

Ways to Interpret Revelation

UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF REVELATION

DIFFERENT
APPROACHES

SIMPLE
OUTLINE OF
SYMBOLS
AND EVENTS

TO KEY TOPICS

CHART
COMPARES
VIEWS AT
A GLANCE

ROSE
PUBLISHING

GOD ACTING IN HISTORY

Both the Old and New Testaments reveal God as Lord over history. Christians of all eras have believed that Jesus will return a second time, but not all Christians have agreed that Revelation is all about the second coming. Whether the visions in Revelation have been, are being, or have yet to be fulfilled is a matter of debate, but the spirit of the last chapter calling on Jesus to come quickly is something all Christians can agree upon—“Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20)

Following is a comparison of four different approaches to the book of Revelation.

Four Views	How Revelation Is Viewed	More About This View
Historicist	The book of Revelation is prophecy about church history from the time of John to the end of the world.	Historicists view the events in Revelation as symbolic descriptions of historical events throughout church history. (Some futurists also understand the Seven Churches [Revelation 1–3] in a historic manner, treating each church as descriptive of a particular era of church history.)
Preterist	The book of Revelation is prophecy that was fulfilled primarily in the first century AD.	“ <i>Partial Preterism</i> ” views most of Revelation as prophecy fulfilled in the first century AD, though final chapters of Revelation describe future events to occur at the end of time. “ <i>Full Preterists</i> ” contend that the return of Jesus described in Revelation 19 was spiritual and occurred in AD 70. Preterists are typically <i>amillennialists</i> or <i>postmillennialists</i> , though some <i>historic premillennialists</i> might fit in this category.
Futurist	Revelation is prophecy primarily about the future end of the world.	In the futurist view, all or nearly all of Revelation is yet to occur. Revelation is a prophecy that describes the end of time and the years leading immediately to the end. Dispensational premillennialists as well as some historic premillennialists interpret Revelation in this way.
Idealist	Revelation is a non-historical and non-prophetic drama about spiritual realities.	This perspective seems to have originated among ancient Alexandrian theologians, who frequently spiritualized and allegorized biblical texts, but this view also has contemporary followers.

COMPARING VIEWS ON REVELATION

Revelation	Revelation 1:1 “soon” 1:3 “near” 1:19 “what is” (Compare, 22:6,7, 12, 20)	Revelation 2:1–3:22 The Seven Churches of Asia Minor	Revelation 4:1–3 God on His Throne	Revelation 5:1–4 The Scroll	Revelation 6:1–17 The Seals
Historical View	The prophecy began to be fulfilled close to the author’s lifetime.	The prophecy begins with the seven actual churches in John’s day and proceeds through history from there. 	God is about to outline his rule over history: the first part of that history is revealed under the vision of the seven seals.	The scroll is the coming history of the church as God reveals it and is Lord over it.	The seals are the stages of church history, perhaps describing the church from the late first century AD to the late fourth century.
Preterist View	Near, soon, and quickly are taken literally.	The prophecy begins with the seven actual churches of Asia Minor. It then focuses on the land of Israel before AD 70.	God’s courtroom in the heavenly temple is the scene. The Judge on his throne is about to hold court.	The scroll is God’s bill of divorce against unfaithful Israel.	The seals describe the Roman war with the Jews which lead to the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70).
Futurist View	These words refer to the whole of the “last days” or to the quickness with which Jesus will return.	The prophecy begins with the seven churches, which were actual churches in John’s day and may also symbolize the types of churches present in the last days.	God gives John a vision from his throne of the events which are to take place “after these things.”	The scroll is either the title deed to the earth or God’s prophetic message in Revelation.	The seals begin to describe the great tribulation, with each opened seal leading to a greater tragedy upon the earth.
Idealist View	Christ is always at hand, near and quick to save his people.	The book begins with the seven churches, which symbolize tendencies in the church that can occur in every age.	God gives John the heavenly viewpoint of the important truths about his power over all things and his care for the church.	The scroll is God’s last will and testament, revealing his salvation plan for all time.	The seals are about recurring evils throughout history and God’s authority over them.



COMPARING VIEWS ON REVELATION

Revelation	Revelation 7:1-8	Revelation 8:1-13	Revelation 9:13-19	Revelation 10:8-11
	The 144,000 (see p. 12)	The Trumpets	The Four Angels at the Euphrates	The Little Scroll
Historical View	The 144,000 is a symbolic number that represents the entire church.	The trumpets are the stages of church history, perhaps from about AD 400 until the fifteenth century (or to the present).	The four angels represent the four principalities of the Turkish empire. The Turks destroyed the last of the Roman empire in AD 1453.	The little scroll is the Bible at the time of the Reformation. It was sweet to those starved for God's Word, but bitter to those who wanted to control its information and keep it from common people.
Preterist View	The 144,000 may be the Jewish Christians who escaped the destruction of Jerusalem.	The trumpets are a vision of the Roman war with the Jews in the first century AD and extend the seals' description in further detail.	The four angels may represent the four legions of Roman soldiers stationed in Syria that Vespasian led against the Jews (around AD 70). The colors mentioned are Roman military colors.	The little scroll is the same divorce bill as in Revelation 5:1-4 but now unsealed and empty of contents, indicating that the judgments against Israel are now occurring.
Futurist View	The 144,000 are Jewish Christians in the last days.	The trumpets describe the events of the tribulation in the last days. 	The four angels represent the armies of the Orient that will march against Israel in the last days. They will cross the Euphrates as a signal of war.	The little scroll represents the divine plan for the end of the ages, showing that the Word of God is both sweet and bitter to God's prophets and messengers.
Idealist View	The 144,000 are the true spiritual Israel: the church on earth.	The trumpets are about the cycles of human sin, consequences, and God's salvation.	The four angels represent the judgment of God that comes on evil when there is no more restraint, which is represented by the river Euphrates.	The little scroll is the gospel, which must and will be preached to all "peoples, nations, tongues, and kings."