

Various Views on the Book of Revelation

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A while back a group of Bible students asked me to teach the book of Revelation. I asked them if they really wanted to have me teach because I knew it would not be exactly what they expected. Views concerning the *secret rapture* and the *battle of Armageddon* prevailed among the members of the group. I forewarned them that I would not be teaching the popular view but would present various viewpoints with an emphasis on those of Biblical scholars most of them were not familiar with. They asked me to proceed on that basis and we enjoyed a very good study together.

When I was given the opportunity to write this article for ACTS, John Kennedy mentioned the book, Revelation – Four views – A Parallel Commentary by Steve Gregg.ⁱ John also sent me a review article on the book, “Revelation, Four Views:A Parallel Commentary” by: Ron Maness.ⁱⁱ I would recommend both the article and the book to anyone interested in studying the book of Revelation.

Gregg offers a valuable comparative study for those interested. In the Forward to this book Robert Clouse states that, “Regardless of the perspective on Revelation each holds, many students of prophecy are intolerant of those who cannot in good conscience agree with them.” Gregg states, “I once believed that there were two types of prophecy enthusiasts – those who shared my views on Revelation and those who had not yet heard them convincingly presented.”ⁱⁱⁱ Perhaps you can identify with that statement. I know I can.

Gregg states his goal “has not been to advocate any position above another, so I hope that my own opinion will not be evident . . . and that rather he has “attempted to present the very best arguments and evidences for each view . . . to encourage Bible students to wrestle with the inspired text of Revelation and with the earnest efforts of godly interpreters to unfold its meaning for the people of God.”^{iv} Each group includes fine scholars and devout Christian believers. While maintaining a certain amount of reservation and respect for the opinions of others (scholars – not novelists), it is wise to first emphasize that our methods of study and research are vitally important and that we must begin our study by gaining some familiarity with the genre, language, historical background, nuances of meaning, symbolism, etc. when studying this apocalyptic book.

Many Christians are surprised to discover that others view the Book of Revelation differently from them. The book invites a wide spectrum of approaches, but the common denominator of all is the ultimate triumph of Anointed Savior, who culminates history with His final coming and reigns with and through His bride forever. The four major views as listed by Gregg are the *historicist*, the *preterist*, the *futurist*, and the *spiritual* approach.

The Historicist position sees Revelation as a symbolic prophecy of the whole of church history forming a picture of the events and movements that have shaped the conflict and progress of the Christian church. Much conjecture is associated with this view as history progresses and references are made to barbarian invasions, the Reformation, the French Revolution, World Wars I and II, the European Common Market, etc. These historical interpretations obviously have to be revised periodically when the popular interpretations prove to be unreliable. The *historicist* view was professed by Wycliffe, Knox, Tyndale, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Whitefield, Spurgeon, Matthew Henry, and other famous Christians. It developed in the 12th century and is the view of most premillennialists prior to the 19th century when it was replaced by the development of dispensationalism which became popular through the Scofield Reference Bible published in 1909.

The Preterist position views Revelation as a message of hope and comfort to first century believers, offering them an expectation of their deliverance from Roman persecution and oppression. This is also called the Contemporary Historical view and regards the visions as referring primarily, if not exclusively, to events and persons within the first century. The *preterist* view became strong in the 19th century. Some *preterists* advocate that everything refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70 and that all of Revelation has been fulfilled but others believe the final chapters of Revelation still look forward to a future second coming of Christ. Some believe “ that the first half of Revelation describes the fall of Jerusalem, the second half predicts the fall of the Roman empire, and the final chapters describe the second coming of Christ.”^v Gregg notes in regard to Revelation 8:8-9, that “the words of Josephus, the Jewish/Roman historian who witnessed and documented the events of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and who had never read Revelation, seem almost as if they were calculated to present the fulfillment of this trumpet judgment.”^{vi} R. C. Sproul and Hank Hanegraaf wrote excellent books on the Preterist view which are not included in Gregg’s research and which I recommend.^{vii}

The *futurist* view developed in the 17th century and proposes that the prophecies are of events which are yet future from our perspective.

Everything after Revelation 3 is future and is usually held to refer to things that will occur in a short period (i.e. a 7- year period known as the Great Tribulation) before the return of Christ. The view portrayed in the *futurist* approach “is held by the majority of the most popular contemporary evangelical writers and Bible teachers...(and) has so dominated the Christian media, in fact, that many Christians and virtually all non-Christians are unaware even of the existence of other approaches.”^{viii}

Belief in the futurist approach leads the reader to take a more literal view of the visions, reducing or eliminating the difficulty of interpreting the symbols but, in my opinion, this leads to faulty interpretation because it often ignores the genre of the book. Even strict dispensationalists often recognize some symbolism in Revelation. In my opinion it is absolutely impossible to truly interpret the book properly without understanding its symbolism.

The most popular and widely promoted approach is called the Dispensationalist interpretation. It is also the most recent and was unknown to the early churches. This view emphasizes a (secret) Rapture of the church at which time the redeemed in Christ are translated into heaven at His coming “in the air” and the Great Tribulation or the wrath of God from which believers are spared. This approach sees national Israel as God’s people on Earth at this time (the church having been raptured), restored to

Jerusalem, protected by divine seal, worshiping in a rebuilt temple, and suffering at the hand of the Antichrist. Dispensationalism was founded by John Nelson Darby and promoted by W. E. Blackstone, G. Campbell Morgan, H. A. Ironside, A. C. Gaebelien, and C. I. Scofield. It was popularized further by D. L. Moody and Billy Graham. Popular books and novels like Left Behind and The Late Great Planet Earth take this view and sensationalize it. The doctrine of a secret rapture was first conceived by Darby in 1827 who claimed that there were not one, but two "second comings". Although his teaching was immediately challenged as unbiblical and he had lingering doubts about it as late as 1843 or 1845,^{ix} it has become a very popular view to this day.

The Moderate Futurist view proposes the Book of Revelation as summarizing the conclusion of the church's historical procession through tribulation and triumph, warfare, and victory, and consummating in the climactic return of Jesus Christ for His church. The tribulation is generally viewed as over a long course of time, but increasing in intensity, so that the church is understood as present through much of Earth's turmoil until just prior to the outpouring of the "bowls full of the wrath of God". This occurs during Revelation 16 and culminates in the collapse of the present world order. This is the view that concludes with a redeemed society dwelling in a

new earth that has been cleansed of all evil and with God dwelling in the midst of His people. This is a more literal view and again this is a relatively modern view that developed from the more ancient Augustinian view.

The Idealist, Spiritual, or Symbolic view (which developed in Germany, England, and the United States in the 19th century) sees spiritual principles within the book of Revelation but little or no references to specific literal events or persons. This view formulates no particular historical focus or effort at interpreting specifics of the book, rather seeing it as a broad, poetic portrayal of the conflict between the kingdom of God and the powers of Satan.^x Rather than seeking to find individual fulfillments of the visions, the *spiritual* view is an extension of the ancient allegorical approach. It takes Revelation as a drama, depicting spiritual truths which may be happening over and over throughout history, such as the conflicts “between Christ and Satan, between the saints and the antichristian world powers, and depicting the final victory of Christ and his saints.”^{xi} Fulfillment of the prophecies may be seen as “entirely spiritual or as recurrent, finding representative expression throughout the age, rather than in one-time, specific fulfillments.”^{xii} An important factor, which I believe many Bible students miss, is the relatively recent development of the major views as well as their source. Most of the more popular views today are relatively

recent in origin and many can be traced no further back than to the 19th century.

Let's see how these four views might look at a well known text differently. Revelation 13:16 gives us the number 666. To the historicist this may represent the Roman Catholic Church, to the preterist it represents Nero Caesar (the number of his name in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), to the futurist it represents body markings, and to the spiritualist it is symbolic of worshipping the beast, e.g. human dictators. A blend of all 4 may include Nero, false religious and political systems, and any identification with these false "gods."

There is further evangelical debate, primarily over chapters 20-22, that focuses not primarily, "on whether one is a *futurist* or a *historicist* as on whether one is a *millennialist*, and if so, of what variety." ^{xiii} Gregg switches his format for those chapters from the four column format to a three column format, presenting the *premillennial*, *postmillennial*, and *amillennial* views. The *premillennial* view holds that Christ's second coming will precede and launch a golden age in which the kingdom will be established on the earth for 1,000 years, with the final judgment and the eternal new heavens and new earth to follow. Early church fathers (from the 2nd century

such as Papias, Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian) interpreted the millennium as a future golden age on earth but “the development of eschatological systems was not a chief priority among the earliest Christians.”^{xiv} There are two principal varieties of *premillennialists*: historic and dispensational. The differences between those two perspectives center on a future place for national Israel and anticipation of a rapture of Christians to heaven before the beginning of the Tribulation in the dispensationalist view.

Dispensationalism with Premillennialism has been the prominent view in many churches, bookstores, and TV and radio programs. Although dispensational premillennialists claim that their unique doctrines have been held since the early church, these claims have been soundly refuted. Postmillennialism was the dominant eschatology from the Reformation until at least 1859.

The *postmillennialist* teaches that Christ will return after the millennial period, which occurs as the world is gradually won over by the gospel, and is marked by a period of peace before Christ returns. *Postmillennialists* are often, though not always, inclined toward the *preterist* view. The Alexandrian church fathers in the 4th century (Origen, Clement, Methodius, Augustine) did not accept millennialism and used an allegorical

interpretation. The *amillennialist* believes there is no literal millennium but that the 1,000 year period in Revelation 20 represents the entire span of time from the first coming of Christ until His second coming, and most aspects of Revelation are held to be symbolic. This is the prevalent view in Eastern Christianity as well, which by the way, didn't accept the book of Revelation in the canon until it was influenced by the Western churches late in the 4th century.

Gregg emphasizes that, "the various approaches to Revelation are not linked inseparably to any particular millennial position" giving the example of *amillennialist historicist* (e.g. Martin Luther), *preterist* (e.g. Jay Adams), and *spiritualist* (e.g. William Hendriksen), while rarely in a *futurist* (Abraham Kuyper is an exception).^{xv}, Gregg also gives an example of a *historicist* applying interpretation in a *preterist* manner so there are many variations and interpretations.

Many students of the Bible settle for a particular dogmatic view. When this occurs, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to see beyond that view. If the view is incorrect or distorted the problem is obvious. The benefits of using varied viewpoints are illustrated by the four Gospels? One is simple and literal (Mark), another is hinting at truths (at times with allegories and

parables) about how God cares for His people (Luke), still another has many practical and moral illustrations and parables (Matthew), and finally one has a deep meaning not contained in the others (John). Revelation will embrace the full spectrum of literal and allegorical. And, in the book of Revelation we are also dealing with a genre (apocalyptic writing) that uses many dramatic symbols.^{xvi}

An open mind that is disciplined by serious study of Holy Scripture is vital when we look at this book which has had many controversial interpretations. Actually, this book was controversial before it became part of the canon. It was “not canonized and placed in the New Testament until the council of Carthage in 395 CE. The Revelation was in competition with the book of Enoch, another apocalyptic book. When the vote was taken, Enoch lost by five votes.”^{xvii}

What is the real nature of the book, the real genre? It is a letter to seven churches and contains prophecy but is primarily an apocalyptic book. What does that mean? During times of great persecution, apocalyptic writers present dramatic scenarios to describe the victory of good over evil or of God and His people versus Satan and his people. Rich symbolic imagery, visions, astronomical signs, monsters, angels, and demons are all common in

this genre of apocalyptic literature which well known from 200 B.C. to 200 A.D.

Apocalyptic writing is an obscure style today but it was popular in John's time. What is the purpose of the book? *Gilyana* in Aramaic means revelation or unveiling. It is a disclosure of mysteries about heaven and earth using much symbolism and imagery. Apocalyptic literature (like Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel 1, 38-39, Zechariah 9-14, Jude, II Thessalonians 2, II Peter 3, Enoch, Revelation, etc.) is focused on the future (near, distant, or ultimate) with promises of eternal peace, deliverance, and judgment that encourage God's people and provide hope when times are very difficult. It is also an appeal for repentance from evil and darkness to turn to God and keep His commandments. The fantastic and vivid imagery energizes and amplifies the message giving it force. Rather than causing fear and anxiety it is intended to provide comfort and hope. Prophecy means to speak forth from God edification, encouragement, and comfort (I Corinthians 14:3). The name of Barnabas is often rendered "son of consolation" by translators. The literal meaning in Aramaic is *Bar*, meaning "son", and *Navi*, meaning "prophet". When transliterated into Greek and then English we derive Bar Nabas.

Old Testament allusions are abundant in the book of Revelation. Revelation contains 404 verses in 22 chapters and 278 of the verses contain allusions to an Old Testament passage.^{xviii} Examples include the tabernacle, priestly garments, the song of Moses and the Lamb, etc. The book also contains abundant Temple imagery, astronomical signs, cryptic historical references, symbolic numbers, angelic messengers, apocalyptic visions, and vivid symbolism. Symbolism is the rule and literalism is the exception in this book. Numbers have symbolic meanings and are not used to merely count units.

To understand the book we must first know something about its background and the date that it was written. Evidence within the book itself indicates that it was written during a period of extreme persecution, which possibly was that started by Nero after the fire that nearly destroyed Rome in July of A.D. 64 and continued until his suicide in June of A.D. 68. In this view, the book thus was written before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in September of A.D. 70, and is an authentic prophecy concerning the continuing suffering and persecution of Christians, which would become even more intense and severe in the years ahead. On the basis of some interpretations of isolated statements made by the early church fathers, others date the book near the end of the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81–96), after

John had fled to Ephesus. The earlier dating tend to support the preterist and blended viewpoints while the later dating supports the futurist view. The later view is the most popular today because it supports many of the end time teachings and publications. The earlier dating is supported by the historical setting regarding the Temple, 7 kings, the cryptic number 666 pointing to Nero, etc. Many well known scholars favored this view such as Adam Clarke, Alfred Edersheim, Sir Isaac Newton, R.C. Sproul, and the early church fathers. The later view has been popular only since 1900.

Charles Cutler Torrey concluded that, “the conventional date assigned to the Apocalypse, the reign of Domitian (81-96), has no valid evidence in its favor.”^{xix} Torrey also concluded that the book was written in Semitic – not Greek – idiom and style and that in Greek editions the writer wrote in Greek but thought in Hebrew, or rather, Semitic. To clarify this he plainly concluded, “The original language of Revelation was Aramaic, not Hebrew.”^{xx}

Dr. Lamsa, a Near Eastern scholar and translator of the Bible from Aramaic, suggested that the book of Revelation was “written during or prior to the reign of Nero, about 64 AD, when the persecution against the Christians began and before the outbreak of the Jewish war under Vespasian

in 67 AD. He based this idea on the fact that John recorded the mysterious number of the man who would persecute the saints.”^{xxi} The number 666 spells the name Nero Caesar and it was Nero who wrathfully persecuted the Christian church during that period of time.

Interestingly, Sir Isaac Newton, a serious Biblical scholar to say the least, agreed with this position and he based it on ancient commentaries as well as the preface to the Syriac (Aramaic) edition of the book of Revelation:

“ . . . the tradition of the Churches of Syria, preserved to this day in the title of the Syriac Version of the Apocalypse, which title is this: *The Revelation which was made to John the Evangelist by God in the Island Patmos, into which he was banished by Nero the Caesar*. The same is confirmed by a story told by Eusebius out of Clemens Alexandrinus, and other ancient authors, concerning a youth whom John some time after his return from Patmos committed to the care of the Bishop of a certain city. . . This is a story of many years, and requires that John should have returned from Patmos rather at the death of Nero than at that of Domitian; because between the death of Domitian and that of John there were but two years and an half; and John in his old age was so infirm as to be carried to Church, dying above 90 years old, and therefore could not be then supposed able to ride after the thief. This opinion is further supported by the allusions in the Apocalypse to the Temple and Altar, and holy City, as then standing; and to the Gentiles, who were soon after to tread under foot the holy City and outward court. This confirmed also by the style of the Apocalypse itself, which is fuller of Hebraisms than his Gospel. For thence it may be gathered, that it was written when John was newly come out of Judea, where he had been used to the Syriac tongue.”^{xxii}

Dr. Rocco Errico, a student of Dr. Lamsa, and a primary proponent of Aramaic today summarizes several key points by stating:

“The book of Revelation differs from other apocalyptic books in the Bible in that it deals with worldwide problems and covers past, present, and future. . . The

reader must study Near Eastern, Semitic symbolism. After all, the Revelation is a Near Eastern book. It contains more than 1,000 symbols, two-thirds of which come directly from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and other Jewish apocryphal and apocalyptic writings. . . We must not take these symbols and visions literally. They point to a much larger reality. ” xxiii

The Usefulness of Varied Interpretive Approaches to the Book of Revelation hopefully by now is obvious. From my perspective, we must go beyond the 4 views and ask who was this written to, what are the messages being conveyed, when do the events prophesied occur, where do they occur, when do they occur, and how are we to respond to this message? When I do this I am strongly convicted that the real battle between good and evil is not merely an external one. It is rather the battle that is going on within me.

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ⁱ Gregg, S., Revelation – Four Views – A Parallel Commentary, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997.

ⁱⁱ Maness' book review of Revelation, "Four Views," is available online at (http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=1672)

ⁱⁱⁱ Gregg, p. 1

^{iv} Ibid, p. 4.

^v Ibid, p. 39

^{vi} Ibid, p. 156

^{vii} Hanegraaf, H., The Apocalypse Code, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007. Sproul, R. C., The Last Days According to Jesus, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998.

^{viii} Gregg, p. 40

^{ix} Van Deventer, J. The Dispensational Origins of Modern Premillennialism and John Nelson Darby; online at <http://www.sullivan-county.com/news/cathouse/darby.htm>

^x Hayford, J. W., General Editor, Spirit Filled Life Bible, Nashville:, Thomas Nelson, 1991. pp. 1952-1953, 1966.

^{xi} Ibid, p. 3

^{xii} Ibid, p. 3

^{xiii} Ibid, p. 5.

^{xiv} Ibid, p. 29

^{xv} Ibid, p. 28

^{xvi} For a list of symbols see http://www.ccel.org/ccel/johnson_bw/pnt.pnt2700_sec7.html

^{xvii} Errico, R. A., Aramaic Light on James Through Revelation, Smyrna, GA: The Noorha Foundation, 2006, p. xv.

^{xviii} Metzger, Bruce M., Breaking the Code – Understanding the Book of Revelation, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993, p. 13.

^{xix} Torrey, Charles Cutler, Documents of the Primitive Church, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941, p. 155.

^{xx} Ibid, p. 165.

^{xxi} Errico, p. 92

^{xxii} Newton, I, Observations Upon the Prophecies of Daniel, and the Apocalypse of St. John;

available online at [http://www.blueletterbible.org/cgi-](http://www.blueletterbible.org/cgi-bin/comm_read.pl?book=Rev&chapter=1&verse=1&Comm=Comm%2Fisaac_newton%2Fprophecies%2Fapocalypse01.html%230%26*Isaac+Newton%26&Select.x=29&Select.y=10)

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^{xxiii} Errico, p. 90-91.