

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

Understanding the Different Interpretations

We are at the stage in our study where we must identify the different approaches to the book and the basis on which each of these interpretations rests. This need not be confusing. From next week I shall be expounding the book in keeping with the approach which I believe to be the appropriate one. It would be counter-productive to attempt to debate each passage. Interpretations do diverge dramatically, depending largely on one's starting point. Having identified the approach I am taking to the book and the main reasons for this approach, I shall be explaining the message of the book in keeping with this approach.

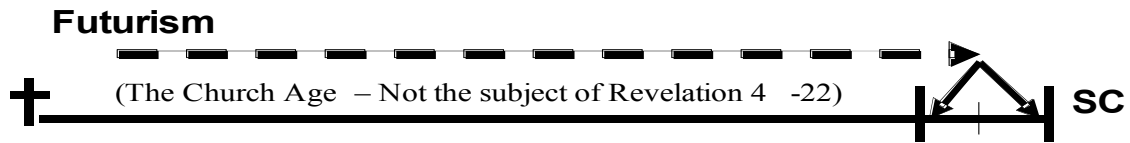
The Main Options



The Revelation, in its entirety, relates to events that occurred at the time of the author. It was written to encourage faithfulness at a time of persecution. No further significance should be sought. The beasts of chapter 13 are identified as imperial Rome and the imperial priesthood. As a consistent system, this view did not appear until the seventeenth century. Its major difficulty is in accounting for the passages that refer to judgment and to the Lord's return. Either the writer was mistaken concerning the Lord's coming or at least its imminence or that is something for the future while everything else has to do with the events around the end of the 1st century.



In essence, this scheme identifies the symbols of the Revelation with historical developments between the first and second comings of Christ (mainly in the western world). So, depending on the particular interpretation, historicists have seen the rise of Islam and/or the role of the papacy or the Anglo-Saxon people (British Israelism) in the prophecies. Historicism is a big umbrella. It does not claim to give us a complete picture of history between the first and second comings of Christ but identifies certain historical events or movements as having been predicted. Depending on the interpreter's circumstances, it is easy to identify the beasts, Babylon and the prostitute with movements that are seen to be opposed to the true church (from the interpreter's perspective).



I shall give a little more attention to futurism because it is so popular today. It is the view that chapters 4-22 relate events that will take place during the last seven years of the present age. Its popularity today may seem surprising when one considers that futurism is less than two hundred years old. It rests on a dispensationalist approach. It recognises the distinction between Israel and the church (which other expositors also recognise). It emphasises that the promises made to Israel cannot simply be applied to the church and it expects these to be literally fulfilled to a re-gathered Israel.

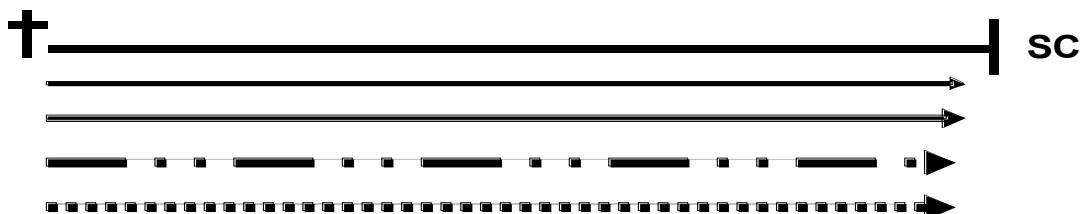
Where exactly does the idea of a seven year tribulation come from? In Daniel 9, the prophet was informed that seventy weeks (or sevens) were decreed on his people. From the time of the issuing of the decree to rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One (Messiah) there would be 69 weeks or “sevens”. Many commentators believe that this prophecy predicts the time of the (first) coming of Jesus but differ regarding the terminus point of the 69th week. Some see it as the birth of Jesus and others as his baptism (the commencement of his public ministry). Probably the most intricate and impressive of the calculations was undertaken by Sir Robert Anderson. Sir Robert believed that it is possible to determine with certainty both the commencement and the terminus dates. To make a long story short, he believed that when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in AD 32 (6 April), he did so in fulfilment of this prophecy. He argued that the number of literal days between those two events is exactly 173 880 and that this is equivalent to the period stipulated in the prophecy. ($483 \times 360 = 173\ 880$)¹

Here’s where the rub comes. He argues, as do other dispensationalists, that “the prophetic clock” stops ticking when Israel is out of favour. So, the clock stopped on Palm Sunday AD 32, with one week (of years) remaining. This was because Israel had a unique opportunity *on that particular day* to accept Jesus as king. Instead, he was rejected and within a week he was crucified. So the church came into being and continues to exist while Israel is out of favour. When “the full number of the Gentiles has come in”, attention shifts back to Israel and the seventieth week kicks in. During this week the antichrist (usually understood to be a political leader) makes a covenant with Israel but breaks off the agreement midway through the period. Usually the entire period is described as the “Great Tribulation” but many believe that, from Israel’s point of view, the second half (after the “abomination of desolation”) Israel’s problems intensify. This is often referred to as the “time of Jacob’s trouble”.

¹ Anderson argues that a “prophetic year” is 360 days but calculates the time from 455 BC to AD 32 using the Julian calendar, with the necessary adjustments. It is an impressive piece of work even if one disagrees with some of his assumptions.

From the point of view of this study, it is important for us to understand the basis on which futurists contend that chapters 6 to 19 refer to this seven year period. The days are taken literally. In chapter 20 we read of a thousand year period, followed by the final judgment and the institution of the eternal order (the new heaven and the new earth).

Parallelism (Idealism)



This view rests on two major tenets:

1. In the first place, it accepts that the book was not only addressed to the church but actually concerns the church. It recognises that there is a difference between Israel and the Church but emphasizes the continuity of God's purpose. It therefore rejects a strongly dispensational approach. It does not regard the church as an interim measure before a reversion to Israel (It's not really fair to caricature the futurist position in this way). The events of the entire book are seen to refer to the people of God (Israel in the OT and the church in the NT). It applies normal interpretive procedures to the book in that it takes the situation of the original readers into account, but it does not limit the significance of the book to the situation that obtained when John wrote to the seven churches.
2. In the second place, it does not limit the relevance of the book to the situation at the time of writing (like Preterism); it does not see the contents of chapters 6-22 as a sequential account of the entire period between the first and second comings of Christ (like Historicism); nor does it see it as a consecutive account of events during the last seven years before the Lord's return (like Futurism). It distinguishes between the sequence of the visions and the sequence of events.

It sees the sections of the Revelation as parallel representations of the church age. Each (with the possible exception of the last) spans the entire New Testament period, from the first to the second coming of Christ. Each of these sections gives us an important perspective on the entire period from the first to the second comings of Christ. Each focuses upon an important aspect of the struggle involved in the establishment of the kingdom of God.

Some (William Hendriksen, for example) contend that the sections are arranged in an ascending, climactic order. While they are parallel, there is also progress and development. Hendriksen describes this as "progressive parallelism". For example, the final judgement is first *announced*, then *introduced*, and finally

described (6:12-17; 14:14-20; 20:11-15). Similarly, the new heaven and the new earth are described more fully in the final section than in the previous ones.

John Stott's Perspective

In his excellent book, *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott points out that, among other things, the death of Jesus on the cross was a conquest. (John 12:23-33; Col 2:13-15; Heb 2:14; Rev 5:5-6) He draws attention to the fact that more than half the New Testament occurrences of the “victory” word group are found in the book of Revelation. He explains the background of persecution under Domitian and gives us the message of the book in a nutshell:

What the book of Revelation does, in keeping with the apocalyptic genre, is to life the curtain which hides the unseen world of spiritual reality and to show us what is going on behind the scenes. The conflict between the church and the world is seen to be but an expression on the public stage of the invisible contest between Christ and Satan, the Lamb and the dragon.²

He points out that “the visions cannot portray successive events since the final judgement and victory are dramatized several times.” In just a few pages Stott summarizes the message of the book. He goes right to the heart of matters, showing us that from chapter 4 the throne is central. Everything is described in relation to it. Jesus is portrayed as both Lion and Lamb (a combination of images that indicate that his power is due to his self-sacrifice). The grim events that follow the breaking of the seals are nevertheless under the control of the Lamb, who is already reigning and whose perfect kingdom will soon be consummated. (11:15-18)

Stott regards the vision of chapter 12 as the centre of the book. John sees a pregnant woman about to give birth to a Son who was destined to rule the nations. (12:5) He is evidently the Messiah and she is “the Old Testament church out of whom the Messiah came”. An enormous and grotesque red dragon – “that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan” (12:9) stood before the woman ready to devour the child the moment it was born. The child was “snatched up to God and to his throne”, and the woman fled into a desert place prepared for her by God. (12:5-6)

War in heaven followed and the dragon and his angels were defeated. The basis of the dragon's defeat was “the blood of the Lamb.” (12:11) But “the dragon is filled with fury because he knows that his time is short.” (12:12) Stott summarizes:

The devil has been defeated and dethroned. Far from this bringing his activities to an end, however, the rage he feels in the knowledge of his approaching doom leads him to redouble them. Victory over him has been won, but painful conflict with him continues.³

² John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986), 247.

³ *Ibid.*, 248.

In this conflict he inspires three allies who now appear in the guise of two ugly monsters and a gaudy prostitute. Stott argues that all three are symbols of the Roman empire, emphasizing three different aspects (Rome the *persecutor*, Rome the *deceiver* and Rome the *seducer*). He then goes on to make an important point.

Prophecy's fulfilment was not completed in the Roman empire. In every violent state, which opposes Christ, oppresses the church and demands the unquestioning homage of its citizens, the horrible 'beast from the sea' raises again its ugly heads and aggressive horns.⁴

The second monster "out of the earth" is obviously the first monster's henchman. He symbolizes the promoters of emperor worship. "In our day," says Stott, "he stands for all false religion and ideology, which deflects worship to any object other than the living and true God."

The third member of this diabolical trio is referred to as "Babylon the Great" (14:8; 17:5) She symbolises the moral corruption of Rome. But, whatever the social order, the prostitute is with us. But her fall is inevitable.

Jesus, the Victor, comes on a white horse and "with justice he judges and makes war." (19:11-16) The final three chapters describe the destruction of Satan and death, the new heaven and the new earth. Satan himself is confined to the lake of fire and evil is eliminated. In the New Jerusalem, there are no more tears, death pain or night. God establishes his perfect rule. And this great victory was all because of the Lamb who was slain and is worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise." (5:12)

In summary, Stott states:

The message of the book of Revelation is that Jesus Christ has defeated Satan and will one day destroy him altogether. It is in the light of these certainties that we are to confront his continuing malicious activity, whether physical (through persecution), intellectual (through deception) or moral (through corruption).⁵

⁴ Ibid., 249.

⁵ Ibid., 250.