

THE BOOK OF REVELATION
Understanding the Book of Revelation
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• 1. THE HISTORICAL SITUATION

The Book of Revelation was written sometime around 96 CE in Asia Minor. The author was probably a Christian from Ephesus known as "John the Elder." According to the Book, this John was on the island of Patmos, not far from the coast of Asia Minor, "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 1.10). This has traditionally been taken to mean that he had been exiled there as a martyr for his Christian faith. Some scholars, however, have suggested that it might have been a regular stop on a preaching circuit. Next, the author says, "I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet" (Rev. 1.11), and this voice tells him to write what he is about to see. This begins the "revelatory" vision that is at the center of the book.

Ephesus was both the capital of the Roman province of Asia and one of the earliest centers of Christianity. The book next contains seven short letters of exhortation to the Christian churches in the seven leading cities of Asia Minor -- Ephesus (2.1-7, Smyrna (2.9-11), Pergamon (2.12-17), Thyatira (2.18-29), Sardis (3.1-6), Philadelphia (3.7-13), and Laodicea (3.14-22). This region would become a key area for the expansion of Christianity into the Roman empire. But it was precisely this intersection that created the problem for the author, as it called for Christians to treat the Roman administration as agent of the devil. But recognizing this comes from understanding how to read this kind of apocalyptic literature.

• 2. HOW TO READ REVELATION

Because of intricate and unusual symbolic language, the Book of Revelation is hard for modern people to read. They are not used to this kind of literature. Not so for people in the ancient world who would have been more accustomed to the complex nature of apocalyptic literature. The very fact that an apocalypse was a common type of literature meant that if followed certain conventions of style, and people knew more what to expect from it. Because there were many other examples of apocalyptic writing, these conventions would have seemed less strange and cryptic. Also, apocalyptic literature was almost always a kind of literature for "insiders," that is to say, it was written for people who already knew something of the situation and of the symbols that were used to portray it. So, for the original audience of the Revelation of John, all these strange scenes would have been immediately intelligible. What the modern reader or biblical scholar has to do is to try to read the text with "ancient eyes," by being informed about the way the literature worked and the situation out of which it came.

So let's look briefly at the layout of Revelation. The book breaks naturally into five major visions plus a prologue and an epilogue on how these came to be written down. This yields our basic outline of the work, as follows:

- **The Prologue (1.1-3)**
- **John's "Cover Letter" (1.4-20) and The First Vision
The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia (2.1-3.22)**
- **The Second Vision: In the Throne Room of Heaven (4.1-11.19)
The Seven Seals and the Seven Trumpets**
- **[Third Vision] Three Great Signs In Heaven: The Cosmic War (12.1-16.21)
The Beasts, the war, seven plagues, seven bowls of wrath, and Battle of
Armageddon**
- **The Fourth Vision: The Judgement on Babylon [=Rome] (17.1-21.8)**

Part I: The Allegory of the Great Whore - (17.1-18)

Part II: Babylon [Rome] is Fallen! (18.1-8)

Part III: Heaven is once again opened: the 1,000 years (19.11-21.8)

Part IV: A New Heaven and New Earth (21.1-8)

- **The Fifth Vision: The New Jerusalem (21.9-22.5)**
- **The Epilogue: (22.6-21)**

Then in each of these visions, there is a literary device that provides for each new thing seen to propel the viewer on to the next vision. We can see this from the beginning of Vision I, where John sees the seven lampstands, and then is told to write letters to the seven churches of Asia, for which they stand. But we see it even more clearly in the Vision II in the section that begins by seeing the scroll with seven seals, and then each of the seals is opened one at a time. But the opening of each seal does not result in the same amount of text: the first four are very brief, only two verses each. Then the fifth is longer, and the sixth is the most important, the climax of the sequence, followed by a longer vision. Finally, comes the seventh seal, but when we get there it turns out to be the seven trumpets, and the whole process starts over again as each of the trumpets is sounded in order.

What results from this is a kind of composite picture created by the cumulative effect of all the material laid out this way. It's been likened to "chinese boxes" where one opens up a box only to discover another box inside. In the final analysis one gets the sense that we (that is, the ancient "reader") are always in the sixth, just on the verge of the seventh thing happening. That's what gives the book its sense of urgency and feel that something important is just about to happen. The overall impact of Vision II, then, is to show the dire and precarious position in which the faithful are now standing, as they await the final things to take place. It is described as a time of famine, plague, oppression, and woe. But all of this probably comes out of a retrospection on the First Revolt and the devastation that occurred when Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. That is precisely the reflection that one sees in the description of the "two witnesses" (or martyrs) who are said to have been slain in the very city where Jesus was killed (11.1-13). So, the sense of

desperation and suffering that is so central to Vision II is a direct commentary on the outcome of the War of 66-70 CE.

At the end of Vision II, when the seventh angel finally sounds his trumpet (11.15-19), then the heavenly throneroom of God is once again opened, and now there appears a new scene. This is the opening of Vision III, the three Signs (or Portents) in Heaven, which are the centerpiece, both literarily and ideologically, of the entire work. For these three "signs" provide the explanation for why the woes and suffering described in Vision II have come upon the earth. The answer, we are now told, is that the war on earth is merely a continuation of a cosmic war begun in heaven between God and Satan (12.1-17). At the end Satan, the Great Red Dragon, is thrown down to earth with his evil angels, and now they begin to make war on the saints (12.18). For his henchmen, the Dragon chooses two helpers, who are called "the beast from the sea" (13.1-10) and "the beast from the land" (13.11-18), who proceed to force all humans to worship the Dragon and the first beast. The result is that God also sends his angelic army to earth, led by the "Lamb who had been slain," and they will now take on the army of the dragon and the beasts (14.1-20). Now we have seven angels pronounce their woes on all who side with the Dragon followed by seven bowls of wrath, which turn out to be seven plagues (15.1-16.21). Once again it is the sixth that is the most important; it is the Battle of Armageddon (16.12-16) which results in victory for the armies of God.

Now we see another important component of how Revelation works by thinking about its sense of the time-line of the story. The various visions of Revelation are not a linear progression, so that the events in chapter 12, for example, do not follow in time after the events in chapter 11. Quite the contrary. In the way they set up, the events described in chapters 12-13 are meant to explain how those circumstances in chapters 5-11 came about. So the time-line of the story moves in a kind of cyclical fashion so that we keep coming back to the "present situation" as it stood for the ancient readers of Revelation.

The result from this way of reading is that the ancient Christians were being told how God would ultimately triumph, and the faithful would be spared. So in Vision IV we see the final judgements against the evil forces of the Roman empire, and the final rewards of the faithful. And it's really only at this stage in the text (chapters 18-21) that it starts to look forward in a prospective way toward the near future. At the center of it all is the recognition of how Revelation is depicting the Roman Empire as the Great Whore, with the Emperor as the seven-headed "beast from the sea," who are the ones carrying out Satan's war against God on earth. So even Vision IV is carrying out the implications of the central scenes in Vision III. This made most clear when we are told explicitly that the Great Whore is Babylon, who is seated on the Beast with seven heads, as seven hills (17.9). This is both a clear reference to the "seven hills of Rome" and a reference back to the seven-headed beast of Rev. 13.3-10. Then it tells that the seven heads are seven kings (17.9-10), which finally give us the real clue that the "beast" is the Roman emperor himself. The visions continue to unfold information for the ancient reader in order to describe its current situation.

• 3. THE SEVEN-HEADED BEAST OF REVELATION AND THE ROMAN EMPIRE

The key to understanding the situation is in the vibrant symbolic language that is so typical of **ancient apocalyptic writings**. The author viewed the religious and political force of Roman rule as a threat. It is now thought that this arose in Ephesus after the year 89 CE when Domitian instituted a new imperial cult sanctuary dedicated to his family, the Flavian dynasty. It had included his father, Vespasian, who as Roman general led the war against the Jews from 66-69. When the Emperor Nero was killed, Vespasian was summoned from Judea to Rome to become the new Emperor. Vespasian then appointed his elder son, Titus, as the commander of the legions in Judea. It was Titus who led the seige and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. When Vespasian died in 79 CE, Titus became the next Emperor. Titus, however, died just two years later in 81, and this left the empire to Vespasian's younger son, Domitian. Domitian was known as a strong-willed emperor who tolerated no disagreement with his policies. Nonetheless, there is no clear indication that he consciously tried to persecute Christians for their faith.



seven headed beast

For this reason, most scholars now think that the issue revolved around the inauguraiaon of the Flavian imperial cult in Ephesus. The imperial cult was a way of showing loyalty and honor to the Emperor, and was viewed as a public duty of all citizens in a city like Ephesus. Our clearest indication of how this is reflected in Revelation is seen in the description of the two "beasts" from Rev. 13. The first is called "the beast from the sea" who is given his power by Satan himself. He is described as having "seven heads and ten horns," and people

worshipped him (Rev. 13.1-4). Then there is a second, "the beast from the land" who makes every everyone worship the first beast and its "image" (Rev. 13.11-18). The "image" (13.14-15) and the mysterious number "666" (13.18) refer to statues and coins or inscriptions with the emperor's image and titles. The "beast from the land" probably referred to either the provincial governor of Asia or to the highpriest of the imperial cult, who jointly would have overseen the temple and its festivals in Ephesus at just this time.

That the "beast from the sea" is the Emperor himself is made clear in a later passage in Rev. 17, where the symbolism of the seven heads is spelled out.

9 "This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; also, they are seven kings, 10 of whom five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain only a little while. 11 As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. 12 And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. 13 These are united in yielding their power and authority to the beast; 14 they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them... (Rev. 17.9-14). Accordingly, the woman sits on the seven-headed beast as a symbol of her "seven hills" - the seven hills of Rome. The woman is the city of Roman, here depicted as the persecutor of Christians. Then it says that the seven heads are also seven kings. And we

can read from its cryptic terminology the references to the Emperors of Rome. The "five fallen" refer to the five emperors who have died: **Augustus** (29 BCE - 14 CE), **Tiberius** (14-37 CE), **Gaius** (37-41), **Claudius** (41-54) and **Nero** (54-68). "One has a wound" refers to the emperor Nero, who died in 68, but whom contemporary legend had it would return from the dead to continue persecuting the Christians. Thus, the beast has a head that has recovered from a mortal wound. The head "who is" refers to Vespasian (69-79) and the one that is "not yet" refers to Titus (79-81). The head that "was but is not" refers to an eighth emperor, Domitian. From this we can also see that the work looks at this history as if it were being written while Vespasian was still alive, and thus "forecasting" what terrible things would occur under Domitian only a few years later. This technique is common in apocalyptic literature, and Revelation was probably written sometime during the early 90's, when Domitian was emperor, or perhaps even after the death of Domitian in 96 CE. By portraying the Emperor and his provincial authorities as "beasts" and henchmen of the dragon, Satan, the author was calling on Christians to refuse to take part in the imperial cult, even at the risk of martyrdom.

•4. WERE THE CHRISTIANS BEING PERESECUTED? RECENT NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP

Almost all New Testament scholars now take the view that Revelation was written during the reign of Domitian, sometime around 95-96 CE. He is the "beast from the sea" beyond doubt. What is not uniformly understood is how political oppression or persecution against the Christians of Asia Minor influenced the situation and, thus, how Revelation was responding to this situation. There are references to martyrdom and persecution in the Book of Revelation, but to what extent there was a real roundup of Christians going on is a matter of some debate. Here we may examine the question by looking at the views of several of the most notable recent scholars on Revelation.

a. The Traditional View of New Testament Scholarship.

The traditional view of Revelation, and of apocalyptic literature in general, is that it grew out of circumstances of persecution. So, Revelation is often compared to Daniel in this regard, since Daniel was written in direct response to the oppressive anti-Jewish measures of the Seleucid monarch, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, at the time of the Maccabean Revolt (167-164 BCE). Thus, scholars would point to Rev. 2.13, which refers to "Antipas, my witness, who was killed among you," in conjunction with the church at Pergamon. It also refers to the "two witnesses" who were killed and their bodies left in the streets of Jerusalem (Rev. 11.4-13), and there is the numberless crowd of saints "who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb," who suffered, and who dwell before the altar of heaven (Rev. 7.13-17). It must also be remembered that the words "witness" and its cognates "testify" and "testimony" (which appear some 19 times in Revelation) all come from the Greek word *martyros*, from which we get "martyr." So it is traditionally assumed that there was a direct persecution of those Christians living in Asia Minor during the reign of Domitian, and that this corresponds to "John's" own exile and imprisonment on Patmos. This is the view maintained in two of the standard and very well-respected older commentaries on Revelation:

G.B. Caird, A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine. Harper New Testament Commentary Series. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

J. Massyngberde Ford, Revelation: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary. The Anchor Bible, vol. 38. Garden City: Doubleday, 1975.

Both Caird and Ford thus argue that the purpose of Revelation was to prepare and strengthen the Christians of Asia Minor, as addressed in the letters to the seven churches, so that they will remain faithful against the impending persecution. The remaining visions were then given to show them how the conflict would be played out, with the victory of God against Satan, and thus encourage them to remain steadfastly on the side of Christ. However, beyond this general assumption of persecution these two works do not think that most of the language of these visions can be taken to pertain literally to precise events in Asia Minor.

b. A Literalist Reading of Persecution.

Two recent works, however, have argued that much of the material in the letters to the seven churches (Rev. 2-3), and more generally in Revelation, should be read as literally applicable to the precise circumstances of the day. This is the view of

Colin Hemer, The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting. Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1986.

John Court, Myth and History in the Book of Revelation. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979.

Hemer's approach, however, is largely a reworking of the older view of Sir William Ramsay near the beginning of the XXth century, which tries to equate archaeological evidence of the region with comments in Revelation. This view has been favored among some more conservative New Testament scholars; however, has not found a majority acceptance. Court's approach differs from Hemer's by looking more at the literary function of the symbolic (or, as he would say, "mythic") language of Revelation as being veiled references to concrete historical circumstances of that day. Nonetheless, underlying both of these studies is the assumption of a direct, one-to-one correspondence between much of the language and the situation under Domitian. It is this view that has largely supported the notion that Revelation was intentionally "concealing" or coding its polemic against Rome in order to escape discovery by Roman authorities. But most scholars do not share these views nowadays.

c. Metaphorical Stances of Revelation against its Environment.

Perhaps the most common way of dealing with the issue of persecution and the circumstances of Revelation in recent scholarship has been to read the work as a type of religious response to the crisis of Christians facing opposition in the Roman world. This response is couched in metaphorical terms of dualistic oppositions, characteristic of apocalyptic literature. This approach is best illustrated by three recent works:

John Gager, "The End of Time and the Rise of Community," in Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1975.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Invitation to the Book of Revelation. Garden City, Doubleday, 1981.

and

The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985; second edition, 1998.

Adela Yarbro Collins, Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984.

Both Schüssler Fiorenza and Gager take the view that the precise situation that was threatening the Christians of Asia Minor in the mid-90's CE was prompted by a new emphasis on the imperial cult in Ephesus, begun under Domitian. Both suggest that there was a pressure for Christians to participate in the imperial cult's religious festivals, with a threat of punishment or death if they did not. So there was an existential crisis facing these Christians. The author of Revelation wrote in order to resolve this crisis by clearly demarcating the lines and by alienating them from the enticements of participation in pagan society and the imperial cult. The mechanism for this demarcation, they argue, is the use of symbolic language that creates a new sense of the cosmic reality in which these Christians were living. At the center of the Book of Revelation, both literarily and ideologically, stands the "mythic" scene of the woman and the dragon (Rev. 12), which results in the dragon being hurled down to earth where it will persecute "the other children of the woman" (i.e., the church). The two beasts of chapter 13 (symbolizing the emperor and his provincial authorities) thus are placed in this cosmic drama on the side of Satan. The later visions then portray what will happen as the cosmic drama unfolds. Babylon (Rome) will fall, the armies of God will triumph, and Jerusalem (God's city on earth) will be restored. For the Christians of Asia Minor, the battle lines are clearly drawn; it's only a matter of time until God is victorious.

Adela Yarbro Collins takes a similar view of the purpose and overall outlook of Revelation, but she does not think the imperial cult itself was a concrete factor, nor that there was much real persecution. It was more of a crisis of faith precipitated by the disconnection between the faith of these Christians and their social experience of alienation. She argues, then, that the work is, if anything, even more metaphorical or symbolic in its approach; it offers a kind of drama of catharsis (or "cleansing") that resolves the internal conflicts of the hearers. Of these three works, Yarbro Collins is perhaps more in keeping with the way most modern Christians would appropriate the "faith struggle" of Revelation; however, among New Testament scholars Schüssler Fiorenza's has had the greater influence.

d. Two Recent Revisionist Views.

Finally, there are two studies that argue that persecution itself was not at the center of the Christian experience underlying Revelation; however, they take different views of the precise role of the imperial cult. These are:

Leonard Thompson, The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Steven J. Friesen, Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia, and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family. Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 116. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993.

and

Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000 (forthcoming).

Thompson goes through a careful analysis of the historical evidence for the reign of Domitian and concludes that there was no real "persecution" of Christians in that day. He also shows that much of the bad reputation heaped on Domitian arose only after his death, when the subsequent emperors (notably Trajan, who ruled from 98-117 CE) made Domitian a "whipping boy" in order to portray themselves as benign and generous rulers. Thompson concludes, therefore, that the imperial cult presented little or no direct crisis for the Christians. Instead, he argues that Revelation was attempting to create a picture of cosmic reality that incorporated all aspects of the daily social life of these ancient Christians of Asia Minor. Revelation does this by incorporating the Roman sense of world order into his own alternative sense of a "new world order" governed by God, through Christ as the triumphant emperor of heaven and earth. This is an intriguing argument in showing the lack of concrete experience of persecution and how Roman imperial ideas seep into the book's "Christian" vision of reality.

Steven Friesen, however, has produced the most thoroughgoing study of the extensive archaeological evidence for the existence and the operation of the imperial cult in Asia Minor. He shows convincingly that there was a concrete presence of the imperial cult (along the lines suggested also by Schüssler Fiorenza) that set the framework for the Book of Revelation. In doing so he demonstrates how the imperial cult was not just an enforced participation in particular sacrifices or festivals, but was a more widespread social, political, economic, and religious factor in the lives of provincial citizens. This type of imperial cult activity was something new in Ephesus during the days of Domitian. Whereas there had been imperial cult activity for over a century in cities such as Pergamon, Ephesus had received its first imperial cult temple, and concomitant imperial awards and lofty titles, under Domitian in the year 89 CE. It was this new and heightened imperial rhetoric, growing like wildfire in the provincial cities, that triggered "John's" reaction. Moreover, this cult, while focused on Domitian himself, also honored his family, the Flavian emperors Vespasian and Titus. And it is this element that yields the underlying apocalyptic tension for the author, for these are the very emperors who had destroyed Jerusalem, the city of God, only two decades earlier. The radical polemic of Revelation is saying, "how can those who call themselves Jews and Christians pay honor to the very family that destroyed the Temple, to the very empire that killed Jesus? They are no less than the henchmen of Satan!" Friesen's work perhaps more than any recent study has drawn together both the concrete historical circumstances, based on the

archaeological evidence, in correlation with the rhetorical stance of the Book of Revelation.

·5. MODES OF INTERPRETING REVELATION

a. The "Past History" view.

These previous profiles of current New Testament scholarship on Revelation show what is the dominant view of how to interpret the work in its historical context. This approach is sometimes called the "**preterist**" (or "**past history**") view, meaning that the events described in Revelation all took place in the past and the work must be read in that ancient historical context. It is almost universally followed in both New Testament scholarship and by scholars of Christian history. It is also the view taken within many Christian denominations, although it is often amended to suggest that all the historical events are past and that Revelation was describing a situation in the Roman empire, but that the final judgement in some literal sense is still to come as a future event.

On the other hand, religious interpretations of Revelation throughout Christian history have not always followed this approach. We shall here profile some other ways that the book has been read by those who want to apply it to their own times. In each case, the difference is how the "historical content" of Revelation is understood.

b. The "Symbolic History" View.

This view holds that while the precise historical circumstances of Revelation pertained to the Roman world at the end of the 1st century CE, that it nonetheless has a kind of universal and timeless message for God's dealing with humanity in all generations. Thus it looks for symbolic elements that may apply across the ages. This symbolic or allegorical view is what lay behind St. Augustine's reading of Revelation, in which he argued that the 1,000-year reign was not a literal number at all but a figurative way of describing the "age of the church" on earth. This view has been the dominant one in most mainstream Christian interpretation, especially in Catholic tradition. It has also been influential in some philosophical appropriations of Revelation in western thinking.

c. The "Continuous History" View.

While the "symbolic history" view (above) was more-or-less the official view of Revelation adopted by the medieval church, there continued to be literalist readings throughout the Middle Ages. In general, these views took a literal view of the 1,000 years as being the current age of the church. As a result this way of looking at Revelation led some to look to it for ongoing events in the history of Christianity. This mode of interpretation, which sees later events in Christian history as fulfilling "predictions" in the Book of Revelation, is known as the "**continuous history**" view.

The first major interpreter to develop this view into a system of reading Revelation with current predictive value was Joachim of Fiore (1132-1202 CE). Based on the number 42 months (Rev. 11.2), the duration of the "trampling of the temple," Joachim concluded that this was period equal to the 42 generations in Matthew's genealogy from Adam to Jesus (Matt. 1.17). So, he said that these 42 generations (or 1,260 years) marked the period from the birth of Jesus until the end he saw predicted in Revelation. He then

looked identified particular events and individuals in Christian history as fulfilling elements in Revelation in a continuum from the days of Jesus until his own time. So, for example, the beast with seven heads (Rev. 13.1), which are explicitly identified as seven kings (Rev. 17.10) he identifies as evil rulers beginning with Herod the Great and continuing to Saladin, the Turkish leader who had only a few years earlier repulsed the Crusaders from the Holy Land. Joachim thus saw, a figure of his own day, as predicted in Revelation's unfolding of history from ancient to contemporary times.

From Joachim's day down to the mid-XIXth century, this pattern of calculation became the most common form of literalist interpretation of the "predictive" capacity of Revelation. It is therefore the most common mode of interpretation within literalist **postmillennial** expectation. It was a prominent feature of many end-time calculations and interpretations during the Reformation period in Europe. It was also used by Cotton Mather and others in colonial America and England; they regularly looked for current events that might be fulfillment of Revelation within this scheme, inevitably looking for elements that pointed toward the nearness of the end of time.

d. The "Future History" View.

A new mode of interpreting Revelation beginning in the early XIXth century. It grew mostly out of Protestant theology with a strong reforming element, both in Britain and America. It also drew on the strong tradition of literalist interpretation of Revelation as predicting contemporary events that had become popular in these areas through the "**continuous history**" view. But this new mode began to look at the past history of Christianity from the New Testament through the Middle Ages and down to its own time in a different light. From this perspective, it was hard to compute how the 1,000 years, if taken literally, could refer to the past history of the church, since that would place the inauguration of the Millennium within the timeframe of the medieval Catholic Church. The new view, therefore, began to argue that none of the events described in the Book of Revelation after chapters 1-3 (i.e., John's vision and the letters to the seven churches of Asia) had yet come to pass. All the florid images of Revelation 4-22 were instead considered to be predictions of future events that would come to pass in literal terms as the return of Christ and the end approached. Thus, this view looks at Revelation as prediction of "**future history.**"

Central to this mode of interpretation is the view that Revelation, along with most of the rest of the Bible constitutes a similar type of "prophecy" of the future, and it often refers to this overall scheme of interpretation as "Bible prophecy." Much of the interpretation that comes from this perspective involved linking various passages from different parts of the Bible to form a composite that fits current and future expectations. This mode of interpretation is also directly connected to the rise of **pre-millennialism**, the view that the 1,000 year reign of Christ will be a literal event that will occur only after Christ returns. Thus, the emphasis on interpreting Revelation, lies in equating its images with those events surrounding the return. Several different versions or systems have been proposed for how the actual events will work out.

The most popular has been that of [John Nelson Darby](#) (1800-1882), which is known as [Dispensationalism](#), a view made popular in England and America in the early XXth century through the publication of Cyrus Scofield (1843-1921). First published in 1909, it came to be known as [The Scofield Reference Bible](#). On each page it printed the King James translation of 1611 alongside of Scofield's own copious "notes" on how to read each passage of the Bible in conjunction with other "prophecies." It thus provided a chainlink interreferencing system to the Book of Revelation, by which one could jump from passage to passage to follow the "true" meaning. [The Scofield Bible](#) continued to be popular among certain Protestant Christian groups. From 1909 to 1967 it sold more than 10 million copies; reprinted in 1967, it is said to have sold another 2.5 million copies by 1990. More than any other "[future history](#)" interpretation, this one has had the most impact on current literalist interpretations of Revelation.

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