

Understanding the Book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation is placed last in the Bible for good reason! It should be the last book of the Bible that anyone seeks to become an expert on. The reason for this is simple. Without a thorough understanding of the rest of Scripture most of Revelation will neither make sense nor be appropriately appreciated. Most of the Book of Revelation is saturated in Old Testament imagery. It's language is highly symbolic and to be regarded as apocalyptic (revealing the future). It has clear echoes from the Books of Daniel and Zechariah where we also find similar apocalyptic passages.

DIFFERENT SCHOOLS OF INTERPRETATION

Throughout the history of the church there have been several main schools of interpretation in regard to the Book of Revelation.

The *Historical School* regards most of Revelation describing events beginning chronologically close to its date of origin but extending through history to the end of time.

The *Futurist School* regards most of the Book of Revelation, from chapter 4 on, as applying to events far removed from the original readers. Futurists

view the prophetic contents of Revelation as taking place near the end of time over a relatively short and compact period.

The third predominant school of interpretation regarding Revelation, which is once again enjoying a resurgence in popularity, is the *Preterist School*. "Preterist" *simply means to look back into the past*. This view regards Revelation in the same way as we would view Ephesians or First Corinthians, or any other Book of the Bible. Rather than assuming that a Biblical prophecy is yet to be fulfilled, the Preterist investigates whether it has *already* been fulfilled. Preterists argue that the contents of Revelation need to be viewed from the context of the original recipients with consideration then given to how it can be applied to readers of any era.

I may be regarded as a *Partial Preterist* since I see the Preterist School as clearly the most Biblically responsible of Eschatological (End Times) Schools. Unlike Full-Preterists, I regard Scripture as describing the consummation of this age when Christ will hand over His kingdom to His Father (1Corinthians 15:26; noting Ephesians 1:10) whereupon there will a general physical resurrection (the Second Resurrection) and the final Judgment. I believe all this is described in Revelation, and does not conflict with any of the Church's ancient creeds.

In this School of interpretation there are several important principles of interpretation that I believe must be adhered to for sound interpretation of any Scripture:

1. No Scripture should be interpreted outside of its textual, cultural, or historical context. This encompasses the principle of original audience.
2. No single verse of Scripture should be interpreted as contradicting the overall message of Scripture.
3. No verse should be interpreted as having multiple meanings or fulfilments, unless the passage itself clearly states that this is the case.

Therefore to adequately interpret the Book of Revelation the first of these Hermeneutical principles needs to be honoured. Understanding the *textual* context of the Book of Revelation will help us to realise that when it uses the number seven, unless it defines itself as a literal quantity of seven, it is also to be understood as having symbolic meaning. Taking into consideration John's other writings, especially his Gospel, the textual context reveals that

“seven” represents *complete, finished, all*. Thus when we read that the Lamb has seven horns, the text is actually telling us something other than what on the surface of it appears to be quite grotesque. Understanding that the literary use of the word “horn”



frequently symbolised ‘strength’ in the Old Testament, we see that a Lamb with seven horns speaks of the Vicarious (substitutionary) Christ who has *all strength* (He is therefore “Almighty”).

Understanding the cultural context we would consider that most of the original readers were either from a Jewish background or thoroughly familiar with it. So when it speaks of seals being opened the original readers would have harkened back to the Lord’s words to Daniel to “seal up” these words until the end and realised that the Lord was now saying the end judgment was near. The use of trumpets was highly significant in the Old Testament. They announced to the camp of Israel that a significant and often triumphant time for the community had commenced and that they should gather together in response to the trumpet sound.



THE DATE OF REVELATION’S AUTHORSHIP

It would be remiss of any serious student of Revelation not to at least do a cursory examination of the historical context to which Revelation is back-dropped. The first point reference would have to be to determine when Revelation was written. Most scholars regard there being only two possible dates. Dr. Leon Morris explores this adequately in his Tyndale Commentary

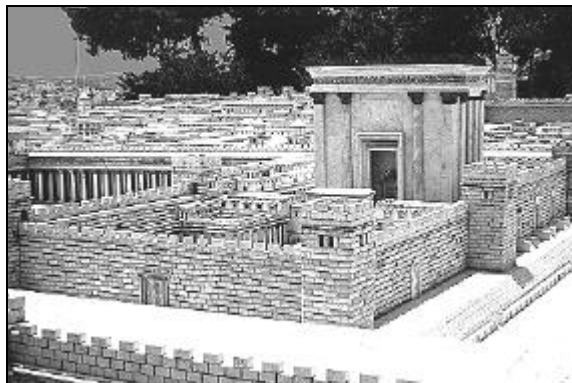
series volume on Revelation, and I recommend that this widely available commentary be read. In the case of most books of the Bible, determining the date of its authorship, while certainly important, is not necessarily crucial to its interpretation. But this is absolutely not the case with the Book of Revelation. Tradition has up until recent times regarded the date Revelation's authorship to be around 95AD. This has been based almost entirely on one vague statement by the second century Church Father, Irenaeus. But the recent doctoral work by Kenneth L. Gentry on dating Revelation has concluded that it must have been written in the "mid to late 60s" rather than in 95AD -

There are suggestive evidences within the book to date it in the mid- to late-60s of the first century. In fact, the evidence is persuasive enough that it convinced such notable scholars Moses Stuart, F. J. A. Hort, B. F. Westcott, and F. W. Farrar in the last century, and J. A. T. Robinson, R. A. Torrey, Albert A. Bell, and C. F. D. Moule in our own day.

Two leading indicators of the early date are: (1) The "temple" in the "holy city" is still standing as John writes, though it is being threatened with devastation (Rev. 11: 1-2). We know as a matter of historical fact that the Jewish temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, and has never been rebuilt. (2) The sixth "king" is presently ruling from the "seven mountains" and will do so until a king comes who will reign a "short time" (Rev. 17:9-10). The preterist takes this to be a clear enough allusion to Nero Caesar. According to the enumeration found in Josephus' Antiquities (18:2:2,6, 10) and Suetonius' Lives of the Twelve Caesars, Nero is Rome's sixth emperor, following Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, and Claudius. The next reigning emperor, Galba, reigned but six months, the shortest reigning emperor until that time.

Sourced from- <http://www.kennethgentry.com/Merchant2/apocalypse.htm>

by Dr. Kenneth Gentry Jr.



Pictured above: A model of the Temple of Christ's day. The actual Temple was destroyed in 70AD by Co-Emperor Titus, as prophesied by Christ in Matthew 24.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It was a dark time for the Church. Since the death of Stephen in Acts 7, the Jewish Temple authorities had been waging a violent war against the Church. This continued up until the time of Jerusalem's destruction in 70AD. Empire sanctioned persecution against the Church was being intensified since 64AD when Nero had ordered Christians to be put to death (usually by beheading). He declared that everyone in the Empire must acknowledge that *he* was Lord and King. Christians were publicly humiliated, ostracized and martyred throughout the Empire by both Jews and the Romans as they refused to declare that Caesar was either their Lord or their King (titles they exclusively reserved for Christ) or that the Old Covenant had any hold on them. Added to this was the rise in false doctrine, an increase in spiritual routine and therefore a decline in authentic passionate love for Jesus.

The Lord reveals through John that the wave of persecution against the Church was driven by the Dragon, no longer would his initial readers be lulled into thinking that they were engaged in some mere politico-ideological war- but a life-and-death *spiritual* war.

CONSISTENCY

Some fanciful interpretations of the Book of Revelation have seen computer chips predicted within its pages and other things equally amazing. But when we refuse to take one verse out of context or let one verse contradict the overall message of Scripture, it is very difficult to give such interpretations any credibility.

Still others have invented a system of interpretation that says a prophecy can have multiple fulfilments. This makes prophetic Bible passages totally arbitrary (subject to change according to a person's whims). The problems with this kind of interpretation are obvious. How does a serious student of the Bible determine when a prophetic passage should be interpreted as having multiple fulfilment options? What about prophecies that we all assumed only had one possible fulfilment (such as the virgin birth of Christ), but someone else claims it will be fulfilled again? Unless the particular prophetic Scripture states that it will have multiple or staggered fulfilment it is hermeneutically perilous to devise multiple fulfilments otherwise. One writer even bases his concept of the "Law of Double Reference" on what he calls an '*ancient rabbinic principle of interpretation*'. Supposedly these are the

same rabbis who deny that Jesus was the Messiah or that He fulfilled any Old Testament prophecy(?).

Too often the symbolised in Revelation is interpreted as meaning something contrary to what Revelation itself says about its own interpretation. One such example of this is to interpret the Dragon as referring to Communist China. The passage goes on to clearly define the Dragon as Satan (Rev. 20:2).

The Preterist view of Revelation sees great value in this awesome culmination to the Bible. There is much to be learned, applied, and drawn on in this Book for your life today. It is my hope that I can prove this to you.



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "A. Corbett". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Andrew Corbett

January 2003