

# THE INTERPRETATION OF THE REVELATION

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## INTRODUCTION

Has any book of the Bible been subject to such diverse interpretations as the book of Revelation?! It seems to stand in a league of its own. Certainly there is no book of the New Testament around which such distinct systems of interpretation have developed.<sup>1</sup> Why is this so? An evident partial cause is the prophetic-apocalyptic genre of the book, which involves much symbolism: hence, there is continual debate as to the degree to which we should interpret it literally or figuratively. Additionally, because of the book's place as the "capstone" of Bible prophecy, and indeed of all Scripture,<sup>2</sup> one's interpretation of the rest of Scripture and one's accompanying presuppositions (especially regarding the Millennium) play a pivotal role in determining one's interpretation of the Revelation. Nor is it insignificant that the book was addressed to the servants of Jesus Christ (1:1): the many attempts by unsaved theologians to unlock its truths have only produced greater confusion. As a result of its perplexities, some have avoided the book altogether (such as Calvin<sup>3</sup>), and others should have done so. Nevertheless, it was clearly written to be understood (1:3; 22:10). Are there no certain paths to understanding, no keys to unlock its truth?

The immensity of the scope of this topic must quickly become evident to anyone who attempts a study of it. The brevity of this paper will only allow a short overview of the wide panorama of Revelation interpretation—a mere introduction to the subject—with the writer's attempts to offer what he hopes are spiritually enlightened insights, derived both from his own study and the works of others.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Non-Pauline Epistles*, Vol. 3 of *An Introduction to the New Testament* (1981; repr., Waynesboro, GA: Gabriel Publishing, 2003), 263; John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>3</sup> Walvoord, 15.

## PRESUPPOSITIONS IN INTERPRETATION

## Millennial view

Although it is mentioned only in Rev. 20:1-7, the Millennium (specifically what one already believes about it) has been a crucial deciding factor in how one interprets the rest of the book. There are three broad categories in this regard: premillennialism, postmillennialism and amillennialism.

It is generally acknowledged by fair and capable scholars of all persuasions that the earliest Christians were premillennial.<sup>4</sup> E. B. Elliott, a well-respected scholar, writes in his commentary, “All primitive expositors, except Origen and the few who rejected Revelation, were premillennarians.”<sup>5</sup>

In the third century the Alexandrian school, led by Origen, “the vehement opponent of Millenarianism [belief in a literal, future 1000-year Millennium],”<sup>6</sup> developed a spiritual or allegorical approach to Revelation that allowed them to avoid accepting a literal 1000-year reign of Christ on the earth. They were influenced by Greek thought and seeking to oppose the excesses of Montanism. Augustine followed in this path, and thus the doctrine of *amillennialism* became predominant for the next millennium,<sup>7</sup> and is still widely accepted today. According to Hiebert, modern amillennialists see the millennium as “representative of the blessedness of Christian experience now, or ... possibly represent[ing] the intermediate state of the blessed dead.”<sup>8</sup>

Postmillennialism arose after the Reformation, when the seemingly glorious progress of mankind and the Gospel appeared to offer bright hopes for mankind *before* the return of Jesus Christ. According to this view, the Millennium has already begun.<sup>9</sup> It teaches

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<sup>4</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *I Corinthians – Revelation*, vol. V of *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 879. Dr. McGee provides numerous quotes to support this point. Also see Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 24.

<sup>5</sup> E. B. Elliott, *Horæ Apocalyptice* [5th ed., (London: Seeley, Jackson and Halliday, 1862)?], 4:310.

<sup>6</sup> Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 323.

<sup>7</sup> Mounce, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Hiebert, 268. Mounce gives this (clearly amillennial) explanation of Rev. 20:1-7: “the essential truth of the passage is that the martyrs’ steadfastness will win for them the highest life in union with God and Christ” (369). He attempts to avoid the stigma of allegory, preferring to attribute this to a “distinction between form and content” (370), which seems to this writer nothing more than intellectual-sounding evasion.

that “the triumph of the gospel over the nations will introduce the reign of peace that will endure until Christ returns in final judgment.”<sup>10</sup> In different forms, postmillennialism was widely adopted both by liberal and “biblical” theologians;<sup>11</sup> it reached its climax toward the beginning of the twentieth century, before the second world war shattered their illusions. However, in recent decades the “biblical” form has experienced a reviving through the Christian Reconstructionist movement.

Each of these views is associated with particular schools of interpretation, as will be seen below. The millennial presupposition with which a scholar approaches Revelation is a strong determining factor as to what school he will join (the reverse does not seem to be true).

#### Interpretational method

There is a fierce controversy over the degree to which the book of Revelation should be interpreted literally. Walvoord speaks for conventional premillennialism when he writes, “The author has assumed that this book should be interpreted according to the normal rules of hermeneutics rather than as a special case.... Instead of assuming that the interpretation should be nonliteral unless there is proof to the contrary, the opposite approach has been taken.”<sup>12</sup> Premillennialists acknowledge the abundance of symbolic imagery in the book, but they believe it represents literal things, and is not exclusive of literal interpretation. For example, while there is clear symbolic significance in the number seven, that does not exclude the fact that the Revelation was addressed to seven literal churches existing at that time.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, many Bible scholars, including certain “hermeneutics authorities,”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, “A Preterist View of Revelation” in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 82.

<sup>10</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985).

<sup>11</sup> C. Marvin Pate, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 20-21.

<sup>12</sup> Walvoord, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Walvoord writes that “by the use of this number (which speaks of completion or perfection) the concept is conveyed that these were representative churches which in some sense were complete in their description of the normal needs of the church” (28).

<sup>14</sup> Gentry refers to Milton Terry as a “hermeneutics authority” at least three times (twice in one sentence on p. 38, and once on p. 82), presumably to bolster more support for his position.

espouse a principle precisely opposite: “We suggest that a better maxim in interpreting apocalyptic [Revelation] is ‘Start out with the assumption that a given statement or image is figurative rather than literal.’”<sup>15</sup> Milton Terry claims that “a rigid literal interpretation of apocalyptic language tends to confusion and endless misunderstandings.”<sup>16</sup> They ridicule the idea that the locusts of Rev. 9 are actually demons, or that New Jerusalem will be in the shape of an immense cube.<sup>17</sup>

In reply, we would quote Terry’s own words:

The allegorical method [habitually] disregard[s] the common signification of words, and give[s] wing to all manner of fanciful speculation. It does not draw out the legitimate meaning of an author’s language, but foists into it whatever the whim or fancy of an interpreter may desire. As a system, therefore, it puts itself beyond all well-defined principles and law.<sup>18</sup>

While Terry and others argue that prophecy demands such an interpretational approach, we find the result of their method to be precisely that which Terry describes (an example from Terry’s own work will be given later): fanciful, inconsistent, subjective and confusing. In contrast, while no interpreter can avoid certain difficulties (in any genre of Scripture), a literal presupposition yields results far more consistent and objective. A comparison of OT prophecies with their NT fulfillments provides a very strong argument, because we can see one literal fulfillment after another, even in places where one might have assumed a figurative sense (consider the literal fulfillments of Ps. 22:1, 7-8, 16-18, 22—in poetry, no less!). No one is denying figurative language (see Ps. 22:6, 12, 14), but it should never be our default.<sup>19</sup> This presupposition will dramatically affect one’s interpretation of the book of Revelation.

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<sup>15</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 550. They argue that “ascribing literalism to [Revelation’s] numbers, proper nouns, and other images may actually prevent a proper understanding of John’s intended meaning.”

<sup>16</sup> Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Apocalypics: A Study of the Most Notable Revelations of God and of Christ* (1898; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 22, quoted in Gentry, 39-40.

<sup>17</sup> Gentry, 40. Why should these things be thought incredible with God?

<sup>18</sup> Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 164.

<sup>19</sup> Roy B. Zuck [*Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Springs: Victor Books, 1991)] offers six helpful guidelines for distinguishing literal and figurative language (146). His chapter “Interpreting Prophecy” adds further useful thoughts, especially pp. 241-49.



## SCHOOLS OF INTERPRETATION

## Historicist

The historicist school views the whole book of Revelation as “outlin[ing] in symbolic form the entire course of history of the church from Pentecost to the advent of Christ.”<sup>20</sup> Joachim of Flores, in the twelfth century, is supposed to have had an important role in promoting this view, but it became very popular during the Reformation period, “because of its identification of the pope and the papacy with the beasts of Revelation 13.”<sup>21</sup> Leading reformers such as Wycliffe and Luther espoused it; well-known scholars like Joseph Mede and Isaac Newton; and commentators like John Gill and Matthew Poole. However, this view has glaring deficiencies.

For one thing, it is often said that there are nearly as many interpretations as commentators: a quick comparison of Gill and Poole on Rev. 12 illustrates the point. Moses Stuart (a preterist) provides many entertaining examples in his commentary.<sup>22</sup> Such a lack of agreement leads one to concur with Walvoord that, “if the historical method is the correct one, it is clear until now that no one has found the key.”<sup>23</sup> The obvious subjectivity and disparate results of this approach manifest the eisegesis involved. Additionally, it is difficult to understand the purpose for which the Holy Spirit would give so much prophecy irrelevant and incomprehensible to the majority of the readers. Not surprisingly, Pate writes that the historicist school has now “passed from the scene.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Tenney, 386.

<sup>21</sup> Walvoord, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse*, vol. 2 (Andover: Allan, Morrill and Wardwell, 1845). Consider this excerpt concerning the identity of the two witnesses (pp. 219-20): “(a) They are the O. and N. Testament; so Melchior, Affelman, and recently Croly. (b) They mean *all* preachers instructed by the Law and the Gospel; so Pannonius and Thomas Aquinas. (c) Christ and John the Baptist; Ubertinus. (d) Pope Sylvester and Mena, who wrote against the Eutychians; Lyranus and Ederus. (e) Francis and Dominic, the respective heads of two orders of monks; quoted in Cornelius a Lapide. (f) The great *wisdom* and *sanctity* of the primitive preachers; Alcassar. (g) John Huss and Luther; so Horzoff. Others; John Huss and Jerome of Prague. (h) The Waldenses and Albigenses; and the Apocalypticist names *two*, because of the Law and the Gospel, and also with respect to such *pairs* in sacred history as Moses and Aaron, Elijah and Elisha, Joshua and Zerubbabel; he had also his eye upon John Huss and Jerome of Prague; Vitringa. Andrew Fuller also supposes the two witnesses are the Waldenses and Albigenses...” Nor are these all the examples!

<sup>23</sup> Walvoord, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Pate, 19.

## Idealist

This view seems identical with that called the *allegorical* or *nonliteral* by Walvoord.<sup>25</sup> It descends directly from Origen and the Alexandrian school, and is growing increasingly popular today with the resurgence of amillennialism. According to Mounce, it views Revelation as “a theological poem setting forth the ageless struggle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness.”<sup>26</sup> Well-known idealists include Milligan, Lenski,<sup>27</sup> Hendriksen and Hoekema. Leon Morris seems to this writer to fall within this category also (*contra* Hiebert<sup>28</sup>).

Besides an *a priori* commitment to amillennialism, some are led to this view because of how enigmatic Revelation seems. Thus M’Clymont concludes, “The safest and probably the truest interpretation of the book is to regard it as a symbolic representation of great principles rather than as a collection of definite predictions.”<sup>29</sup> However, recent publications have shown just how subjective this approach too can be, divorced as it is from any historical reality. Pate notes two recent idealist commentaries with new twists: Paul Minear views the book as a warning to Christians of “the enemy within—‘the false Christian’”; and liberationist and feminist theologians are making use of it to promote their agendas (as in Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*).<sup>30</sup>

While all schools of interpretation would agree that Revelation portrays great principles, there is great danger in cutting it off from its historical and prophetic reality—the dangers inherent in all spiritualization. The book can thus be made to say anything ... which means it really says nothing.

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<sup>25</sup> Walvoord, 16. He gives Augustine’s *City of God* as an example, depicting the conflict between it and the “City of Satan” (17).

<sup>26</sup> Mounce, 28.

<sup>27</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation* (1943; repr., n.p.; Hendrickson, 1998), 25. He gives this perspective: “As far as the writer is able to see, the visions, from the first to the last, present lines or vistas. These start at various points, but like radii or rays all focus upon the final judgment and the eternal triumph.... Times and seasons are not for us (Acts 1:7) but the sure triumph, glorious over and amid them all, is.” To his credit, Lenski does seem to have a high regard for the Scriptures.

<sup>28</sup> Hiebert, 279. He says Leon Morris “combines the preterist and futurist views.”

<sup>29</sup> James Alexander M’Clymont, *The New Testament and Its Writers* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1892), 155.

<sup>30</sup> Pate, 25. He writes, “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” (24).

## Preterist

The first member of the preterist school is supposed to have been the Jesuit Alcazar around 1600.<sup>31</sup> It views the book strictly in relation to its own time,<sup>32</sup> with its prophecies predicting either the fall of Jerusalem (70 A.D.) or of Rome (476 A.D.).<sup>33</sup> It came to be associated particularly with postmillennialism, which teaches that the Millennium has already begun. Preterism was popular among liberal 20th century postmillennialists, such as James Moffat and R. H. Charles,<sup>34</sup> as well as “biblical” postmillennialists, like Milton Terry and Moses Stuart. The foremost contemporary defenders are the Christian Reconstructionists.<sup>35</sup>

Preterists such as Milton Terry and the Reconstructionists interpret nearly the entire book as being fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. They view the judgment of Israel as the central theme.<sup>36</sup> Of necessity, this requires that the book was written in the 60s, much earlier than the time traditionally assigned. Terry argues, with some appearance of validity, that Hebrews contains passages that clearly reference Revelation.<sup>37</sup> However, Beckwith extensively deals with the historical background of the book, and very convincingly maintains the traditional time of writing (approx. 96 A.D.).<sup>38</sup>

There are other major hurdles over which they must leap. One involves their identification of Babylon the Great with Jerusalem.<sup>39</sup> Also, they argue that Jesus’ promises to come quickly (22:7, 12, 20; cp. 1:1, 3) require *soon* fulfillment from *man’s* perspective,<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Mounce, 26; Walvoord, 17. Mounce says Alcazar even took Rev. 20 – 22 as describing the *present* state of the church, beginning with Constantine!

<sup>32</sup> Tenney, 386.

<sup>33</sup> Mounce, 27.

<sup>34</sup> Hiebert, 278, 279.

<sup>35</sup> Pate, 21. Kenneth Gentry is a Reconstructionist.

<sup>36</sup> Terry, *Hermeneutics*, 478; Gentry, 81, 87. Gentry sums up Rev. 6 - 11; 14 - 18 as God “put[ting] the harlotrous Jerusalem away by capital punishment” (87).

<sup>37</sup> Terry, *Hermeneutics*, 490-91. This is his strongest argument for an earlier date, in this writer’s opinion.

<sup>38</sup> Beckwith, 197-207.

<sup>39</sup> Rev. 17:18 describes the Harlot as “that great city which reigneth over the kings of the earth.” They compare 11:8, where Jerusalem is clearly called “the great city.” They contend that “earth” here (and in Matt. 24:30; and elsewhere in Rev.) should be “land,” and refers only to Palestine (Terry, *Hermeneutics*, 479). However, while such a translation is lexically possible, it is difficult to see how it makes sense. In what way could Jerusalem be said to rule over their Roman governors and the Herods? It seems rather that Jerusalem was under *their* rule. Rome is a much better fit.

<sup>40</sup> Gentry, 42. He writes, “A number of the historical, geographical, and political allusions in the

but their argument leaves one wondering why these churches in Asia Minor prior to A.D. 70 were so anxious for the destruction of the Jews and Jerusalem.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Jesus' *parousia* is inseparably tied to this judgment, so they face the crushing burden of proving that His second coming actually took place in the first century!<sup>42</sup> Supposedly this was also the beginning of the Millennium, when Satan was bound<sup>43</sup> (perhaps this was easier to swallow in the 19th century).

Besides the incredible nature of their claims, preterists also share with the historicists and idealists the problems brought on by rejecting literal interpretation of prophecy. This is well illustrated by Terry's interpretation of Rev. 12.<sup>44</sup> Finally, if it is true that John was writing to encourage believers about an event that was so soon fulfilled, one wonders why no one in the early church seems to have understood it that way: how in the world did they fall away into futuristic premillennialism?

#### Futurist

The futurist school of interpretation holds that Rev. 4 – 22 are eschatological. This view harmonizes with premillennialism and a literal approach to interpretation, and is seen among the earliest church fathers—in fact, it is interesting to note certain striking similarities between them and modern futurist interpreters.<sup>45</sup> Although there have

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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 only a 'little while longer' (6:10-11)."

<sup>41</sup> What was accomplished? According to Gentry (46), "God's wrath [was brought] on the Jews for rejecting their Messiah," the "old covenant era" was concluded, and the "typological sacrifice system" was closed down, freeing the believers from "all Jewish constraints." This begs the question: How did all of this bring such urgently awaited relief to the churches of Asia Minor? The fiercest days of persecution were yet future, and false teachers every bit as dangerous as the Judaizers would enter in among them. The preterist interpretation seems rather anticlimactic.

<sup>42</sup> Terry is left arguing that Jesus' coming was invisible to the eyes of men, and must be accepted by faith (see *Hermeneutics*, 447-48).

<sup>43</sup> Here Terry insinuates that demonic possession became a thing of the past (*Hermeneutics*, 488).

<sup>44</sup> Terry, *Hermeneutics*, 475-76. He writes: "By the woman . . . we understand the apostolic Church; the man-child . . . represents her children, the adherents and faithful devotees of the Gospel. [How is the church different from "her children"? One might think the distinction is meant to be temporal, but Terry later says the flight of *the woman* into the wilderness represents the flight of the believers at the siege of Jerusalem.] . . . Michael and his angels are but symbolic names of Christ and his apostles. The war in heaven was fought in the same element where the woman appeared [so heaven actually symbolizes the *earth*], and the casting out of demons by Christ and his apostles was the reality to which these symbols point."

<sup>45</sup> Beckwith, 321-22. For example, they looked for the coming of a literal Antichrist, of whom Antiochus Epiphanes was representative (Dan. 11); Hippolytus thought the two witnesses would be Elijah and Enoch; Victorinus believed the 144,000 would be Jews, "converted by the preaching of Elijah," and

been extreme positions within this school,<sup>46</sup> and each interpreter is bound to have certain unique viewpoints, there is a very great degree of consistency in interpretation—the natural result of a literal hermeneutic.

Perhaps the two most common arguments against this viewpoint are that it is *over-literal* to the point of misrepresenting John’s meaning (already briefly dealt with in this paper), and that it makes the book too irrelevant. Leon Morris writes, “This robs the book of all significance for the early Christians and, indeed, for all subsequent generations right up to the last.”<sup>47</sup> Such a charge makes this writer wonder if Morris has read any futurist commentaries (surely he must have)! Walvoord does an excellent job of addressing this accusation, pointing out that future prophecies occur frequently in the Bible accompanied with immediate applications (as in II Pet. 3:10-14).<sup>48</sup> In addition, the book of Revelation contains rich truths concerning Jesus Christ and the Trinity, and is immensely valuable for its anthropology and hamartiology, angelology, ecclesiology, eschatology and bibliology.<sup>49</sup> The futurist approach is far from marginalizing this wonderful book.

#### KEY TO INTERPRETATION

The Lord did not leave us without guidance in seeking to interpret His revelation. In the very first chapter John is given the key to understanding the structure of the book when commanded (1:19): “Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter.” This threefold division is as follows: Rev. 1, “the things which thou hast seen”; Rev. 2 - 3, “the things which are”; and Rev. 4 - 22, “the things which shall be hereafter.” This very clearly lays out what is eschatological.

Most futurist interpreters believe that “the things which are”—the letters to the seven churches—applies to the entire church age from John’s time to the Rapture in a

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espoused a *progressive parallelism* approach to the structure of the book. However, it should be noted that there were also many differences. Walvoord says that, although they were premillennial, “the early fathers did not in any clear or consistent way interpret the book of Revelation as a whole in a futuristic sense” (22).

<sup>46</sup> Hiebert (277) notes that E. W. Bullinger believed even the seven churches were future!

<sup>47</sup> Leon Morris, *The Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 20.

<sup>48</sup> Walvoord, 21-22.

<sup>49</sup> Partially drawn from Walvoord, 30-33.

threefold sense: “First, that the epistles were actually written to seven churches at the time existing in Asia. Second, that the epistles contain an unfolding of the condition of the Church in successive stages of its history. Third, that the epistles give a picture of seven conditions of Church life to be found continuously in the history of the Church of Christ.”<sup>50</sup> Although the second sense—that the churches represent seven ages in church history—seems to be decreasing in acceptance in recent times<sup>51</sup> (probably due to certain presuppositions<sup>52</sup>), it has the support of many excellent Bible scholars,<sup>53</sup> and this writer is firmly convinced of the truth of it.<sup>54</sup>

The commencement of the eschatological portion is made crystal clear by the words *meta tauta* in Rev. 4:1, as McGee explains:

After what things? After the church things. So in chapters 4–22 he is dealing with things that are going to take place after the church leaves the earth. The fallacy of the hour is reaching into this third section and trying to pull those events up to the present. This gives rise to the wild and weird interpretations we hear in our day. Why don’t we follow what John tells us? He gives us the past, present, and future of the Book of Revelation. He will let us know when he gets to the *meta tauta*, the “after these things.” You can’t miss it—unless you follow a system of interpretation that doesn’t fit into the Book of Revelation.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *A First Century Message to Twentieth Century Christians*, 3rd ed. (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1902), 11-12.

<sup>51</sup> Leon Morris says (57-58), “Such views are unlikely. It seems much more probable that the letters are letters to real churches, all the more so since each of the messages has relevance to what we know of conditions in the city named.” Apparently he has not done the cursory research necessary to realize that few (if any) proponents of the “seven ages” interpretation deny that the churches were real churches.

Thomas Ross, an Independent Baptist scholar, also attacks the view in an online article: “The Historical Ages Interpretation of the Church of Revelation Two and Three.” <http://faithsaves.net/historical-ages-interpretation-churches-revelation-two-three/> (accessed May 7, 2014).

<sup>52</sup> Those who reject the view generally seem to do so because of certain presuppositions: 1. Clearly it would not be acceptable to Roman Catholic or liberal Protestant scholars, for obvious reasons; 2. Present-day scholarship tends to reject the traditional, and to downplay the supernatural and magnify the human aspect in Scripture—this interpretation seems too unintellectual and unscholarly; 3. Baptist Briders dislike the broader significance of the word “church” here; 4. Others mistakenly believe it contributes to a “pessimistic,” anti-revival spirit (due to a misunderstanding of the interpretation).

The third presupposition (above) is clearly Thomas Ross’ greatest stumblingblock. As to his other points, historical exceptions do not deny the general aptness of characterization; and the differences in the details of interpretation among commentators are seen to be remarkably minor when compared to the attempts to read history into the eschatological portion of the book (as in the historicist approach).

<sup>53</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, a highly respected Bible student, quoted above, writes, “My own conviction is that all these [three senses] are true” (12). Others holding to it include John Gill, Matthew Poole, Johannes Cocceius, William Newell, H. A. Ironside, J. Dwight Pentecost, and many others (Thomas Ross names another thirty-one!).

<sup>54</sup> Seth A. Folkers, “The Seven Churches of Revelation: The Holy Spirit’s Viewpoint on Church History?” (undergraduate thesis, Louisiana Baptist University, 2013), 1-29. This paper contains a much more extensive defense of the position, explanation of its importance, and resources for further study.

<sup>55</sup> McGee, 883. In contrast, Mounce writes that “there are ... many futurists who ... believe that Rev. 4:1 represents no more than a change in the Seer’s perspective from earth to a position within the throne

## CONCLUSION

So much more could be said. Indeed, a whole book could be written on this subject (and at least one has been, for Tenney wrote a book called *Interpreting Revelation*). The goal in this brief paper has been to touch upon the most prominent factors in the interpretation of the Revelation.

The book of Revelation was written to be read, heard, understood and guarded (1:3; 22:10). Unfortunately, the multiplicity of perspectives on it have muddied the waters so much that many are left entirely perplexed as to how to interpret it: as a result they avoid it, and miss out on its rich blessings. Yet, as we have seen, the Lord provided a key at the very beginning—not hidden away, but quite open—that helps to unlock the interpretation. Illumined by the Holy Spirit, armed with a simple, straightforward hermeneutic, and diligently comparing Scripture with Scripture, the mysteries of Revelation are by no means impenetrable—and the blessing pronounced by our Lord in Rev. 1:3 can belong to each one of us.

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room of heaven.... This approach ... avoids the excessive literalism that often accompanies the dispensational approach” (28). But Mounce’s futurist credentials are highly questionable.





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