

Revelation

Author and Occasion The author identifies himself as John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), without further elaboration. Early Church fathers, including Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, consistently held that this John was the beloved disciple. However, in the third century, an African bishop by the name of Dionysius compared the language, style, and thought of Revelation with the gospel and epistles of John and concluded that the book could not have been written by the apostle. While there are differences in grammar, vocabulary, and theological content, there are also many similarities, including the distinctive use of terms like “word”, “lamb”, and “true” as well as the use of conflicting themes set in stark contrast with each other such as light and darkness, love and hate, and good and evil. Differences in style and vocabulary are better explained by the unusual circumstances surrounding the writing of Revelation rather than postulating a different, non-apostolic John as the author.

The apostle John wrote this book while imprisoned on the island of Patmos late in the reign of the Emperor Domitian, probably in the mid-90s. Some believe that the book was written at an earlier date, during Nero’s persecution of Christians following the burning of Rome in 64. The later date is preferable for the following reasons:

- It was the opinion of Irenaeus (a disciple of Polycarp who was a disciple of John) and other church fathers;
- John probably didn’t move to Ephesus until after the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66 and thus, the early date would not give him sufficient time to establish an ongoing ministry in Asia Minor prior to the composition of the book;
- The churches addressed in Rev 2-3 seem to have been in existence for some time, enough to have reached a point of complacency and decline – a fact that favors a later date; and
- Domitian’s persecution was more widespread and assaulted Christian belief more directly (Domitian demanded that he be worshipped as a god while still alive) than Nero’s persecution and therefore better fits the time and context of the book.

The book is addressed to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. The churches had been in existence for some time, had undergone various degrees of spiritual development and decline, and were confronting either actual or imminent persecution. There was a growing hostility between the church and the Roman state. Universal persecution may not have been the order of the day, but it was clear that there was to be no compromise between paganism and the claims of Christ. Revelation was written as encouragement for churches sensing this growing hostility and as a warning to careless Christians who were tempted to lapse into an easy conformity to the world.

Revelation unveils the character and program of God. Its purpose is to reveal God’s sovereignty in the affairs of people in time and eternity. One day God will bring history to a triumphant climax in Christ. It is only the resurrected Christ who has the authority to judge the earth, remake it, and rule it in righteousness.

Interpretive Approaches

Understanding the exotic imagery of this book is central to its proper interpretation and application. We identify with plain statements asserting God’s control over history, His conflict with Satan, and His

coming judgment of the created order. But trumpets? Bowls of wrath? Fire from heaven? Mountains falling into the sea? Fantastical beasts emerging from the smoky core of the earth? Not your typical fare on the church casserole circuit. What do these phantasms mean and what application do they have for our day?

Interpretations of the book have historically fallen into one of four categories:

Idealist view This perspective considers Revelation to be a symbolic picture of the enduring struggle between good and evil, between Christianity and the forces marshaled against the faith. The symbols in the book cannot be and ought not be identified with particular historical events either in the past or the future. They simply are trends and ideals. The principles of spiritual warfare are operative throughout the ages and may have repeated embodiments. The impact of the entire message, rather than the literal details, is the point of the book.

Preterist view “Preterist” comes from the Latin word *praeter*, meaning “past”. This view understands Revelation as growing out of and describing events in the apostle’s own day. Preterists share much of the same disposition towards the book as those in the idealist camp, except that they limit the scope of the book to a description of the persecution of Christianity by ancient Rome and to what was expected to happen after the destruction of the Roman Empire.

Historicist view This perspective regards Revelation as describing events from the time of John’s visions on the isle of Patmos to the end of history. Thus, interpreters speak of the breaking of the seven seals as representing the fall of the Roman Empire, locusts from the bottomless pit as standing for the Islamic invaders around the time of Mohammed, the beast from the pit as symbolizing the Roman papacy (as many in the time of the Reformation believed), and so forth. Explanations of the various symbols in Revelation have varied widely among members of this school of thought. A number of the Reformers held to this view.

Futurist view This view places most of the events recorded in Revelation (chapters 4-22) in the time immediately preceding Christ’s Second Coming. While the first three chapters are viewed as relating to the apostolic church, the last nineteen leap forward to the end of the age. Many futurists seek to discern particular meanings behind the symbols in the book, diligently comparing them to many of the Old Testament passages from which the images are drawn, not content to merely ascertain the big picture.

A graphic comparison of these views may be helpful:

View	Rev 1-3	Rev 4-19	Rev 20-22
Idealist	Historic churches	Symbolic of the conflict between good and evil	Symbolic of the triumph of good
Preterist	Historic churches	Symbolic of contemporary conditions in John’s time	Symbolic of heaven and the Lord’s ultimate triumph
Historicist	Historic churches	Symbolic of historical events through the ages	Final judgment; eternal state

Futurist	Historic churches; seven stages of church history for the more imaginative	Future tribulation; judgment on the Antichrist and all apostasy; culminating with Christ's Second Coming	Millennium; final judgment; eternal state
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Millennial Views:

Differences in millennial views relate to the understanding of Revelation 20:1-6, which speaks of believers reigning with Christ a thousand years, and to the chronological relation of this passage with Revelation 19:11-21, which describes Christ's Second Coming and His complete victory over the forces of evil opposing Him. Is the thousand-year period described in Revelation 20 literal or figurative? Do the events of Revelation 20 chronologically follow those described in Revelation 19, or does Revelation 20 introduce another cycle of the book which describes God's judgment leading up to the Lord's return.

There are three major millennial views:

Postmillennialism Postmillennialists (postmils) believe that the reference to a thousand years in Revelation 20 speaks figuratively of a long interval of time that precedes the Second Coming of Christ. This perspective holds that the gospel will spread throughout the world in this present age and will usher in a golden age of peace on earth followed by Christ's return. The basic tenets of this view include:

- **Nature of the Kingdom** The kingdom of God is primarily a present reality; it is the rule of Christ in the hearts of people.
- **Widespread Preaching of and Response to the Gospel** Postmils expect a wide-ranging conversion of people from every nation on the earth prior to Christ's return. Not everyone will be converted, but a great multitude from every walk of life and every nation will come to faith. Many postmils also expect that a large number of Jewish people will be included in this worldwide awakening on the basis of Romans 11:25-26.
- **Nature of the Millennium** There will be a very long period of earthly peace called the millennium. This is not a literal thousand-year period, just a lengthy span of time. God's kingdom will grow gradually as the gospel is preached around the world. While premils expect a dramatic and radical in-breaking of Christ's visible rule on earth, postmils see the kingdom spreading as the gospel is preached and the millennium resulting from the spread of righteousness. For postmils, the millennium differs from the present age only in degree.
- **Final Rebellion** At the end of the millennium, there will be a time of apostasy and a flare up of evil in connection with the coming of the Antichrist. Evil will be shown to be what it truly is and God's just punishment will be seen as eminently deserved.
- **Return of Christ** The millennium will end with the personal, bodily return of Christ followed immediately by the resurrection and judgment of all people, both righteous and

unrighteous, and their assignment to heaven or hell.

Amillennialism Literally, amillennialism means “not [no] millennium”. Amillennialists (amils) do not reject the teaching of the millennium, just the millennium as envisioned by premils and postmils. Most amils hold that the millennium is a figurative reference to the reign of Christ, and of believers with Him, in the present age (between the Lord’s first and second comings). In essence, the millennium is being realized now.

The first resurrection of Revelation 20:4 refers either to Christians who have died and are with Christ in heaven or to life in Christ which starts with the new birth. Amils believe that Satan has been bound (as referred to in Rev 20) through the triumph of Christ in His crucifixion and resurrection. Unlike postmils, amils do not believe that actual earthly conditions will get better and better. Sin will run its course and Christ will return to judge the world and usher in the eternal state, including the new heavens and the new earth.

Some basic tenets of amillennialism include:

- ***Second Coming as Inaugurating the Eternal State*** The Second Coming of Christ will inaugurate the eternal state for both believers and unbelievers. There will be no transitional state – the millennium envisioned by the premils. The Second Coming sets in motion a number of events in close sequence – a general resurrection of both believers and unbelievers, the transformation of living believers (1 Cor 15:51-52), the rapture or catching up of Believers to welcome the descending Lord to earth (1 Thess 4:16-17), final judgment of both believers and unbelievers (Mt 25:31-46), and the ushering in of the eternal order.
- ***Millennium as Symbolic*** The thousand-year period mentioned in Revelation 20 is symbolic, not literal. The reference is not a temporal matter at all. Furthermore, the two resurrections mentioned in Revelation 20:4-6 do not, as premils contend, require an intervening millennium. Most amils understand the first resurrection as spiritual and the second as physical. Some see both as spiritual.
- ***Figurative interpretation of Old Testament prophecies*** Old Testament prophecies are interpreted less literally than premils. These prophecies are interpreted as fulfilled in the history of the church or in the eternal state rather than in a literal, seven-year tribulational period or during a millennial reign of Christ.
- ***Interpretation of Revelation*** The typical amil approach to Revelation is one of progressive parallelism. They believe that Revelation consists of seven sections which run parallel to each other, each depicting the church and the world between the times of Christ’s first and second comings. These sections typically are as follows:
 - Rev 1-3 Seven lampstands – Messages to the churches;
 - Rev 4-7 Seven seal judgments;
 - Rev 8-11 Seven trumpet judgments;
 - Rev 12-14 Seven signs of conflict – Description of key spiritual players behind the unfolding drama;
 - Rev 15-16 Seven bowl judgments;
 - Rev 17-19 Victory and judgment of Christ – Fall of the earthly order, the dragon, and the beasts;
 - Rev 20-22 New heavens and the new earth – Completion of Christ’s victory over His

enemies and the ushering in of the eternal state.

In this treatment, there is a progression. Revelation 1-11 describes the struggle on earth, picturing the church persecuted by the world. Revelation 12-22 gives the deeper spiritual background of this struggle, describing the persecution of the church by Satan and his henchmen.

- ***Points of Congruence with Other Schools*** Amils and postmils hold many things in common in their approach to Revelation, even to claiming the same significant church figures as adherents. Both oppose (actually, are put off by) the literalness and eschatological exuberance of the premils. However, amils do not anticipate a worldwide growth of righteousness as do the postmils and generally lack the optimism of postmils. They actually share the pessimistic outlook of the premils and a belief in the “immanence” of Christ’s Second Coming (i.e. that the Lord could return at any time – there are no major events of long duration to be fulfilled prior to His return). But while they share this sense of immanence, amils are noticeably less preoccupied with “signs of the times” that are premils.

Premillennialism Premillennialists (premys) believe that Christ will personally return to initiate the visible manifestation of His kingdom; that the righteous dead will be raised and join the living believers reigning with the Lord on earth for a thousand years (usually understood as a literal time period); that subsequent to this reign there will be a final rebellion that will be immediately suppressed, the wicked judged, and the eternal state inaugurated. There are two main camps in premillennialism: pre-tribulationism (or dispensational premillennialism) and post-tribulationism (or historic premillennialism, so-called because of its affinity to the chiliasm of the early Fathers like Irenaeus).

Pre-tribulationists (pre-tribbers) believe that God will completely restore the national Israel through a literal seven-year period called the Great Tribulation, which, according to pretribbers, is described in detail in Revelation 4-19. They sharply distinguish God’s dealings with Israel and His dealings with the church. Dispensational premils believe that the church will be raptured (*rapturo* is Latin for caught up – translating the Greek verb in 1Thess 4:17) before the period of the tribulation described in Revelation. They believe that the events of the Great Tribulation are used of God to bring Israel to Himself and to inaugurate His millennial reign on earth. Mid-Tribulationism (the church won’t be raptured until the middle of the tribulation) and partial raptureism (only the “godly” part of the church will be raptured) are variations of this approach.

Post-tribulationists (post-tribbers) do not make sharp distinctions between God’s dealings with Israel and God’s dealings with the church. They teach that the people of God will be on earth during the entire tribulation period after which Christ will come in triumph to judge His enemies and to inaugurate His visible reign on earth.

Basic tenets of premillennialism include:

- ***Two physical resurrections in Rev 20:4-6*** Revelation 20:4-6 is something of a watershed passage for millennial views. Here, the apostles and those given authority to judge and the righteous martyrs are described as coming to life and reigning with Christ for a thousand years. In pertinent part, the text states:

“They came to life (ezesan) and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

5 (The rest of the dead did not come to life (ezesan) until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy are those who have a part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them ...”

Premils insist that the two resurrections referred to are bodily in nature and of different groups of people separated by an interval of time (the thousand years of the millennium). They point out that the same word (indeed, the same form and tense of the same word – ezesan) is used in both references and insist that the word used elsewhere refers to a physical resurrection. While it is possible in principle for one or both resurrections to be spiritual, there needs to be some clue in the literary context to suggest this. Premils see nothing in the context to indicate that the two resurrections are different in kind. In addition, they think that the passage also implies that those who participate in the first resurrection do not participate in the second, for the passage makes a contrast between those raised at the beginning of the millennium and those raised at the end.

Amils argue that the language concerning the second death in 20:6 suggests a contrast between the first and second death, the first being bodily and preliminary and the second being spiritual and final. Likewise, they reason, the first and second resurrections are preliminary and ultimate as well, only this time, the first is spiritual and the second is physical. Amils insist that a single physical resurrection precedes a single general judgment.

- ***Nature of the Millennium*** Although there are important variations, premils view the millennium as having certain common elements:
 - Jesus Christ will have absolute control. Overt opposition will be confined or eliminated.
 - It will be a period of truly righteous rule. Torah on the heart as taught in the Sermon on the Mount will be experiential reality.
 - Christ’s reign will be a political reality, ushering in worldwide peace.
 - In its character, the millennium will be clearly distinct from the rest of history.
 - There will be harmony in nature. All hostility within the forces of nature and among its creatures will cease.
 - The saints will reign with Christ. Faithfulness in small things in this age, renders opportunities to co-labor with God on a larger page in the next age.

- ***Israel and the Millennium*** Premils see a significant moving of the Spirit of God among the physical descendants of Abraham in the End Times. But with this general description, agreement ends.
 - Pre-tribbers (dispensational premils) hold that the millennium itself will have an essentially Jewish flavor and that there will be a virtual restoration of the Old Testament economy (understood as fulfilled in Christ). According to this perspective, when God has accomplished His purpose with the church (His New Testament people), He will renew His concern for national Israel. In the millennium, God will restore national Israel to a favored place in His program and will fulfill each of His prophetic promises to Israel. Thus, from this perspective, passages like Ezekiel 40-48 are to be literally fulfilled (e.g. in the building of a millennial temple).
 - Post-tribbers (historic premils) place little emphasis on national Israel, believing that the prophecies and promises to Israel are fulfilled in the church. However, most post-tribbers see a significant awakening among the Jewish people at the end of the age on the basis of

such texts as Rom 11:25-26.

Guiding Concepts

Sovereignty of God Revelation conveys a sense of the majestic sovereignty of God as no other book in the New Testament. The vision of God on His throne and the worship which is His due is an immense help in getting believers beyond our own immediate circumstances to a new understanding of the Lord of heaven and earth. It reminds us that it is God alone who rules, he alone who disposes. It is God alone who is worthy of our devotion and praise. It is God alone who will ultimately deal with human sin and who will bring to consummation the salvation of those who are His own and the final judgment which is His alone to render.

Eschatology Nowhere in the Bible are we given a more detailed description of the events of the end of the age. Revelation reminds us of the reality and severity of evil forces active throughout history and in the world today. Knowing how history ends helps us fit into it. A proper understanding of the focus of Eschatology thrusts us to the present to live godly lives in Christ Jesus now in expectation and hope of our full and complete deliverance in the future (see 1 Jn 3:2-3).

High Christology Jesus Christ is portrayed throughout the book, from the opening vision (1:12-20) to His triumphant return (19:11-16), in terms only appropriate to God. He is called the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the ruler over the kings of the earth (1:5), the First and the Last (1:17), the Living One (1:18), the Son of God (2:18), the holy and true (3:7), the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the ruler of God's Creation (3:14), the Lion of the tribe of Judah (5:5), the root of David (5:5; 22:16), the Lamb (5:6), Faithful and True (19:1), the Word of God (19:13), the King of kings and Lord of lords (19:16), and the Bright and Morning Star (22:16). Both God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ are called "the Alpha and the Omega" (compare 1:8; 22:13). John makes it clear that the sovereign God is accomplishing His purposes on earth through the Son, very God Himself.

Portrait of Evil Revelation charts a glaring portrait of evil. It contains no hint that the world at large will improve or that all people will turn to God in repentance and faith. The depiction of human civilization at the close of the age is one that is highly prosperous, culturally advanced, grossly unjust, and thoroughly materialistic and godless (18:2ff). The last act of unredeemed humanity is armed rebellion against the rightful Sovereign of the universe (20:7-10). The final doom of sin is described in a way that makes your skin crawl (20:15), but the justice of which is indisputable.

Perhaps evil's most prominent and deceitful characteristic is its Satanic counterfeits of God Himself and of His church. Satan, the beast, and the false prophet form an unholy trio that counterfeits the Holy Trinity. Note the following parallels:

- The beast is the image of Satan (13:1ff) as Christ is the perfect image of God (Col 1:15);
- The beast wears many foul crowns (13:1) as Christ wears many worthy ones (19:12);
- The beast is empowered by the dragon (13:2) just as Christ has power and authority from the Father (12:10; Jn 5:21-23);
- The beast counterfeits Christ's resurrection (13:3) and usurps Christ's rightful position as the object of human worship (13:4, 8);
- The beast wars against the saints (13:7) as Christ wars with the saints against the godless (19:11-21);
- Babylon the great harlot counterfeits the bride of Christ (17:1ff) complete with a false ministry

(the false prophet) and a godless idolatry that makes a mockery of true worship.

Apocalyptic Revelation belongs to the category of apocalyptic literature. Such literature is characterized by

- Symbolic language, dreams, and visions;
- Intense despair over the present circumstances and pervasive hope of future divine intervention;
- Celestial powers (angels and demons) as messengers and agents working out God's purposes; and
- The catastrophic judgment of the wicked and the supernatural deliverance of the righteous.

Most of Revelation's imagery is derived from the Old Testament prophetic books. The outlook of this type of literature is pessimistic in the sense that the world, in itself, is hopelessly lost and corrupt. The book calls the people of God to persevere and sinners to repent for the old age is groaning to a close and a divine cataclysm will usher in a new age which is completely different.

Restoration Note the parallels between the first three (Gen 1-3) and the last three (Rev 20-22) chapters of the Bible:

Gen 1-3

God created the heavens and earth (1:1)
Darkness he called night (1:5)
God made the sun and moon (1:16)
Death comes with eating of the tree (2:17; 3:19)
Satan appears as humanity's deceiver (3:1)
Garden of Eden defiled (3:6-7)
Walk of God with people interrupted (3:8-10)
Initial triumph of the serpent (3:13)
Sorrow greatly multiplied (3:16)
Cursed is the ground (3:17)
Adam's dominion broken (3:19)
Eden closed and people barred (3:23-24)
Access to the tree of life denied (3:24)
People driven from God's presence (3:24)

Rev 20-22

New heavens and new earth (21:1)
There is no night there (21:25)
No need of sun or moon (21:23)
There shall be no more death (21:4)
Satan disappears forever (20:10)
City of God never defiled (21:27)
Dwelling with people resumed (21:3)
Ultimate triumph of Lamb (21:3; 22:3)
No more sorrow (21:4)
No more curse (22:3)
Christ's dominion restored (22:5)
Paradise open and people welcomed (21:24-25)
Access to tree reinstated (22:14)
They shall see His face (22:4)

Significance of Numbers A distinctive feature of Revelation is the frequent numbers, seemingly with symbolic significance. The number seven appears over 50 times and is often understood as symbolic of completeness. Revelation has seven beatitudes (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14), seven churches (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14), seven spirits of God (1:4; 4:5), seven golden lampstands (1:12; 4:5), seven stars (1:16), seven seal judgments (5:1; 6:1, 3, 5, 7, 12; 8:1), seven trumpet judgments (8:6, 7, 8, 10, 12; 9:1, 13; 11:15), a Lamb with seven horns and eyes ((5:6), seven thunders (10:3), seven bowl judgments (16:1, 2-4, 8, 10, 12, 17), seven signs (12:1, 3; 13:13-14; 15:1; 16:14; 19:20), a dragon with seven crowns (12:3), seven hills (17:9), seven kings (17:10), and a number of other sevens as well. The numbers four and twelve figure prominently also. There are four living creatures (4:6), four horsemen (6:1-8), four angels (9:14), as well as multiples of four such as the twenty-four elders (4:4) and the one hundred and forty-four thousand of the redeemed (7:4; 14:1).

There are twelve gates with twelve pearls to the city of God (21:12), twelve foundations with the names of the Lord's twelve apostles (21:14), and twelve kinds of fruit on the tree of life (22:2). Other numbers beg for interpretation, including the number ten and the notorious 666 (13:18). The speculations of the numerologists have been with the people of God since the early days of the interpretation of this book.

Summary Outline Revelation: God on His Throne

The Guided Tour notes take an amillennial approach to interpreting Revelation. The chart below presents a common amillennial outline of the book.

Son of Man Letter to the Churches	Heavenly Throne First to Sixth Seals Interlude Seventh Seal	Prayers of the Saints First to Sixth Trumpets Interlude Seventh Trumpet	Woman & Child Dragon & War Beasts Lamb & His People Harvesting Angels	Vision of Plagues Seven Bowls of Wrath	Harlot & Beast Babylon Feast of the Lamb Second Coming	Judgment New Heavens & Earth River, Tree, Invite
1 2-3	4-5 6 7 8	8 8-9 10-11	12 13 14	15 16	17 18 19	20 21 22
Vision 1 Seven Lamps	Vision 2 Seven Seals	Vision 3 Seven Trumpets	Vision 4 Seven Signs of Conflict	Vision 5 Seven Bowls of Wrath	Vision 6 Judgment & Victory of the Lamb	Vision 7 New Heavens & New Earth