 1:1, NKJV). As Friedrich Düsterdieck notes: “The deixai occurs in the way peculiar to semainein, i.e., the indication of what is meant by significative figures.”6 In fact, forty-one times John says he “sees” these prophecies (e.g., 1:12, 20; 5:6; 9:1; 20:1). Furthermore, some of the visions are obviously symbolic, such as the slain lamb (chaps. 4 and 14), the seven-headed beast (chaps. 13 and 17), and the Babylonian prostitute (chap. 17).

In his Gospel John shows the problem of literalism among Christ’s early hearers: They misconstrue his teaching regarding the temple (John 2:19–22), being born again (3:3–10), drinking water (4:10–14), eating his flesh (6:51–56), being free (8:31–36), being blind (5:39–40), falling asleep (11:11–14), and Jesus’ being king (18:33–37). Such an erroneous approach is magnified if used in John’s Revelation. The visual nature of Revelation’s content—not just the method of its reception—demands symbolic interpretation. That is, except for a very few instances (e.g., Rev. 1:20; 4:5; 5:6, 8; 7:13–14; 12:9; 17:7–10), the symbols are not interpreted for us. And in one of those instances where we do receive an angelic interpretation (17:9–12), the seven-headed beast is not literally a seven-headed beast at all.

(2) The precedent of earlier prophets. Old Testament prophets employ figurative language for one of two purposes: to majestically relate spiritual truths, or to dramatically symbolize historical events. For instance, God’s riding on a cloud down into Egypt (Isa. 19:1, see below: “The Revelational Theme”) and the decreation language (Rev. 13:10, see below: “The Sixth Seal”) speak of the downfall of ancient cities. Terry offers many helpful insights in this regard, noting that “a rigid literal interpretation of apocalyptic language tends to confusion and endless

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misunderstandings. Even literalist Robert Thomas admits "the fluidity of metaphorical language in Scripture is undeniable."

(3) The difficulty of consistent literalism. Some instances of literalism seem to me strange, unreasonable, and unnecessary. For example, Robert Thomas holds that the eerie locusts of Revelation 9 and the strange frogs of Revelation 16 are demons who literally take on those peculiar physical forms, that the two prophets of Revelation 11 literally spew fire from their mouths, that every mountain in the world will be abolished during the seventh bowl judgments, that the fiery destruction of the literal city of Babylon will smolder for more than 1000 years, that Christ will return from heaven to earth on a literal horse, and that the new Jerusalem is literally a 1500-mile-high cube.

THE TEMPORAL EXPECTATION (REV. 1:1–3)

I turn now to a survey of the book of Revelation. In his Republic Plato states an important maxim: "The beginning is the most important part of the work." This principle holds a special significance for the would-be interpreter of Revelation. Unfortunately, too many prophecy enthusiasts leap over the beginning of this book, never securing a proper footing for the treacherous path ahead. But stealing a line from Isaiah, the preterist asks: "Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?" (Isa. 40:21). The preterist insists that the key to Revelation is found in its front door. Notice John’s introduction:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. . . . Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. (Rev. 1:1a, 3, italics added)

Here—before the dramatic visions flash on the scene and the highly wrought imagery confound the reader—John provides an indispensable clue for interpreting his book: The events of


*Terry, Biblical Apocalyptics, 228.
*Thomas, Revelation 8–22, 372.
*Thomas, Revelation 1–7, 455, and Revelation 8–22, 30, 46, 49, 90, 264, 360, 386, 467.
Revelation "must soon [Gk. tachos] take place" (v. 1) because "the time is near [Gk. engys]."11

Greek lexicons and modern translations agree that these terms indicate temporal proximity. Throughout the New Testament tachos means "quickly, at once, without delay, shortly."12 The term engys ("near") also speaks of temporal nearness: of the future (Matt. 26:18), of summer (24:32), and of a festival (John 2:13). The inspired apostle John clearly informs his original audience nearly two thousand years ago that they should expect the prophecies to "take place" (Rev. 1:1) in their lifetime. As Milton Terry notes, the events of Revelation are "but a few years in the future when John wrote."13

The significance of these words lies not only in their introducing Revelation, but also in their concluding its drama. They bracket and, therefore, qualify the entire book. Notice how it ends:

The angel said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place" . . .

Then he told me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near." (Rev. 22:6, 10, italics added)

What is more, the terms appear frequently in Revelation, showing John's urgent emphasis on temporal expectancy. We find tachos ("soon") in 1:1; 2:16; 3:11; 22: 6, 7, 12, 20 and engys ("near") in 1:3; 3:10; 22:10.14 Thus, as Robert Thomas, who opposes preterism, admits: "A major thrust of Revelation is its emphasis upon the shortness of time before the fulfillment."15

Theologians note that references to "the time" often indicate a special "crisis time." The near crisis in Revelation, as I will show, is the "Day of the Lord" judgment on Israel in A.D. 67–70 (Acts 2:16–20; 1 Thess. 2:14–16).


Terry, Biblical Apocalyptic, 277.

Rev. 1:19 may also be helpful, though it is obscured in the NIV. It probably should be translated as in Marshall's The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959, 959: "Write thou therefore the things which thou sawest and the things which are and the things which are about to occur after these things." See Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1996), 141–42.

Thomas, Revelation 1–7, 55.
John emphasizes these two clear terms with similar meanings, thereby preempting any confusion among his readers regarding *when* the prophecies will occur.

The preterist, then, argues that John himself positively asserts that the events are near in his day. Consequently, they must lie in our distant past. Preterism is exegetically based, being rooted in sound hermeneutical principle. But before moving on, I must briefly reckon with two common rejoinders to this analysis:

*Objection 1:* John is speaking of God’s timing, not ours. Scripture informs us that a thousand years with the Lord is “as a day” (2 Peter 3:8).

This popular objection strains under the weight of the following evidence: (a) Revelation is personal-motivational. John is here writing to human beings, not about God. Peter’s statement in 2 Peter 3:8 is clearly a theological statement; Revelation 1:1, 3 are human directives, which are to be heard and acted upon. Peter is dealing with the opposite problem from John: He is explaining (on the basis of God’s eternality) the delay of Christ’s second advent (2 Peter 2:4), while John is warning (on the basis of human suffering) of the nearness of temporal judgment.

(b) Revelation is concrete-historical. John is writing to seven specific, historical churches (1:4, 11; 2:1–3:22) about their present dire circumstances (they are in “tribulation,” 1:9; 2:9–10, 13), their need for patience (1:9; 2:2–3, 10, 13, 25; 3:10–11), and soon-coming judgments (2:5, 16, 25; 3:3, 11; 22:10, 18–19).

Robert Thomas, approvingly citing William Lee, notes concerning the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3: “One cannot, however, overlook the historical character which is stamped on the Epistles throughout . . . and which distinctly points to a state of things actually before St. John’s mind as existing in the several churches.” That is, a number of the historical, geographical, and political allusions in the letters show that John does, in fact, have in view the specific churches he addresses. He would be taunting them mercilessly if he were discussing events two thousand or more years distant. God answers the anxious cry “How long?” by urging their patience

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only a “little while longer” (6:10–11). Revelation promises there will no longer be “delay” (10:6). The ad hoc nature of the book demands a preterist approach.18

(c) Revelation is emphatic-declarative. The expressions of imminence are didactic (nonsymbolic), frequent (in the introduction, conclusion, and elsewhere), and varied (see above discussions of tachos and engys). How else could John have expressed nearness in time if not by these terms? All English translations employ terms expressing temporal nearness.

(d) Revelation is parallel-harmonic. The temporal expectation in Revelation parallels New Testament teaching elsewhere. For instance, Robert Thomas parallels Revelation 6 with Matthew 24: “Jesus in His discourse was clearly anticipating what he was to show John in much greater detail.” Pate concurs.19 I agree. Interestingly, in Matthew 24:34 Jesus holds the same expectancy as John: “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place” (NKJV, italics added; cf. 23:36). He urges his hearers, as John does his own, to expect these judgments in their own lifetimes.

In Mark 9:1 Jesus promises that some of his hearers will not “taste death” before witnessing “the kingdom of God come with power.” This almost certainly refers to the destruction of the temple at the behest of Christ (rather than to his transfiguration, which is only six days away). Similar notes of the temporal proximity of divinely governed crises abound in the New Testament (see Matt. 26:64; Acts 2:16–20, 40; Rom. 13:11–12; 16:20; 1 Cor. 7:26, 29–31; Col. 3:6; 1 Thess. 2:16; Heb. 10:25, 37; James 5:8–9; 1 Peter 4:5, 7; 1 John 2:17–18). How else could the New Testament express nearness more clearly? As these verses so evidently

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17Futurist Robert Thomas notes the potential “meaninglessness” of the prayers of these saints if their persecutors are not still alive when the prayer is uttered (Thomas, Revelation 1–7, 441). I would apply the same principle to the entire book of Revelation and place it in the first century.

18Of course, this does not preclude the contemporary relevance of Revelation today, in that it may still provide patterns illustrating certain divine principles for our instruction (e.g., Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11; 2 Tim. 3:16–17) while maintaining its ad hoc character. See George W. Knight III, “The Scriptures Were Written for Our Instruction,” in JETS 39 (March 1996): 3–14.

show, dramatic divine judgments are “soon,” “near,” “at hand,” “at the door,” “present”; “the hour has come”; “the time is short”; “the wrath of God is coming”; “the day is approaching” in “just a little while.” These events are to occur in “this generation,” before “some who are standing . . . taste death.”

Objection 2: These events do occur in the first century, but they occur again later in history, either through double fulfillment or through repeated recurrence until the end as the already/not yet nature of prophecy unfolds.

Three difficulties plague this type of response. (a) There is no exegetical warrant for it; the statement is pure theological assertion. What is more, this approach not only empties John’s express declarations of meaning (“these things must shortly come to pass”), but it contravenes a specific angelic directive contrasting John’s responsibility to Daniel’s. An angel commanded Daniel to “seal up” his prophecy for later times (Dan. 12:4), but commands John (who lives in “the last hour,” 1 John 2:18) to “not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near” (Rev. 22:10, italics added). Nevertheless, Marvin Pate holds that Revelation “does not imply that Nero filled the complete expectation of the coming antichrist, but, as a precursor to such, he is certainly a good starting place.”20 As I shall show, Nero does fulfill Revelation’s prophecy. Why look for further fulfillment?

(b) It requires us to believe that the many specific events, things, and personages of Revelation will appear repeatedly on the scene of earth history. In the same order? In the same geographic regions? With continual groupings of 144,000 being sealed? With constant beasts designated by the same number 666? On and on I could go. For example, Pate suggests that “the signs of the times began with Jesus and his generation,” and history witnesses “the coming intensification and culmination of those signs of the times,” which began in the first century.21 Such a position seems to stretch credulity to the breaking point.

The already/not yet theological principle, though valid and widely accepted by evangelicals, cannot govern whole, vast, complex works such as Revelation. The already/not yet principle applies to unitary, simple constructs: the kingdom, salvation,
new creation, and so forth. The principle snaps apart when we stretch it over so massive a work as Revelation. Furthermore, how can this principle explain the simultaneous operation in one book of such allegedly global themes operating as judgment (Rev. 6–19) and blessing (Rev. 20–22)? Pate’s use of this principle to explain Revelation seems more hopeful than helpful.\(^{22}\)

(c) This approach not only denies what John expressly affirms, but confuses principal application with historic event. That is, even were the events of Revelation repeated, that would not diminish the fact of their direct first-century historical fulfillment—with all its pregnant meaning in that unique era that effects the closing of the sacrificial system, the setting aside of Israel, and the universalizing of the true faith. For instance, Exodus-like events occurring after the Mosaic Exodus do not remove the redemptive-historical significance of that original historical episode. Pate specifically notes that the mark of the beast “can be understood as pointing a guilty finger at those Jews in the first century.”\(^{23}\) Why, then, should we look for further fulfillments beyond this most relevant first-century one?

According to John, then, the prophetic events are “soon” (1:1) and “near” (1:3), so that his original audience must “hold fast” (2:25; 3:11, NKJV), waiting only “a little longer” (6:11). “I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown” (3:11). Modern students of prophecy must not let a presupposed theological scheme or predetermined interpretive methodology blunt these forceful assertions.

THE REVELATIONAL THEME (REV. 1:7)

What, then, does John expect in the near future of his original audience? How can any events in the first century meet up to the Revelational drama?\(^{24}\)

\(^{22}\)Ibid., 148–55.

\(^{23}\)Ibid., 53.

\(^{24}\)Due to space limitations I cannot here defend the pre-A.D. 70 date of Revelation’s composition, which, though a minority viewpoint, claims many notable scholars. For detailed arguments see the published version of my doctoral dissertation on the subject: Gentry, Before Jerusalem Fell. Or see Terry, Biblical Apocalypses, 237–42. The late-date view depends heavily on church tradition, a tradition deeply rooted in Irenaeus’s famous statement found in his Against Heresies (5:30:5). But as Metzger notes: “Irenaeus’s date is open to question” (Bruce M. Metzger, “Revelation, The
Revelation’s main focus of attention (though not its only point) is this: God will soon judge the first-century Jews for rejecting and crucifying his Son, their Messiah. That is, the judgments of Revelation come especially against those who cried out: “Crucify him! . . . Let his blood be on us and on our children!” (Matt. 27:22, 25; cf. John 19:1–16). John states his theme in his introduction at Revelation 1:7, just after he declares the nearness of the events (1:1, 3), a theme that is directly relevant to the first-century circumstances. Note particularly the following literal translations:

Lo, he doth come with the clouds, and see him shall every eye, even those who did pierce him, and wail because of him shall all the tribes of the land. Yes! Amen! (Young’s Literal Translation of the Holy Bible)

Behold he comes with the clouds, and will see him every eye and those who him pierced, and will wail over him all the tribes of the land. Yes, amen. (Alfred Marshall, The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament)

Many assume the Second Advent is in view here. And upon first reading such seems appropriate. Nevertheless, in its contextual setting verse 7 points to the destruction of Jerusalem and her temple in A.D. 70, which produces several dramatic results: It brings God’s wrath on the Jews for rejecting their Messiah (Matt. 21:33–44); it concludes the anticipatory old covenant era (John 4:20–23; Heb. 1:1; 12:18–29), which is becoming “obsolete” and “aging” and “will soon disappear” (Heb. 8:13); it finally and forever closes down the typological sacrificial system, reorienting the worship of God (Heb. 9–10); and it effectively universalizes the Christian faith by freeing it from all Jewish constraints (Matt. 28:19–20).
28:18-20; Eph. 2:12-22) that tend to "pervert the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:7; cf. Acts 15:1; Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:16). Let me provide brief exegetical notations supporting this interpretation.

(1) The "coming with the clouds" language is common prophetic parlance for historical divine judgments on nations. Isaiah speaks of God's coming judgment against Egypt in similar terms: "An oracle concerning Egypt: See, the LORD rides on a swift cloud and is coming to Egypt. The idols of Egypt tremble before him, and the hearts of the Egyptians melt within them" (Isa. 19:1). Obviously, God does not literally and visibly ride down from heaven on a cloud against Egypt. But he does send a great judgment on the Egyptians—as by a terrible and destructive storm cloud. Other references confirm this type of statement, known as "apocalyptic metaphor" (see Ps. 18:7-15; 104:3; Isa. 13: 1, 9-13; Joel 2:1-2; Mic. 1:3-4).26

Interestingly, as Robert Thomas notes, John follows Jesus' merging of Zechariah 12:10 and Daniel 7:13.27 Like John, Jesus mentions the "coming with [on] the clouds" (cf. Matt. 24:29-30) against Israel (23:36-24:2, 16), immediately before he says, "This generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (24:34, italics added). And just as Jesus says to the first-century high priest standing before him that he will "see" the Son of Man "coming on the clouds" (26:64), so here John tells his original audience, "Every eye will see him," that is, his judgment-coming will be a dramatic, public event, not done in a corner.28

(2) This coming will be especially directed against "those who pierced him," that is, the first-century Jews who demanded his crucifixion. Jesus' teaching lays the blame for the crucifixion primarily on the Jews (Matt. 20:18; 21:33-43; Luke 9:22), as does the apostle Peter's instruction: "Then know this, you and all the


27 Thomas, Revelation 1-7, 76.

28 In various places in Revelation "seeing" does not demand a physical beholding, but sensing or realizing, just as we say, "I see," when a teacher shows us a math solution. Robert Thomas notes of John's own "beholding" in Rev. 4:1: "This action should not be equated with the physical eye. Rather, it is sight with the eye of ecstatic vision as throughout the Apocalypse" (Thomas, Revelation, 1:334). Yet this is a type of "seeing."

Christ’s judgment-coming will bring mourning on “all the tribes of the earth” (NIV). The literal translations cited above show John actually focuses on all the tribes of “the land” (Gk. ἔδρας, the well-known Promised Land in which the Jews lived. (We should probably translate the Greek word ἔδρας as “the land” rather than “the earth” in the great majority of the cases where this word occurs in Revelation.\(^{30}\)) John’s reference to Christ’s piercing demands a first-century focus if the theme is to be relevant and true, for those who pierced him are now long since deceased. Note the important observation regarding Matthew 21:40 made by premillennialist scholar Henry Alford:

We may observe that our Lord makes ‘when the Lord cometh’ coincide with the destruction of Jerusalem, which is incontestably the overthrow of the wicked husbandmen. This passage therefore forms an important key to our Lord’s prophecies, and a decisive justification for those who like myself, firmly hold that the coming of the Lord is, in many places, to be identified, primarily, with that overthrow.\(^{31}\)

(3) This interpretation fits perfectly with the Lord’s Olivet Discourse, which begins with an inquiry regarding the destiny of the first-century temple in light of the Jewish rejection of Christ (cf. Matt. 23:34–24:2). The judgments focus particularly on the temple (24:2) in Judea (24:16) during that “generation” (24:34).\(^{32}\)

29The Romans, in effect, were instruments of Jewish wrath against Christ. The Jews demanded that the Romans crucify him (Matt. 20:18–19; 27:11–25; Mark 10:33; 15:1; Luke 18:32; 23:1–2; John 18:28–31; 19:12, 15; Acts 3:13; 4:26–27; Rev. 17); Pilate sought to release him and lay the responsibility on the Jews (Matt. 27:24); Christ said that the Romans “do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). For more information see Terry, Biblical Apocalyptics, 280–82.


32See: Thomas D. Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., The Great Tribulation: Past or Future? (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997); Gary DeMar, Last Days Madness: Obsession of
As a result of the grave nature of God’s judgment on Israel and its universal consequences, however, great disruptions will reverberate well beyond the narrow confines of Israel. The narrow focus is on Israel; the full scope encompasses the Roman empire. This is why John writes to the seven churches of Asia Minor. They not only must understand God’s destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (a major event even for Christians33), but must brace themselves for the severe aftershocks associated with it. In fact, Christ urges the seven churches to repent, reform, and persevere (Rev. 2:5, 16, 21–22; 3:3, 19) because of impending judgments soon to erupt (2:5, 16; 3:11; 22:12, 20). In the case of the church in Philadelphia, for instance, Christ promises to shield them from that judgment: “Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come [italics added] upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth” (Rev. 3:10 NASB).

THE THRONE SCENE (REV. 4–5)

In 1:12–20 John’s first vision shows Christ in history (spiritually) walking among the churches as their ever-present protector and head (cf. Matt. 18:20; 28:18, 20; Acts 18:9–10; Heb. 13:5). The focal judgments of Revelation do not begin until chapter 6. In chapters 4–5, however, God braces John for those coming fearsome judgment scenes by spiritually transporting him above history to God’s throne room in heaven (Rev. 4:1–2).

In Revelation 4 John sees God sitting on his judicial throne and actively ruling over all creation (4:2–6, 11). The four “living creatures” closest to the throne seem to be angels of the highest order: They ever watch (being “covered with eyes,” v. 6) over

creation (appearing as creatures and singing of creation, vv. 7, 11), ready to do God’s holy bidding (having six wings to fly swiftly and singing of God’s holiness, v. 8) in all of creation (their number represents the four points of the compass, v. 7; cf. 7:1; 21:13). Whatever John witnesses thereafter—however terrifying the judgments, however vicious the opposition—he may rest assured that not only does Christ concern himself with the affairs of his people in history (chap. 1), but God is actively controlling all things from above history (chap. 4; cf. Dan. 2:21; 4:35; Rom. 8:28; Eph. 1:11).

Interestingly, John mentions God’s “throne” in eighteen of Revelation’s twenty-two chapters. In fact, of the sixty-two appearances of the word “throne” in the New Testament, we find forty-seven of them in Revelation. Strong judicial tendencies characterize Revelation, not only because of this dramatic vision itself but because of all the judicial terminology therein (e.g., 6:10; 11:18; 15:3; 16:5–7; 18:8; 19:2, 11). The temporal judgment—coming of Christ, which dramatically concludes forever the Old Testament typological era (cf. 11:1–2, 19; 21:22), is directed from the throne of the universe.

In chapter 5 a remarkable claimant to the right to execute God’s judgments appears before the throne: a slain but living Lamb. The strongly Judaic (and symbolic) description of Christ’s appearance here underscores the thematic concern of Christ’s coming in cloud-judgment against “those who pierced him,” that is, the Jews (1:7). Thus he appears as a sacrificial lamb, “looking as if it had been slain” (5:6, 9, 12), who is “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David” (5:5). The emphasis on his crucifixion (as in 1:7) is unmistakable (“lamb,” “slain”). As Milton Terry observes, there is a certain irony in this imagery: “The great trouble with Judaism was that it looked for a mighty lion; and was scandalized to behold, instead, a little lamb” (cf. Luke 24:21, 25–27; John 6:15; 19:15).34

But what does the seven-sealed scroll represent? “Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals” (5:1). If we are to discern the proper meaning of this scroll, we must bear in mind four interpretive controls: (1) The scroll must apply to first-century events, for “the time is near” (1:3; 22:6, 10, 12; cf. 6:11). (2) The scroll

34Terry, Biblical Apocalyptics, 323.
must refer to Israel, for Revelation’s theme refers to “those who pierced him” (1:7; 11:8). (3) The scroll should have Old Testament warrant, for, as Robert Thomas well notes: “The influence of the OT on Revelation is overwhelming.” 35 (4) The scroll should be consistent with the flow of Revelation, for it is an intricately structured book with all of its numbered series and reappearing images.

In the Old Testament we find a scroll similarly described and in an analogous context. In Ezekiel 1 the prophet saw four living, winged creatures, much like those John sees (Ezek. 1:5–10; Rev. 4:6–8). Near Ezekiel’s living creatures he saw a crystal-like expanse and a glorious throne overarched by a rainbow, much like that John sees (Ezek. 1:22–28; Rev. 4:2–6). In Ezekiel 2:9–10 we read: “Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.” This reminds us of John’s experience: “Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals” (Rev. 5:1). The strong similarities surely are not accidental; John seems to be intentionally following Ezekiel’s pattern.

What, then, is the point of Ezekiel’s vision? Judgment on Israel: “He said: ‘Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day’” (Ezek. 2:3). This supports our understanding of Revelation’s main focus, especially when we consider how much greater is first-century Israel’s sin in rejecting the Messiah himself (Matt. 21:33–45; 23:32–38; John 1:11; Acts 2:23, 36; cf. Matt. 13:17; 1 Peter 1:10–12). The sevenfold nature of the judgments on Israel (represented by the seven seals, trumpets, and bowls) reminds us of the covenantal curse God threatens on her in the Old Testament: “If after all this you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over” (Lev. 26:18; cf. vv. 24, 28).

When viewed against the backdrop of the theme of Jewish judgment, personages (a harlot and a bride), and the flow of Revelation (from the sealed scroll to capital punishment for “adultery” to a “marriage feast” to the taking of a new “bride” as the “new Jerusalem”), the covenantal nature of the transaction suggests that the seven-sealed scroll is God’s divorce decree

35 Thomas, Revelation 1–7, 41.
against his Old Testament wife for her spiritual adultery. In the Old Testament God “marries” Israel (see esp. Ezek. 16:8, 51–32), and in several places he threatens her with a “bill of divorce” (Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:8).

In the New Testament the final and conclusive destruction of the temple accomplishes this. In his divorce of Israel God disestablishes her: Redemptive history is no longer the story of a Jewish-focused, Israel-exalting, geopolitical work as in the Old Testament (Matt. 8:11; 21:43; cf. Ps. 147:19–20; Amos 3:2). God’s work now reaches out to “all nations” (Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8); Christ makes of two, one new man (Eph. 2:12–22), where there is no longer “Jew nor Greek” (Rom. 10:12; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11).

The “Lion of the tribe of Judah” reference (Rev. 5:5) harks back to Genesis 49. There we hear of the universalizing of God’s work beyond the borders of Israel: Judah is “a lion’s cub ... the obedience of the nations is his” (Gen. 49:9–10). Furthermore, Christ’s appearing before God’s throne in heaven (Rev. 5:6) reminds us of Daniel’s messianic vision: When the “son of man” appears before “the Ancient of Days,” God grants him a kingdom so that all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him” (Dan. 7:13–14; cf. Rev. 5:9; 7:9; 14:6).

Nevertheless, though God judges the first-century Jews and disestablishes Israel as the unique geopolitical focus of his kingdom, we know from other New Testament revelation that the Jews will also eventually return to the kingdom of God in full number, receiving the blessings of salvation (Rom. 11). But God will never exalt them above other blood-bought people (even the Old Testament anticipates such equality; see Isa. 19:23–25; Jer. 48:47; 49:6, 39; Zech. 9:7). Jews and Gentiles merge into one body in Christ forever, forming one tree (Rom. 11:15, 25), one new man (Eph. 2:13–18), one new temple (2:19–22), and one new creation (Gal. 6:15).

THE SEVEN SEALS (REV. 6)

In Revelation 6 Christ begins opening the seals. As Robert Thomas, Marvin Pate, and other commentators note, there is a

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36 Isa. 54:5; 62:4; Jer. 3:14, 20; 31:32; Hos. 1:2; 2:2, 7, 16; 5:4; 9:1, 10. She seeks marriage to foreign gods, Mal. 2:11.

37 David E. Holwerda, Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).
“close parallelism” between Jesus’ Olivet Discourse and the seals of Revelation. And as the preterist reminds them, the contexts of both of these prophecies relate to first-century events (cf. Rev. 1:1, 3 with Matt. 24:2–3, 34). It is significant that church father Eusebius (A.D. 260–340) used Josephus’s history of the Jewish War (A.D. 67–70) to illustrate the fulfilling of the Olivet prophecy (Eccl. Hist. 3:5–9).

The rider on the white horse “bent on conquest” (Rev. 6:2–3) represents the victorious Roman march toward Jerusalem to engage the Jewish war in the spring of A.D. 67. The rider on the red horse (6:4), who takes the “peace from the earth” (6:4; cf. Matt. 24:6–7), speaks of the surprising disruption of the famous pax Romana, an enforced peace that prevailed throughout the Roman empire for many years. For example, Epictetus (A.D. 60–140) writes that “Caesar has obtained for us a profound peace. There are neither wars nor battles” (Discourses 3:13:9). The Jewish revolt against Rome temporarily interrupts this famous peace. The red horse especially highlights that civil war occurring in Jerusalem itself (where Jesus utters his prophecy, Matt. 24).

The riders on the black and pale horses represent famine and death issuing from the Jewish war. These tragic factors of this war are well-documented by Josephus (Wars of the Jews 4–7), the Jewish historian who participated in the war, and by the Roman historians Tacitus (Histories 1) and Suetonius (Vespasian).

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38Thomas, Revelation 1–7, 53; Pate and Haines, Doomsday Delusions, 37–44.
39For a detailed explanation of Matt. 24, see Ice and Gentry, The Great Tribulation.

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White here represents “victory,” not purity: (1) It commonly does so in antiquity (Virgil, Aeneid 3:537; Plutarch, Camillus 7; Dio Cassius, Roman History 53:14). (2) The rider goes forth “bent on conquest” (6:2). (3) The bow is a symbol of victory (Zech. 9:13–14). (4) The color relates to its effect (conquering) like the other horses’ colors (e.g., red=blood; black=famine; pale=death).

4Flavius Josephus is a non-Christian Jewish historian who lived from A.D. 37–101. He served as a general in the Jewish forces during the Jewish war against Rome in A.D. 67–70. During the war the Romans defeated him at Jotapata. Josephus surrendered to the Roman general Flavius Vespasian, whom he then befriended by interpreting a prophetic oracle to mean that Vespasian would one day be emperor of Rome. He then worked with Vespasian in attempting to persuade the Jews to surrender their hopeless cause. After the war Josephus moved to Rome and changed his name from the very Jewish Joseph Ben Matthias to a more Roman Flavius Josephus, taking on his benefactor’s name. Vespasian became emperor of Rome in A.D. 69 and sponsored the writing of The Wars of the Jews, The Antiquities of the Jews, and
The fifth seal (6:9–11) gives a heavenward glance once again (cf. chap. 4), where we hear the martyrs crying for vengeance. God promises to vindicate them, but they must "wait a little longer" (v. 11; cf. Luke 18:6–8). Martyr vindication is crucial to understanding Israel’s judgment (Matt. 23:34–24:2).

The decreation language in the sixth seal (Rev. 6:12–17) portrays Israel’s world coming apart under the “wrath of the Lamb” on the “great day of wrath” (vv. 16–17). Such language is common prophetic parlance regarding the collapse of God-cursed governments, such as Babylon (Isa. 13:1, 10, 19), Egypt (Ezek. 32:2, 7–8, 16, 18), Idumea (Isa. 34:3–5), and Judah (Jer. 4:14, 23–24). Milton Terry writes of Revelation 6:

The imagery and style of the Old Testament apocalyptists are most appropriately brought into use; sun, moon, and stars, and the heaven itself, are pictured as collapsing, and the crisis of the ages is signaled by voices and thunders and lightnings and earthquake. To insist on literal interpretation of such imagery is to bring prophecy into contempt and ridicule.

The moving away of “every mountain” of the sixth seal (6:14) may allude to the Roman legions’ construction crews removing mountainous impediments to the progress of the massive army, or else to their building banks to the tops of the protective walls surrounding Jewish cities. Josephus notes: “Accordingly [Vespasian] sent both footmen and horsemen to

other works by Josephus. Josephus completed Wars in A.D. 75, just five years after the fall of Jerusalem. In this work Josephus wrote as an eyewitness historian who happened to be in the action on both sides of the conflict. His work is extremely helpful for providing historical insights into the events of that war, so many of which are foretold in John’s prophecy in Revelation.


For expositions of Old Testament decreation imagery in preconsummational, historic Old Testament judgments, see Dallas Theological Seminary’s commentary, Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament, at Isa. 13:10; Jer. 4:23–28; Ezek. 32:11–16; Joel 2:10–11.

Terry, Biblical Apocalyptics, 269.
level the road, which was mountainous and rocky, not without
difficulty to be traveled over by footmen, but absolutely imprac­
ticable for horsemen. Now these workmen accomplished what
they were about in four days” (Wars 3.7.3). After describing the
mountainous setting of Jotapata and its natural impregnability
(Wars 3.7.7), Josephus mentions Vespasian’s decision to “raise
a bank against that part of the wall which was practicable”
(Wars 3.7.8).

In 6:15–16 many “hid in caves” and “called to the moun­
tains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us.’” Josephus frequently mentions
that the Jews actually sought refuge underground during the
A.D. 67–70 war: “And on this day the Romans slew all the mul­
titude that appeared openly; but on the following days they
searched the hiding places, and fell upon those that were under­
ground, and in the caverns” (Wars 3.7.36; see also 3.2.3; 3.7.35;
5.3.1; 6.7.3; 6.9.4; 7.2.1).45

Jesus warns the women watching him carry his cross:

For the time will come when you will say, “Blessed are
the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the
breasts that never nursed!” Then

“they will say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us!’
24:1–2, 19, 34)

The fate of the women and children in A.D. 70 was horrible:

Then did the famine widen its progress, and devoured
the people by whole houses and families; the upper
rooms were full of women and children that were dying
by famine; and the lanes of the city were full of the dead
bodies of the aged; the children also and the young men
wandered about the marketplaces like shadows, all
swelled with the famine. (Wars 5.12.3)

The relevant fit of first-century events with the prophecy of Re­
velation 6 is so compelling that Marvin Pate admits their con­
nection, even though he rejects the preterist conclusions.46

45 An interesting archaeological study of the first-century caverns under
Jerusalem appears in Leen Ritmeyer, “Locating the Original Temple Mount,” BAR
46 Pate and Haines, Doomsday Delusions, 44–55.