

4 Approaches to Interpreting Revelation

Interpretive challenges

No other NT book poses more serious and difficult interpretive challenges than Revelation. The book's vivid imagery and striking symbolism have produced 4 main interpretive approaches:

The Preterist approach interprets revelation as a description of first century events in the Roman Empire. This view conflicts with the book's own often repeated claim to be prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). It is impossible to see all the events in Revelation as already fulfilled. The second coming of Christ, for example obviously did not take place in the first century.

The Historicist approach views revelation as a panoramic view of church history from apostolic times to the present – seeing in the symbolism such events as the barbarian invasions of Rome, the rise of the Roman Catholic church (as well as various individual popes), the emergence of Islam, and the French Revolution. This interpretive method robs Revelation of any meaning for those to whom it was written. It also ignores the time limitations the book itself places on the unfolding events (cf. 11:2; 12:6, 14; 13:5). Historicism has produced many different – and often conflicting – interpretations of the actual historical events contained in Revelation.

The Idealist approach interprets Revelation as a timeless depiction of the cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil. In this view, the book contains neither historical allusions nor predictive prophecy. This view also ignores Revelation's prophetic character and, if carried to its logical conclusion, severs the book from any connection with actual historical events. Revelation then becomes merely a collection of stories designed to teach spiritual truth.

The Futurist approach insists that the events of Chapters 6-22 are yet future, and that those chapters literally and symbolically depict actual people and events yet to appear on the world scene. It describes the events surrounding the second coming of Jesus Christ (chapters 6-19), the Millennium and final judgment (chapter 20), and the eternal state (chapters 21,22). Only this view does justice to Revelation's claim to be prophecy and interprets the book by the same grammatical-historical method as chapters 1-3 and the rest of Scripture.