

Introduction to the book of Revelation

1. There is no book in the New Testament that gets more bad press, nor gives the church more bad press than the book of Revelation. Not only does the book seem to be the least straightforward book in the New Testament, but certain groups of Christians seem to be nearly obsessed by the book seemingly to the exclusion of the rest of the Bible. Before we begin to tackle the book perhaps we should tackle the sociological realities we commonly see played out before us.
2. Since the ascension of Jesus Christ, Christians have been awaiting his return. There is nothing wrong with this, in fact the book of Revelation is a book of and for Christians who long for Jesus' final victory and vindication here on earth. That longing is a natural and appropriate thing for believers, but along the way some came into the habit of attempting to forecast Jesus' return. There has been an attempt to read between the lines to discern a date of return for Jesus. We should talk about the motivation behind this and the assumption implicit within this impulse.
3. Whereas we certainly long for Jesus' return, we have no indication that he attempted to give us a date as to when he will return nor do we know that his return is fixed by a calendar in the sense that we judge time. The Bible often talks about "the fulness of time" in the sense of when things are ripe. Should we assume that there is a particular date out there that God is shooting for? If Jesus wanted to give us a date why didn't he just do so? Whom would it serve to present something of the clues and codes as imagined in many movies to hide such a date?
4. Even though this kind of speculation has occurred throughout the history of the church it is important to note that there was an intensification of this during the 19th century in the United States. Three different groups: the Jehovah Witnesses, the Mormons and the Seventh Day Adventists all arose during this period and shaped their theologies and worldviews around explicit predictions of the second coming. It is also important to note that all of them were wrong. The Seventh Day Adventists have been gradually moving back towards the larger community of orthodox churches while the Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons have continued to see themselves as exclusive sects that expound markedly different theological positions than the historical church has. The game of picking dates for Jesus' return has often accompanied a departure from the historical confessions of the church. A more recent example of this can be found in the ministry of Harold Camping.
5. Many conservative, American churches are of the tradition often referred to as Dispensationalist. This tradition also comes out of a pattern of Biblical interpretation arising in the 19th century with similar patterns as we see in the other sects mentioned above. Biblical interpretation tends to be literalistic which when applied to highly symbolic segments of the Bible often attempts to interpret them allegorically. Beast X means nation Y, etc. One must ask such a tradition of what value the text had for all previous generations, and if their foretelling proves to be 100% wrong (as has universally been the case for such practitioners of prognostication) how should we evaluate their pattern of interpretation? Seldom do such interpreters publically admit, apologize, and publicize their previous errors and more seldom

(never) do they subject themselves to the literal penalty of such incorrect poor prophesy mapped out in Deuteronomy 18 (death). How much damage has this tradition done to the credibility of the church in America? You can judge that for yourself.

6. We should begin by applying some basic assumptions to the book of Revelation that we apply to all of the books of the Bible. The book of Revelation was a letter written to a group of believers by an author in a particular place and time. We must assume that this letter had meaning within that context and therefore what was written was considered to be of value for those people in that context. Any interpretive filter that assumes the letter was merely a sort of Greek time capsule to post encrypted clues to the timing of doomsday in my opinion is out of touch with the rest of the Bible. The book had meaning to its original audience and we need to begin there.
7. The book by its inclusion in the canon throughout the development of that canon also had meaning for the church as it has passed through the centuries. The book has meaning for Christians of every epoch and on every continent. This we should keep in mind as well.
8. Historically there has been four main patterns of interpretation of the book that have been widely recognized. Each perspective has its strengths and its weaknesses:
 - a. Preterist or “Contemporary-historical” interpretation: It is quite obvious that John is referring to specific people and places within his lifetime. The book is written to 7 churches and the city and the monsters are clearly veiled references to Rome. The Preterist position sees the book as referring to places and events within the context of the writer and his audience. The difficulties of this school of interpretation are that the book clearly speaks of the second coming of Jesus and we know this has not yet happened.
 - b. The historicist view: This sees the elements of the book as a sort of allegorical mapping of what will happen from John’s time up until Christ’s return. John’s prophetic elements pointed to specific world events in the future that can be deciphered by comparing the book and world events that happened in subsequent centuries. This view has many of the problems listed above. Of what value would a prediction of Napoleon’s conquest of Europe be to the people of the church of Ephesus in the first century? Such mappings also tend to always focus on a particular telling of history. Why would Napoleon or Hitler be the anti-Christ as opposed to Genghis Kahn or a Meso-American empire?
 - c. The futurist or eschatological view: This view sees everything beginning in chapter 4 as treating specifically last days events. It doesn’t tend to map things as allegorically as the historicist perspective. The images or symbolic but not as allegorical.
 - d. The idealist or spiritual view: The book interprets recurring elements throughout the history of the church. Patterns emerge and players take on roles that repeat and embody forces within the conflict between God and the rebellion. This view has value for all generations of believers yet can sometimes disconnect the progress of God’s kingdom from history by just having us talk about patterns.
9. Each school of interpretation has its strengths and its drawbacks. To me the most straight forward way to view the book revolves around the purpose of the book: to give a vivid picture of Jesus’ reign over history to a suffering church. See the photocopied pages from More Than Conquerors.