

UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF REVELATION SERIES

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# THE OVERCOMERS

Dr. Richard Booker

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DESTINY IMAGE® PUBLISHERS, INC.

P.O. Box 310, Shippensburg, PA 17257-0310

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ISBN 13 TP: 978-0-7684-3749-2

ISBN 13 Ebook: 978-0-7684-9006-0

For Worldwide Distribution, Printed in the U.S.A.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 /15 14 13 12 11

## Acknowledgments

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**T**O Peggy, my wife and covenant partner of more than 45 years, who has faithfully served the Lord with me with unselfish love and support. Whatever I have been able to accomplish is because of her sacrifices and servant's heart. There are many great women in the world, but Peggy surpasses them all. She is the best Christian I know and a true overcomer.

I also want to thank my friends at Destiny Image, especially Don Nori, for being faithful to his vision of "speaking to the purposes of God for this generation and for the generations to come."

I want to acknowledge two of my students: Angela James, who gave so much of her time editing the manuscript, and Mark Sessions, who prepared the map and charts. Thank you both for your excellent work.



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## Preface

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**W**HEN John was on the island of Patmos, the Lord gave him a revelation of Jesus, the exalted Son of Man, and of God's people overcoming satanic opposition and before the throne of God. In spite of tremendous persecution, John saw "in the Spirit" that the faithful followers of the Lord were victorious. They overcame satan by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony. Furthermore, John was given revelation to see the spiritual warfare in Heaven that was being played out on the earth. He saw the outcome of this spiritual battle as well as prophetic events that would take place in the endtimes before the coming of the Lord.

John saw that God would totally and completely destroy His enemies and resurrect His own people to live with Him forever in a new Heaven, a new earth and a New Jerusalem. Regardless of the trials and tribulations God's people must endure, our destiny is certain and sure. Jesus is returning, and we will rule and reign with Him in a world free of satan, sin, and death. In the challenging days ahead, believers can joyfully commit their souls to God, who is faithful to keep His Word of promise.

As John wrote at the end of his vision:

*And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:3-4).*

So the Book of Revelation is not a book of doom and gloom, but of the victory of the Lamb and those who follow Him. The purpose of the Lord's revelation to John was to unveil or disclose to him what John could not know without divine assistance. The Lord gave John his vision to encourage and comfort his immediate readers as well as believers throughout the ages. What eventually became the Book of Revelation was clearly intended to be understood by John and his first-century readers.

However, with the passage of time, this book that God intended for us to understand became, without a doubt, the most mysterious book in the Bible. For almost 2,000 years, Christian scholars and everyday believers have tried to understand its message. Because the Book of Revelation is an apocalyptic vision filled with otherworldly symbols and descriptions of strange creatures, God's people have not always agreed on its meaning. This has led to a number of different interpretations of John's words.

Since there are so many books written on John's revelation, with so many different interpretations, why would I feel burdened to add to the confusion? It was certainly not my intention to write a book on the Book of Revelation. With more than 30 other books in print, I was ready to take a break from book writing. I wrote this book because there is an urgent need to explain John's revelation with the following four points

of view that have not been adequately included in most commentaries on the Book of Revelation.

First, almost all books written to explain the Book of Revelation are written with a Western cultural worldview rather than a biblical worldview. There are some exceptions. What I mean by this is that the writer interprets the Book of Revelation through Western eyes rather than through the Hebraic eyes of a Middle Eastern person. John was not a Western theologian. He was a Jewish seer. This means that he understood and wrote his revelation in terms of his own history and culture. His history and culture is the Hebrew Bible—what Christians have always called the Old Testament. In this book, I prefer to use the phrase *Hebrew Bible*.

In order to understand the Book of Revelation, we must read it through the eyes of a Jewish man rather than through the eyes of a Western theologian. For example, when John sees Jesus in Heaven, he describes Him in Jewish terms, not Western Christian terms. To get the fullest meaning of John's vision of Jesus, we need to know Jesus, the Jewish "Son of Man." To John, Jesus is the "Cloud Man" of the Book of Daniel.

Second, since the Book of Revelation is the last book in the Bible, we must have a good understanding of all the other books in the Bible. We cannot understand the Book of Revelation if we do not have a good understanding of Genesis through Jude, as well as some basic knowledge of the literature written between the Testaments, and of Greek mythology. We must not read John's revelation as if it were written in modern times isolated from the rest of the Bible. The best way to understand the Book of Revelation is to begin with Genesis. For instance, when John explains the eternal home of believers in the last two chapters of the Book of Revelation, he assumes that the reader will be familiar with the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis.

Third, in order to understand the Book of Revelation, we must interpret it according to the type of literature John used in writing it.

John wrote the Revelation in an apocalyptic literary style. Apocalyptic literature flourished in the period of time in which John was writing. It has certain characteristics that John's readers readily understood. I explain these characteristics in Chapter 1. Because this is not a normal style of writing in our times, we have difficulty understanding and interpreting apocalyptic literature.

We have a tendency to interpret apocalyptic literature as if it were a literal story narrative, written chronologically like a Western textbook. Reading the Book of Revelation as a Western textbook can clearly lead us to wrong conclusions regarding John's statements. For example, when John says that he saw an open door into Heaven and heard a voice calling him to Heaven, he did not mean that he saw a literal door and was literally taken to Heaven. He meant that God opened his spiritual eyes so that he could see realities in Heaven that he would not know otherwise. Physically, John never left Patmos.

Fourth, to properly understand the Book of Revelation, we must know the historical context in which John wrote. Jesus gave John letters to write to seven literal congregations in the first century. Since the English word *church* means something different to modern readers than its biblical meaning, I use the word *congregation*, which is the more accurate meaning of the word. I could have used the words *assembly* or *community*. In a few instances, I use the word *Church* when referring to organized Christianity, such as the Roman Church or the Catholic Church. These congregations or communities were challenged every day to live out their new faith in a hostile environment in which their neighbors worshiped Greek gods and goddesses and Roman emperors, practiced gross immorality, and pressured them to compromise their faith and witness. They were faced with life-and-death decisions.

In addition, each of the cities where the seven congregations were located had their own unique physical circumstances that Jesus acknowledged in His letters. Without knowledge of their circumstances, spiritual and physical, it is impossible to understand why Jesus said what He

said to the different congregations. For instance, if we do not know that Laodicea had a drinking water problem, we cannot understand why Jesus preferred the believers to be cold or hot rather than lukewarm.

I have the greatest appreciation for scholars and ministers who have spent years studying the Book of Revelation and have labored to help us understand its mysteries. While I present points of view in this book that most ministers and everyday believers might not be familiar with, I do not intend to be critical of what others have written or believe. We must all walk in love and humility and be gracious to one another, especially if we see things differently.

You may be challenged by some of my explanations that are contrary to your preconceived ideas and traditional teachings. You may not agree with everything I have written, and that is OK. What I desire to accomplish is to glorify our Lord, to encourage God's people to be steadfast and faithful as we face challenging days ahead, and to provide a fresh, exciting, and more balanced understanding of the Book of Revelation. If I accomplish these goals, I would be most grateful to our Lord. May God's people be blessed and His name praised forever.

For ease of reading and understanding, the publisher has wisely organized my writing on the Book of Revelation into a three-volume series entitled *Understanding the Book of Revelation*. Volume One is entitled *The Overcomers*. This volume begins with three chapters that are necessary for us to understand the historical events that prompted the Lord to send His letters to the seven congregations. In order to properly understand the Revelation, we must know the context in which it was written. I have also included a chapter on the literary style in which the book was written as well as a survey of the Book of Revelation. I then explain the letters to the seven congregations within their historical, geographical, archeological and Hebraic context and perspective along with my view of their prophetic and personal significance. This background information is often missing or not adequately

explained in most books on the Revelation, but is critical to understanding the Revelation. Volume One covers Revelation 1-3.

Volume Two is entitled *The Lamb and the Seven-Sealed Scroll*. This volume opens up with John's vision of Heaven and the throne room of God. John sees the greatest drama in human history when the Lamb of God takes the seven-sealed scroll and opens the seals. I then explain the events that follow, including the opening of the first six seals, God's seal of protection, Israelites and Jews, the multitude of the redeemed, the opening of the seventh seal, the mighty angel and the little book, the two witnesses, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, and the war in Heaven and on Earth. Volume Two covers Revelation 4-12. We will learn along the way that the Book of Revelation actually ends with the close of Revelation 11. The rest of the information is an "instant replay" giving more details and different looks at the same information.

Volume Three is entitled *The Victorious Kingdom*. This volume includes an explanation of the two false messiahs, a preview of the end, preparing to blow the seventh trumpet-shofar, the blowing of the seventh trumpet-shofar, the destruction of the one-world religious and political systems, the second coming of Messiah, the Battle of Armageddon, the Messianic Kingdom, the New Heaven and New Earth and Paradise Restored. Volume Three covers Revelation 13-22.

These volumes are designed to be read along with the Book of Revelation. Each discussion in the text is keyed to a specific chapter and verse in the Book of Revelation. To get the most from the text, first read the information in the Book of Revelation, and then read my explanations and comments in the books.

As I have already said, the Revelation is not a book about doom and gloom. While there are many hard things to read and much suffering in the book, Revelation is a book about God's faithfulness to Himself, His Word, and His people. It is about God defeating His enemies, and His people overcoming by the blood of the Lamb and the Word of their testimony. The outcome is certain and victory is sure. As you read the

*Preface*

Revelation and this three-volume series, may the Lord encourage your heart that our God is sovereign over world conditions and is using them to move forward His awesome plan of redemption for His people. Do not be fearful in the dark days ahead. We will live with our Lord forever in the full manifestation of His blazing glory and dazzling beauty. We will look upon Him as He is, for we shall be like Him.

Let us make the following prayer from Jude 24-25 our own personal praise and worship to our God:

*Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling [falling], and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.*



## Chapter 1

# Understanding the Book of Revelation

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**O**F all the books in the Bible, the Book of Revelation has been the most challenging to understand. In fact, it is the only book in the Bible about which the great reformer John Calvin refused to write a commentary. Throughout history, scholars have debated its meaning and how it should be interpreted. Some see it as having been written only for the believers who lived at the time John received his revelation. Others see it as a prophetic outline of Church history. Other scholars understand it only as a symbolic book explaining the spiritual battle of good against evil. More recently, scholars have interpreted Revelation as a book explaining only end-time events.

When discussing the Book of Revelation, Christians today argue about how to interpret the book, the meaning of its symbols, the identity of the anti-Messiah, the meaning of 666, the timing of the rapture, the nature of the millennial reign of Jesus, the timing of the Lord's return, and just about everything else in the book.

Million-seller books and movies are based on end-time prophecies from the Book of Revelation. While these books and movies are very popular with the Christian public, they often fail to present the Hebraic and cultural roots, historical background, and audience of the Book of Revelation. So it is vital that we do our best to understand John's

words as his readers would have understood them. This may not be as exciting and sensational as the million-sellers, but this approach is more accurate.

The readers of John's message in the first century clearly understood what and who John was referring to in the symbols he used. But history and time and literary styles have obscured much of their meaning to us today. Christians need to realize that scholars who love the Lord and His Word have debated these subjects for centuries and come to different conclusions as to their meanings. This being the case, we should not think that we have all the answers and can explain ancient "other-worldly" visions and symbols with our fancy charts and diagrams.

We will continue to seek to understand the Book of Revelation and continue to disagree on much of what it means until Messiah comes. Because of this, we need to respect the views of others who have "seriously" studied the book and sought to understand it with sound scholarship and the help of the Holy Spirit.

We must not be arrogant and think we have all the answers, but rather present our views with a humble spirit and be open to considering the views of others. While it is good to share our insights, we certainly should not argue over our disagreements. Because that is all they are—disagreements. And we certainly should not make our views foundational doctrines that only divide us.

After all, the most important consideration in understanding the Book of Revelation is not that we all agree on the meaning of everything in the book. The most important consideration is that we understand that Jesus is Lord and King and Savior of all who put their trust in Him, and He is returning to establish His Kingdom on the earth. At that time, He will destroy evil, and His people will live with Him in a world of righteousness and peace.

Since this is the most important issue in the Book of Revelation, we should spend our time and energy learning how to prepare for His coming rather than arguing about things we don't clearly understand.

We should become great people of God and live as salt and light rather than great debaters who understand doctrine but don't love and serve people. With all this said, let's learn about the literary style of the Book of Revelation and see how scholars throughout history have sought to understand it. Let's do so with an open mind, a humble heart, and a teachable spirit. In other words, let's be willing to consider views that may be different from what we have always believed to be "the" one and only correct understanding of the Revelation.

## APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

In modern English, we have different types of literature such as technical documents, poems, fiction and nonfiction, etc. We realize that we don't interpret these different types of literature the same way. For example, we don't interpret a poem the same way we interpret a novel.

The Book of Revelation was written in a distinct literary style that is called "apocalyptic literature." Because this is not a normal literary style of writing in our modern era, we have difficulty understanding and correctly interpreting apocalyptic literature. However, it was a common style of writing in John's time, and people understood it and knew how to interpret it.

Apocalyptic literature as a writing style flourished in Jewish writings during times of great national distress. Its purpose was to encourage God's people that He had not forsaken them, and that in due time, He would judge their wicked oppressors and establish His Kingdom on the earth. In fact, in his book, *A Theology of the New Testament*, George Eldon Ladd calls apocalyptic literature "tracts for bad times."<sup>1</sup>

When the Jewish people were being persecuted and suffered at the hand of evil pagan rulers, they couldn't understand why God was allowing this to happen. Had He forsaken them? Was He really aware of their plight? Was He really the sovereign Lord over the evil rulers? Was He

going to do something to help them? And if so, how and when? We have the same questions today.

One of the ways spiritual leaders sought to encourage the people was to give them an assurance of God's deliverance through apocalyptic writings. The central theme of these writings was that their God was indeed Lord of the world, that He did know of their sufferings, that He was allowing it for His own reasons that they did not understand, and that He would judge the evil rulers, deliver the people from their plight, and establish His Kingdom on the earth.

Apocalyptic literature had common characteristics. First, these books claimed to be a revelation from God. In fact, the Greek word for *apocalypse* means revelation, disclosure, or unveiling. The writer claimed to be revealing something he learned supernaturally from God that he was passing on to the people to encourage them in their time of despair. This is why the Book of Revelation is also referred to as the *Apocalypse*. So John begins his writing with the phrase, "*The Revelation of Jesus Christ*" [Yeshua the Messiah].

Second, apocalyptic literature is symbolic. The writer uses cosmic journeys, mysterious creatures, supernatural beings, strange, frightening beasts, numerology, etc., to explain invisible divine mysteries in the heavens in human terms for those living on the earth. The symbols were not intended to be understood literally, but represented real events and personalities that the readers would understand in their times.

For example, when John mentioned that Jesus has a sharp two-edged sword in His mouth (see Rev. 1:16), he didn't mean that literally. He meant that Jesus was speaking the creative *rhema* Word of God, as we learn from Hebrews 4:12-13.

Third, apocalyptic literature emphasizes the supernatural means of receiving the message and the supernatural intervention of God in human history. This literature commonly includes the writer in a spiritual state being transported to Heaven, or having visions on the earth where he sees the throne of God, and angelic beings that reveal to him

the divine secrets and mysteries of the current political and religious situation on the earth. This includes God's future judgments and a new world order of God's Kingdom, with God's people being delivered from their suffering. All of these elements are in the Book of Revelation.

For example, in an apocalyptic book from the Apocrypha called First Enoch (1:9), we read that Enoch is taken by angels on a journey through the heavens and the realm of the dead. In the book, he relates what he saw and heard. In the Bible Book of Jude, the writer is actually referring to the book of Enoch and writes,

*Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men also, saying, "Behold the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints [angels], to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him" (Jude 14-15). (See also Deuteronomy 33:2; Matthew 16:27; 25:31.)*

In the Hebrew Bible, parts of the Books of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah are apocalyptic. These were difficult times when God's people were in exile in Babylon and struggling to reestablish themselves in Israel as well as looking into the future "last days."

Apocalyptic literature flourished in the period from Antiochus Epiphanes (164 B.C.) to the Bar Kochba revolt (A.D. 135) when Jews were suffering and fighting for their survival. Apocalyptic literature such as the Assumption of Moses, First Enoch, Fourth Ezra, the Apocalypse of Baruch and others, as well as Christian apocalyptic literature were plentiful and popular during the time that John wrote the Revelation. Believers were suffering at the hands of the Greeks and the Romans. They needed encouragement and assurance that God had not forsaken them and that righteousness would prevail. The point is that the people were familiar with the apocalyptic literary style and understood it.

While most of the Book of Revelation is apocalyptic, it also contains literal messages to seven literal congregations in Asia Minor (modern Western Turkey), and prophecy for our times. While it is a first-century book written to first-century believers, it is certainly appropriate for us today as believers face many of the same challenges. In fact, it seems like history is repeating itself. The central message is that God is in control of nations and world events, He will comfort His people in times of distress, and Jesus will return to Earth to judge the wicked and reward His own.

### INTERPRETING REVELATION— HISTORICAL VIEWS

Throughout history, scholars have incorporated four different views in interpreting the Book of Revelation. Let's review each one.

The first of these views is called *preterism*. This is a strange word that comes from a Latin word that means before, previously or past tense. This method of interpreting Revelation is called by this name because scholars who embrace it believe that the events described in the Book of Revelation were fulfilled in the first century. To these scholars, the Book of Revelation is a history book only. Naturally, this view stresses the historical background of the Book of Revelation. It does not view the Revelation as prophetic.

This view was first taught in the 1600s by a Jesuit priest named Luis de Alcazar (1554-1613). In his time, the Protestant reformers claimed that Babylon and the political and religious messiahs in the Book of Revelation pointed to the Catholic Church and their persecution of the reformers. People, including ourselves, have a tendency to interpret the Book of Revelation based on their own time and circumstances. Because the Catholic Church was so powerful, yet so worldly and corrupt, and so evil in persecuting the reformers, it is easy to see how the

reformers would identify the Beast of Revelation with the Catholic Church of their time. They were very successful in their presentation.

When Luis de Alcazar started teaching that the Book of Revelation was fulfilled in the first century and was not prophetic, he was countering the attack of the reformers against the Catholic Church. Since, in his view, the book was not prophetic, it couldn't be about the Catholic Church. In this way, he sought to nullify their attacks against the Catholic Church.

It is certainly true that John was writing to first-century believers to encourage them in their struggle against Rome. It was a time when worshiping the emperor was imposed on the people and believers who opposed it were martyred. We certainly must know this history in order to understand Revelation. But this view is self-serving and narrow with an agenda in that it only sees the Revelation as a history book with no prophetic significance throughout history or for the endtimes.

A second view of Revelation is called the *historical view*. This view interprets the Book of Revelation as a prophecy about the history of the organized Christian Church through time, from the first century to the return of Jesus.

In this approach, spiritual leaders of times past tried to identify specific nations, events, wars, and political and religious leaders in history with the Beast of Revelation, the symbols, the seals, the trumpets and the bowl judgments. The reformers clearly favored this view because they could identify the Beast with Rome and the political and religious system with the Catholic Church.

This is the view that has led to every generation claiming that the corrupt political leaders and religious leaders of their time were the ones John was writing about in the Revelation. Their conclusion was that they were the last generation and that the Lord would return in their lifetime.

While they were sincere in their attempts to understand the Revelation as it related to their time and circumstances, they always turned out wrong and could never rightly identify what person or events actually connected to those in the Revelation. Their conclusions always caused confusion because their speculations had to be far-fetched and constantly revised as they tried to identify events in history with the symbols in the Revelation. The anti-Messiah has been identified as everyone from Nero in the first century to Henry Kissinger in our times. This historical view might be more rightly called the *hysterical view* as it was constantly changing and causing confusion and turmoil.

Modern students of prophecy make the same error when they attempt to identify world leaders of our time with the Beast and False Prophet of Revelation. There are many in our day who have certain characteristics of those mentioned in the Revelation, and we should be alert to the signs of our times. But we must be cautious in saying, “This is that,” or claiming that every corrupt politician and religious leader is the Beast and/or the False Prophet.

The third view of interpreting Revelation is called the *symbolic view* or *allegorical view*. Simply put, this view teaches that the Book of Revelation does not in any way refer to literal events in history, but is an allegory of the conflict between good and evil throughout history.

This view began at the first Christian Seminary in Alexandria, Egypt, with the teachings of Clement of Alexandria and his famous student, Origen. These were Greek scholars who embraced Jesus but wanted to disconnect Christianity from its Jewish roots. The way they did this was to interpret the Bible allegorically, which was the Greek way of interpreting text. In other words, they did not interpret the Bible literally. When we interpret the Bible allegorically, we lose the plain sense of the text and can make the Bible mean whatever we want it to mean.

The Alexandrian School of scholars was anti-Semitic and taught replacement theology. They could not accept a Jewish Jesus returning to Earth to rule as the Greater Son of David over a restored Israel. The

allegorical view enabled them to “spiritualize” Revelation so that they would not have to accept a literal Messianic Kingdom of one thousand years.

Augustine (A.D. 354-430) proclaimed this view in his monumental work, *The City of God*. This was the view of the Christian Church world from the 5th century until the 16th century of the Puritans and Pilgrims who interpreted the Bible in its literal sense. While the Book of Revelation is filled with symbols which we are not to understand in their literal sense, they do represent literal events on the earth.

The fourth view of interpreting Revelation is called the *futurist view*. This is the view, and perhaps the only view, that most evangelical Christians today know about. In this view, Revelation is seen primarily as a book about the future. It is a book about Bible prophecy regarding the endtimes. Scholars who teach this view believe that everything after Revelation 4:1 to the end of the book is about end-time events just prior to and following the return of Jesus.

This is the view popularized by *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series. Since these books have been so influential, they have contributed to this view being held today by most evangelical Christians. This view understands that the first three chapters of Revelation were written to seven literal congregations in Asia Minor which also represent seven successive periods of Christian or “Church” history.

For example, Ephesus represents the apostolic Christian era that flourished from A.D. 33-100. Smyrna represents the persecuted Christian era from 100-312. Pergamos represents the compromising Christian era from 312-606. Thyatira represents the tolerant Christian era from 606-1517. Sardis represent the dead Christian era from 1517-1750. Philadelphia represents the faithful Christian era from 1750-1925. Finally, Laodicea represents the lukewarm Christian era from 1925 to the coming of the Messiah. However, there is really no solid reason for viewing the congregations of Revelation as representative of successive

Christian periods, because these types of congregations have existed in all periods of Christian history.

This view sees the believers as “caught up” or raptured and in Heaven in Revelation chapters four and five, with chapter six describing the beginning of end-time events on the earth. The futurist view is the most literal interpretation of the Revelation. It does try to make plain sense of the symbols, but runs the risk of understanding the symbols too literally. In other words, it does not adequately take into account the apocalyptic literary nature of the Revelation.

For example, there is no reason to believe that when John says that he was caught up into Heaven that this typifies the rapture of believers. John was not physically raptured to Heaven. John didn’t go anywhere. He had a spiritual vision on the island of Patmos. It is simply an apocalyptic way of expressing the divine origin of the Revelation. To say that he represents the Church is a fanciful imagination.

Which of these views is correct? They all have some element of truth. The challenge in embracing any one of the views is to think that it is the *only* view and that the others are to be criticized and ignored. We can learn from all of these views while not taking any of them to the extreme.

For example, it is important to learn as much as we can about the historical situation when John wrote the Revelation. But if we only view the Revelation as a history book, it has little or no relevance for us today. It is also helpful to understand how world history and Christian history have clashed through the ages. But this leads to prophetic speculation and confusion where we try to identify any and every world and religious leader with the frightening figures and symbols in the Revelation.

It is good to understand that the Revelation tells us about the war in Heaven between good and evil, the allegorical view. But the symbols were more than just an allegory. They represent real places, people, and events on the earth. The futurist view certainly helps us understand the

plain sense of the Revelation but, taken to an extreme, can read into the text too literal of an interpretation.

The best approach is to understand the Revelation as apocalyptic literature written to seven literal congregations at the close of the first century. The readers would have understood the meaning of the symbols for their time. While the events that John described were about a real historical conflict between Roman imperial cult worship and the believers in Western Asia, they also foreshadow the spiritual war between good and evil down through the ages that will culminate in the endtimes with the coming of the Lord, who will destroy evil and establish a literal Kingdom on the earth.

#### INTERPRETING REVELATION— END-TIME VIEWS

In addition to these four historical views of understanding the Revelation, there have been three different views of the endtimes all based on a different interpretation of one passage of Scripture in Revelation. These three views are: 1) postmillennialism, 2) amillennialism, and 3) premillennialism. Don't let these big words confuse you, because I am now going to explain what they mean.

The passage of Scripture that theologians debate is Revelation 20:1-6, which reads:

*Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the devil and satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while.*

*And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ [Messiah] for a thousand years.*

*But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priest of God and of Christ [Messiah], and shall reign with Him a thousand years.*

The postmillennial view is that Christianity will establish the Kingdom of God on the earth, at which time the Lord will return. This view does not interpret the thousand years as literal, but spiritualizes it to mean an indefinite period of time in history when God's people will fully establish the Kingdom of God on the earth. When Christianity has completed this mission, it will invite Jesus to return to a world that is sanctified and eagerly awaiting His return.

Augustine developed this view in his famous work, *The City of God*, and established it as the end-time theology from the 5th century to the 15th century. As the Roman Empire was crumbling and as barbarians were destroying the existing order, Augustine taught that the Roman Church, meaning organized Christianity, was the "City of God" that would take the empire's place and grow in power to the point that it would rule the world. Augustine also taught that the Roman Church, as the "City of God," was the same as the Kingdom of God.

This view of the millennium gave a theological justification for the Roman Church to forcefully extend its political and religious rule and authority by political alliances and conquests. The fact that Christianity

became the official religion of the empire and survived and flourished when the empire crumbled gave credibility to Augustine's teachings. They believed Roman Christianity would convert the world.

During the 1800s, Christian nations colonized much of non-Christian Africa and Asia. This opened the door for missionaries to take the Gospel to these countries. To the Christians of that era, it seemed like they would soon establish Christian rule over the nations, which would usher in the coming of the Lord. It was an exciting time for missionary work, and there was great optimism.

But aside from this view not being scriptural, the Bible says that the world will get *more* evil, not less (see 2 Tim. 3:1-5). World War I put an end to the belief that the world was getting better. The modern terms for postmillennialism are "Kingdom Now" and "Dominion Theology." While this is still the official doctrine of many of the historic denominations, it should be clear to anyone that Christianity is not going to convert the world.

Augustine was also a proponent of amillennialism. As mentioned earlier, his method of interpreting the Bible was allegorical. This means he spiritualized the prophecies about the Kingdom of God, the millennium, the tribulation, Christianity and the Jews, and end-time events in general. According to his view, the end-time prophecies are not to be taken literally.

If you accept Augustine's writings, you believe that you are now living in the millennial Kingdom of God on the earth, which is Christendom, as a citizen of the New Jerusalem, which is spiritual. The devil is effectively bound, and you are establishing God's rule over the earth. Wow, that is too much for even the most optimistic, positive-thinking believer.

This spiritualized view of Christianity was manifested by Christian dominance of the Jews who were to be forever humiliated and disgraced. Augustine wrote that the Jews deserved death, but instead they were to wander the earth as a witness to their punishment and the victory of

Christianity over the synagogue. Augustine's writings became the theological textbook for Christianity for 1,000 years, and his views are still taught by much of the Christian world. No wonder anti-Semitism is still rampant in Christianity.

Premillennialism takes a literal view of the end-time prophecies. This view is that Jesus will return before the millennium, at which time the Lord will bind Satan and set up His Messianic Kingdom on the earth, with His saints ruling and reigning with Him for a literal thousand years.

While we can understand how theologians of the past arrived at their views, in the light of history and our modern world, the view of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, and the restoration of Israel and prophetic signs of the times, the premillennial view is the only view that is consistent with the plain sense of Scripture and redemptive history.

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Write a summary of what you have learned in this lesson. Write the summary in clear, concise words as if you are going to present it to another person.
2. Write an explanation of how you can apply what you have learned in this lesson to your life.
3. Share what you have learned with your family, friends, and members of your study group.

### ENDNOTE

1. George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 671.