Interpreting Revelation

Vern Sheridan Poythress
Westminster Theological Seminary
A. Dangers and Rewards
Extreme Responses

- Repulsion
- Unhealthy interest
Dealing with Disputes

- The interpretive challenge (Swete, p. ccvii)

- Spiritually challenging.

- and patience (Prov. 14:15)
Encouragements about Rev.

- Revelation is inspired Scripture.
- God knew the difficulties.
- Profitable, 2 Tim. 3:17.
- For servants of Christ, Rev. 1:1.
- With explicit blessing, Rev. 1:3.

Let's get going.
Relevance to Our Time

- It always speaks to people under persecution.
- Dispensationalism needs a positive answer.
- It attacks modern sins.
Attack on Sins

- Disp. Literalism
- Modernist unbelief
- Secularist atheism
- Hedonism
- False religion
- Symbolically deep
- Supernatural
- Theocentric
- Exposing sin
- Exposing idolatry
Resources in Scholarship

- Biblical theology
- M. G. Kline on theophany
- Discourse linguistics showing structure
- Interest in apocalyptic
Renewing Your Mind

Glory of God in Revelation

Western Culture

escape, renewal
Envisioning the Future

- Dealing with bewilderment
- Grasping possibilities
- God’s mind
- Cosmic framework
- New values

Robert Scholes (Structural Fabulation, p. 19), quoting Olaf Stapledon, preface to Last and First Men:
“Within this elaborate plan [of 7 7’s] is developed the action of a prophetic poem unsurpassed in sacred or profane literature in either the grandeur of its poetic imagery, or the superb sweep of its prophetic vision.” (B. B. Warfield: Selected Short Writings 2:86).
B. Four Major Views about Interpretation
Why Look at Others’ Views?

- Learn from others.
- Don’t blindly adopt an approach.
- One’s choice affects all of Revelation.
- No one view fits all the Scripture.
Time of Fulfillment

When is the primary fulfillment?

● The four views differ about the primary time of fulfillment of Revelation.
Beckwith (pp. 334-35): “fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem and the fall of the Roman Empire.”
Two Strands of Roman Empire View

- Modernist extreme: wholly in first century.
- Moderate: first century is chief focus.
Final Crisis View (Futurist)

- Fulfillment occurs in the events of the final crisis immediately preceding the Second Coming.
Two Strands of Final Crisis


- Posttribulationist, usually more moderate, sees the bulk as relating to final crisis before Rapture.
Church History View (Historicist)

- Morris (p. 17): “setting out ... the history of western Europe ... until the second coming of Christ.”
- Rev 6-19 is in chronological order.
Two Strands of Church History

- Straight-line historicist treats Rev 6-19 as in chronological order.

- Recapitulationist finds a number of recapitulations and nonchronological order in Rev 6-19.

- But recapitulationist is really a fifth view.
Tenney (p. 143): “... represents the eternal conflict of good and evil which persists in every age.”
Two Types of Repeated Pattern

- Consistent idealist: Eternal conflict, with no reference to specific events.
- Moderate idealist: repeated fulfillment
Summary of Views

- Roman Empire
- Final Crisis
- Church History
- Repeated Pattern
C. How the Four Major Views Work in Practice
Interpreting Rev 13:1-8 (Beast)

- Roman Empire
- Final Crisis
- Church History
- Repeated Pattern
- Roman Emperor/Empire
- Final Antichrist
- The Pope
- Persecuting dominion wherever it appears
Locusts of Rev. 9:1-11

- Roman Empire
- Final Crisis
- Church History
- Repeated Pattern
- Roman decadence
- Future locusts; or evil powers
- Islamic invasion
Interpreting Rev 9:1-11 (cont.)

- **Church History**
  - 612
  - Mohammed opens his mission
  - 150 years
  - 762
  - Caliphate to Baghdad

- **Islamic invasion**
  - crowns
  - women’s hair
  - five months

Mohammed opens his mission 150 years after 612, leading to the establishment of the Caliphate in Baghdad 762 years later.
Interpreting Rev. 9:1-11 (cont.)

- Roman Empire
- Final Crisis
- Church History
- Repeated Pattern
- Roman decadence
- Future locusts; or evil powers
- Islamic invasion
- Powers of evil in the wicked at all times
Strengths of Different Views

- Roman Empire
- Final Crisis
- Church History
- Repeated Pattern

- Relevance to 7 churches.
- Climax at Second Coming (22:20; 19:11-21).
- Draw a line between the two dates.
- Seize common principle; Satan as unoriginal.
Transition from Roman Empire to Final Crisis View

- Add a second fulfillment
Transition from Final Crisis to Roman Empire View

- Add a foreshadowing
Transition from Church History to Final Crisis View

- Compress the time line
Transition from Church History to Repeated Pattern View

- Recapitulate
Transition from Repeated Pattern to Another View

- Find a primary fulfillment of the pattern
Variant Views

- Early Roman Empire: Fulfillment in the fall of Jerusalem
- Recapitulationist. Revelation portrays the entire course of history from Roman times to the Second Coming, with the symbols possibly having more than one embodiment and with several “recapitulatory” accounts of this period.
D. Clarity of Revelation
The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known ...

- unveiling, disclosure
- Christ knows our need
- show, not keep in the dark
- to his servants (you!)
- made known

God’s plan
Blessing for Reading (1:3)

“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it.”

- The only book of the Bible with an explicit blessing for reading. Extra encouragement.
- “Keep” means it’s practical. Strengthening the heart, not tickling the fancy.
Are Its Symbols Difficult?

- Unfamiliar
- Apocalyptic
- Need OT background

Yes

No

- It’s obvious.

Fearsome! Hideous!
It’s Simple

- For children also.
Hmm…. Let’s see now. What does the “locust” of Rev. 9 mean? The “horse” part must refer to one of the months of the Chinese calendar. “Crowns of gold” must refer to Babylonian kings. “Women’s hair” surely suggests that it is women who will bring about the final downfall of mankind. “Scorpion tails” … hmm… Now let me see.

Awesome! It’s a monster!
Confidence in God

Don’t be the “expert.”
You can’t possibly understand without my help!

Encourage.
Look at God's greatness!

You’re right. I give up.
The Majesty of Christ

- Christ is our friend (John 15:14-15).
- He is also our majestic, awesome king!

Not a tame lion!
E. Symbolism
Why the Dispute over Revelation?

Due to: symbolism

clear and yet controverted
Meaning of a Symbol
Two Approaches to Symbols

1. Code
- One referent
- Meaning = referent
- Isolated

2. Multifaceted
- Multiple allusions
- Multifaceted impact
- Holistic
Decoding by the Schools

Beast ➔ Roman Emperor

Beast ➔ Future Antichrist

Beast ➔ Pope

Beast ➔ Idolatrous Government
Prophecy is Poetic

Day of the Lord

- Literal locusts
- Enemy army (Babylonians?)
- Theophany
- Final judgment

Locust Plague (Joel 1-2)
Expanded Understanding of Prophetic Fulfillment

Adapted from Irving Jensen, *Bible Study Charts*
Olivet Discourse (Luke 21)

Double Perspective of Olivet Discourse

Adapted from Irving Jensen, Bible Study Charts
Rev. 17:9 Has Two Referents

- 7 heads of the Beast

  - 7 hills on which the woman sits. (17:9)
  - 7 kings, 5 of whom have fallen. (17:10)
More Than Two Planes of Interacting Meaning

For Beast

- Referent (Roman Emperor?).
- Hideous monstrosity (repulsiveness).
- Combination of beasts from Daniel 7.
- With background of Genesis 1-3, where beasts are subordinate to man.
God-Centered Symbolism

God in theophany is rich, multifaceted, nonexhaustible, Trinitarian.

Symbolism of Revelation is multifaceted.
Schools’ Decoding is Inadequate

Beast

Roman Emperor

Future Antichrist

Pope

Idolatrous Government
F. A Positive Approach
Attractions of the Schools

I’m not sure. They all look good.

Insightful!
God Is Involved with Us

- Roman Empire
- Final Crisis
- Application NOW
- Repeated

- God loves 7 churches.
- God will come.
- God loves us NOW.
- God is the same at all times.

God is central
Satan as a creature **must** imitate God; he cannot create anything new.

Since God is the same, Satanic counterfeiting is the same for all times.

Spiritual war shows a constant pattern.

Satan suffers repeated defeats.
Some Truth in All Four

- God is always the same.
- God rules all history.
- Spiritual warfare is always the same.

All apply the same spiritual principles.
Evidence for Multiple Fulfillment

- Flexible imagery.
- Speaks to people in all times.
- Evidence for all.
- Necessity of repeating counterfeiting.
Starting with Repeated Pattern

Symbol

General principle

Embodied in other approaches

NOW
From Symbol to Application

Truth symbolized

Symbol

Referent in Rome (or other)

Generalized truth

Contemporary application
From Symbol to Application in Repeated Pattern View

- Symbol
- Generalized truth
- Contemporary application
Fourfold Interpretation

A Symbol represents

- Roman
- Final
- Church
- Repeated
- First century embodiment
- Final embodiment
- Embodiment NOW
- A general principle
G. Insight of Roman Empire View
Evidence for Roman View

- Rev. 2-3.
- General principle of relevance to original audience.
- Nearness of the “time,” 1:1, 3; 22:10.
- Christ threatens to “come” in 2:5, 16; 3:11.
H. Insight of Final Crisis View
The Endpoint of Fulfillment

- Endpoint when Christ comes, 22:12, 20.
- For NT church, the Second Coming is next on the “calendar,” 2 Thess. 1-2.
- 22:20 is prayer associated with Second Coming (cf. 1 Cor. 16:22).
Does Revelation Focus on an Earlier “Coming”?

- Rev. 2:5; 2:16; 3:11 speak of Christ “coming”
- He judges the churches, short of final judgment
- This context qualifies 2:5, etc., but not 1:7; 2:12-17; 11:18; 22:7, 20; etc.
- Rev. as a whole offers a cosmic context.
Nearness of Second Coming

- Preliminary judgments foreshadow the climactic judgment.
- Nearness is "structural": 1 John 2:18.
Nearness

Many antichrists

One Antichrist
I. Insight of Repeated Pattern View
Universal Revelance

- Revelation is canon, relevant to now (2 Tim. 3:17).
- “he who has an ear,” 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.
- Pattern of spiritual war is constant.
- Flexible symbolism.
- Rev. 1:1 references Dan. 2:45.
Dan. 2:45 and Rev. 1:1; 4:1

What? The eschatological kingdom of God.

“what must take place” ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα (Rev. 4:1)

**OT eschatological prophecy, in the process of realization (inaugurated eschatology)**

ᐃ δεῖ γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα (Dan. 2:45 Theodotion)
Daniel and John

LXX: “in the last days”

Eschatological fulfillment

Daniel  
John

"soon"