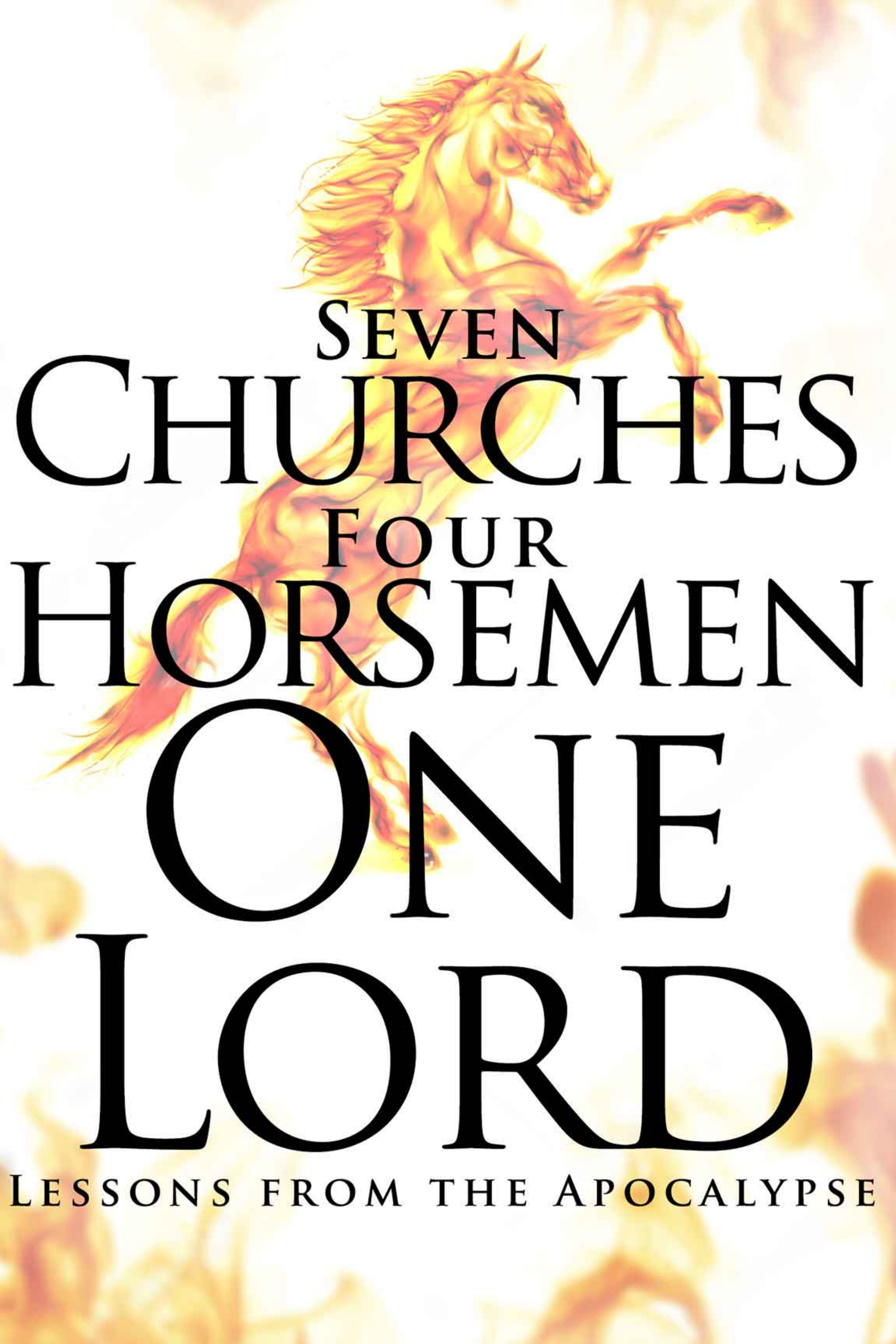


JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE



SEVEN
CHURCHES
FOUR
HORSEMEN
ONE
LORD

LESSONS FROM THE APOCALYPSE

EDITED BY PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN

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FOREWORD

No one knew it at the time, but these were the last sermons that James Montgomery Boice ever preached—his last regular weekly Bible expositions from the historic pulpit of Philadelphia’s Tenth Presbyterian Church.

As he neared the end of a long series of sermons on the book of Matthew, Dr. Boice had begun to think about tackling what is perhaps a preacher’s greatest challenge: the profound mysteries of the book of Revelation. When he casually mentioned to colleagues on Tenth’s pastoral staff that he was “thinking about preaching Revelation,” we urged him to ignore every possible alternative and preach the series that we knew would electrify the congregation.

Any Christian who has ever turned to the back of the Bible to “see how the story ends” or has puzzled over the bizarre and sometimes disturbing images in its final pages knows how strange Revelation is—and how deeply our hearts desire to know what it means. Dr. Boice’s clear and compelling expositions of the Bible’s famous last book became one of his last gifts to his beloved congregation before he died. He began his sermons on Revelation in November of 1999 and concluded them on April 16 of the following year, shortly after receiving the difficult diagnosis of liver cancer. Now, for the first time, these marvelous messages are appearing in print for the blessing of the wider church.

If you look through the table of contents, you will notice immediately that Dr. Boice never made it to the end of Revelation. Sadly, the rapid progression of his disease compelled him to cut his series short, which is one of the obstacles we faced as we considered publication: would people really be interested in reading a commentary on Revelation that ended at chapter 6?

There were other challenges as well. Although Dr. Boice completed his customary first edit of the manuscript—we have the handwritten notes to prove it—he never had the opportunity to prepare it for publication. So, inevitably, some important decisions needed to be made without the benefit of consulting with the author.

I have worked closely with Linda McNamara Boice throughout the editorial process. Like me, Mrs. Boice believed strongly that her late husband's sermons on Revelation deserved a wider audience. We are both deeply grateful to David Almack and other friends at P&R Publishing and also to Bob Brady at the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals for their strong partnership in bringing this book to print, as well as to Lydia Brownback for kindly preparing the indexes.

The entire manuscript has been carefully reviewed for accuracy. The Scripture passages have been updated to the English Standard Version—a more recent, literal, and accurate translation than the one that Dr. Boice typically used for preaching. In various places, Mrs. Boice, the editorial team at P&R, and I agreed that a word was missing or a phrase was redundant, that a pronoun needed to identify its antecedent, that an anachronism ought to be updated, or that the manuscript should be clarified in some other way. But the expositions in this book are essentially the messages that Dr. Boice preached, in a form that he might have approved for publication.

Although the following commentary is incomplete, it stands as an unfinished masterpiece. In the opening chapters, Dr. Boice covers the full range of introductory topics, providing an orientation to the main themes of Revelation. His expositions of the seven letters to the seven churches show how those epistles are fully integrated into the symbols and significance of the book as a whole. His manuscript ends before the opening of the seventh seal, leaving readers to anticipate the coming judgment of God and the consummation of his

Foreword

kingdom. We stand in the same position today—waiting for Christ’s return. Thus, in God’s sovereign providence, the book ends precisely where it should end: with a warning to us to repent of our sin before the final judgment and an invitation to believe in Jesus Christ before his second coming.

James Boice believed that “the purpose of Revelation is to get Christians from all periods of history and in all circumstances to look at things from God’s perspective rather than from man’s and to draw comfort and strength from that perspective” (p. 42). His last Bible expositions have the same purpose: to give us the comfort and strength that come when we see life and eternity from God’s point of view.

Philip Graham Ryken
President
Wheaton College

1

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

Revelation 1:1–3

In his commentary on Revelation, J. Ramsey Michaels quotes this tongue-in-cheek definition of *Revelation* by Ambrose Bierce in *The Devil's Dictionary*: “REVELATION, *n.* A famous book in which St. John the Divine concealed all that he knew. The revealing is done by the commentators, who know nothing.”¹

It is not entirely true that John concealed what he knew, because the ending of the book records these words from John's angelic guide: “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near” (Rev. 22:10), meaning that the book was written to be read and understood. Indeed, the very first paragraph contains a blessing for those who read and heed it: “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, for the time is near” (Rev. 1:3). But Revelation is still obscure to most, if not all, readers, and even the most diligent and persistent scholars are divided over what John is saying. More books have been written about Revelation than about any other book in the Bible. G. K. Beale's commentary on the book has 852 items in its bibliography, and even the more “selected

1. J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 13.

bibliography” of Robert H. Mounce contains 278 commentaries, articles, or reference volumes.

St. Jerome stood in awe of Revelation. He said, “The Apocalypse of John has as many secrets as words.”² Martin Luther did not like Revelation—he wrote, “My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book.” Why not? He explained, though with sad misunderstanding, “There is one sufficient reason for the small esteem in which I hold it—that Christ is neither taught in it nor recognized.”³ Ulrich Zwingli, another Protestant Reformer, did not like Revelation either, saying that “it is not a biblical book.”⁴

Yet how can we avoid studying Revelation? Its words and images have made their way into popular culture. We speak of the new millennium, using a concept that is drawn from Revelation 20. The title of the popular movie *Armageddon* came from the name of the place where the final battle between the forces of God and the forces of Antichrist will be fought, according to Revelation 16. And what of the word *Antichrist* itself? Or the mystical number 666? Or the “seventh seal”? Or the “new Jerusalem”? Or the “four horsemen of the apocalypse”? The list is almost endless.

The real reason for studying Revelation, however, is not its use in popular culture but the fact that it is part of the Bible—and the Bible tells us,

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.
(2 Tim. 3:16–17)

If we study this book carefully, we will find that it is as edifying as any other portion of God’s Word and will be used by God to equip us for obeying him and doing good works.

2. *Epistle*, letter 53, sec. 9, quoted in G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 2.

3. Quoted in Caird, 2.

4. Quoted in William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, vol. 1, *Chapters 1 to 5*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 1.

A BOOK LIKE NO OTHER

The first three verses of this book speak of John in the third person, suggesting that they were added by some official church body as an introduction to and endorsement of the prophecy. This is similar to a verse at the end of the gospel of John (21:24)—which may indicate that both books are by the same author and authenticated by the same church body.⁵ But what kind of book did he write? We have to consider what Revelation is like before starting to study it, because it is unlike any other book of the Bible. The technical word that is used to classify various types of literature is *genre*. What we need to do is determine Revelation's genre. We do not have to do that for Paul's letters or the Gospels, because we know what those types of literature are like—but Revelation is different.

So what is Revelation? It is not a theological treatise or a poem or a history or a gospel. Actually, it is three things all at the same time: (1) a *letter*, which is addressed to “the seven churches that are in Asia” (v. 4); (2) a *prophecy*, which is how the author chiefly identifies his book, beginning as early as verse 3 (see also Rev. 22:7, 10, 18–19); and (3) a unique type of writing from this period of history that is known as an *apocalypse*. We meet references to two of these three types of literature in Revelation 1:1–3 and then to the third type in verse 4.

Let's begin with the strangest of these literary genres.

APOCALYPSE

The word *apocalypse* has come into English as a transliteration of the Greek word for “revelation.” It has two parts: *apo*, meaning “away from,” and *kalupsis*, meaning a “covering” or “veiling.” Thus, *apokalupsis* means “an unveiling” or “a revelation,” and this is how the word is translated in Revelation 1:1: “the revelation of Jesus Christ.” Interestingly enough, it is because of Revelation's use

5. However, Robert Mounce says that “there is no reason to believe that the prologue is the work of some later redactor. It appears to have been added by the author himself after completing the book.” Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977), 63.

of *apokalupsis* in this verse that scholars describe this type of literature as apocalyptic—the entire genre took its name from the wording of this verse.

This literary genre encompasses a body of Jewish writings that flourished in the Near East between roughly 200 BC and AD 100—or, we might say, between the fierce persecution of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BC and the destruction of the Jewish nation by Hadrian in AD 135. These books are filled with vivid images, such as one might see in a dream or vision, and the chief idea throughout them is that history is the working out of a struggle between good and evil on a cosmic scale. They often have angelic guides or interpreters and use symbolic numbers, such as John’s 666. Examples of apocalyptic literature are the book of Enoch, which one writer called “one of the world’s six worst books,” and the Ezra Apocalypse, which is responsible for some of the worst features of medieval theology.⁶

Revelation is like such literature in some ways, but it is different too. For one thing, Revelation identifies its author. It says it was written by a man named John. Apocalyptic literature usually claims to have been written by a well-known historical figure (like Ezra) when it is actually written later by someone who does not identify who he really is. Revelation, in contrast, is identified as having been written by a living person—not by someone who was claiming to be a historical figure. The book also claims to be a prophecy, which apocalyptic literature generally does not.

This leads us to the second of these three genres.

PROPHECY

This is the word John himself uses to describe his work, with its earliest occurrence coming in verse 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, for the time is near.” Its mention of prophecy puts Revelation in the same category as many Old Testament books, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Minor Prophets. These books predict the future, but that is only one

6. See Caird, *Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 10.

(and not necessarily the most important) thing that they do. Prophets speak to the present, in light of what is soon to come, and they call for repentance, faith, and changes in lifestyle from those who hear or read the prophecy. The conclusions of the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor in Revelation 2 and 3 are examples of this feature of prophecy.

LETTER

Revelation is also a letter. It begins in a customary letter format, with the name of the author followed by the name of those to whom he is writing, which is followed in turn by a greeting (see 1:4–5), and it ends as a letter too (see 22:8–21). Elsewhere in my writings I have referred to Romans as a doctrinal treatise wrapped up in a letter. In a similar way, we might call Revelation an apocalyptic prophecy wrapped up in a letter. G. K. Beale, the scholar whom I mentioned having 852 items in his bibliography, lifts a sentence from a large *Introduction to the New Testament* by D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris to conclude that “the most preferable view is that Revelation is ‘a prophecy cast in an apocalyptic mold and written down in a letter form.’”⁷ But, J. Ramsey Michaels says, “If a letter, it is like no other early Christian letter we possess. If an apocalypse, it is like no other apocalypse. If a prophecy, it is unique among prophecies.”⁸

FOUR APPROACHES TO REVELATION

There is another matter that we have to consider in this first introductory study, and that is the period of history to which John’s prophecy should be applied. This is a problem that confronts us early on, because as early as the first paragraph of the book, John refers to his visions as “the things that must soon take place” (v. 1) and

7. D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 479, quoted in G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 39.

8. J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 30, quoted in Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 39.

pronounces a blessing on those who read his prophecy and take it to heart, “for the time is near” (v. 3). Really? More than nineteen hundred years have passed since John wrote these words, and the end times do not seem to have come yet. Or have they? The question leads us to think about the four main approaches that scholars have taken to John’s prophecy.⁹

THE HISTORICIST APPROACH

This is the historic Protestant interpretation of the book. It sees Revelation as a pre-written record of the course of the world from the time of the writer to the end. There is much to commend this view. For one thing, much if not all prophecy is about what is to come. For another, numerous phrases in the book suggest an unfolding future outlook, such as Revelation 1:19, in which John is told to write down “the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this,” or Revelation 4:1, in which a voice from heaven calls to him, saying, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” Proponents of this view have generally understood the seals, trumpets, and bowls as foretelling such successive historical events as the invasion of the Christianized Roman Empire by the Goths and the Muslims, the corruption of the medieval papacy, the founding of the Holy Roman Empire under Charlemagne, the Protestant Reformation, and even the age of Napoleon or the Nazi era or the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The main problem with this view is its subjectivity. Its proponents invariably see the events of Revelation reaching a culmination in their own time and the second coming of Jesus as virtually around the corner. Besides the fact that there has been little agreement among those who hold this view, Jesus has obviously not yet returned. These interpretations also usually ignore what has taken place in lands other than those in the Christianized West.

9. These four approaches are discussed in most of the major commentaries. For a sampling, see Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 44–49; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 39–45; Steve Gregg, ed., *Revelation: Four Views; A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 34–46; and Leon Morris, *The Book of Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 18–24.

THE PRETERIST APPROACH

The word *preterist* comes from the Latin verb *praeterire*, which means “to go before” or “to have happened in the past.” Used in regard to Revelation, this term means that the events prophesied in the book (and in such other New Testament passages as Matthew 24) have already occurred. Preterists are concerned with taking references to time, such as “soon” (Rev. 1:1), “the time is near” (Rev. 1:3), and “this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (Matt. 24:34), literally. How? By maintaining that the fulfillment of these prophecies has already occurred as a result of God’s judgment on Jerusalem, through its destruction by the Romans in AD 70. It is true that some preterists believe that the final chapters of Revelation look forward to the second coming of Christ, but even these see the bulk of John’s prophecies as having been fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem.

There are several problems with this view. For one thing, if Revelation and other prophetic passages are about the past, then we are left with no real words about the future. The disciples’ question “When will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matt. 24:3) is not answered. Another problem is that the decisive victory described in Revelation’s last chapters did not occur during the destruction of Jerusalem, which is why some preterists break with the pattern and see these chapters as pertaining to the future.

THE FUTURIST APPROACH

The easiest way to solve these difficulties is to defer the fulfillment of the prophecies of Revelation to the future—to a time shortly before Christ’s return. This is the approach of dispensationalism, but dispensationalists are not the only futurists. This is probably the dominant broad evangelical view. In this approach, chapters 2 and 3 of the book, which contain the letters to the seven churches, are usually seen as a description of the things that are happening now (see Rev. 1:19), while chapter 4 through verse 5 of chapter 22—the bulk of the book—is seen as referring to the end times exclusively. These chapters are understood to teach the following: the restoration of

ethnic Israel to its own land, the church's rapture into heaven, a seven-year tribulation period, the appearance of the Antichrist, the battle of Armageddon, Christ's second coming, the subsequent millennium, and the establishing of a new heaven and new earth. Futurists tend to take the prophecies more literally than other views do, which is easy for them since, none of these events having occurred, their interpretations cannot be falsified.

The major weakness of this position is that it leaves the book without any real significance for those to whom it is addressed—and Revelation is meant to be significant. "Blessed are those who hear [this prophecy], and who keep what is written in it," John says (Rev. 1:3).

THE IDEALIST APPROACH

This fourth approach is sometimes also called the *symbolic* or *spiritual* approach. It affirms that the prophecies do not describe actual historical events, whether past or future, but instead use symbols to portray transcendent spiritual realities, such as the conflict between Christ and Satan or good and evil. The strength of this position lies in the fact that Revelation obviously does employ symbols as a literary device and that such symbols can and do have present significance. The weakness of the view is that it denies the book any specific historical fulfillment.

NOW, BUT ALSO NOT YET!

In one way or another, each of these views has been with us for centuries—and in many cases the positions of their adherents have hardened. This might suggest that there is no way to resolve these matters—that we simply have to take one and get on with it, whether it is right or not. I do not think that such pessimism is warranted. On the contrary, what I observe is a maturing approach to Revelation in many recent commentaries, which can perhaps be best understood as a conservative attempt to recognize and include the best features of each of these four views while rejecting the most problematic aspects of each.

Let me explain how I want to approach Revelation. I have two main guidelines. First, I believe that Jesus himself gives the overall framework for all New Testament prophecy (which the New Testament writers consciously follow) in Matthew 24. In that chapter, he recognizes and prophesies the imminent destruction of Jerusalem but indicates that, as shattering as that event will be, it is not a sign of his immediate coming. There will be many “signs” in history—wars, famines, earthquakes, persecutions, apostasy in the church, and false prophets—but none of these will be genuine signs of his return. This is because his actual coming will be without warning. It will be sudden—like lightning flashing from the east to the west. The conclusion to this discourse is that, since we do not know when Jesus will return, we need to “keep watch” and “be ready.” Jesus uses no fewer than seven illustrations, images, or parables to make this point (see Matt. 24:36–25:46).

My second guideline is from 1 John 2:18, where the same John who, in my opinion, wrote Revelation declares, “Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come.” This means that a biblical prophecy can have a genuine fulfillment in history without that fulfillment necessarily being the prophecy’s final or full fulfillment.

There are examples of what I mean in Revelation itself. For example, John refers in verse 14 of chapter 2 to people who “hold the teaching of Balaam” and in verse 20 to “that woman Jezebel.” These are not reincarnations of that ancient mercenary prophet or that particularly wicked queen. They are examples of what we might call a recurring biblical pattern. You have heard of Balaam; even now there are many Balaams. You have heard of Jezebel, but even now there are many Jezebels. In a similar way, John the Baptist not only was like but in a sense actually was Elijah (see Matt. 11:14).

Let me put it another way. When the Reformers of the sixteenth century identified the pope of their day as the Antichrist and the papacy as the great prostitute of Babylon, that was literally the case for them and for their time. Rome was proclaiming a false gospel. She was the enemy of Christ. This was a true fulfillment. But this does not exclude an even more complete or literal fulfillment of the

prophecies concerning the Antichrist and the prostitute of Babylon in the last days. Are there antichrists today? False prophets? There certainly are. But we can also believe that a final Antichrist and a final false prophet will appear before Jesus Christ returns.

Earlier I wrote that I detect a maturing approach to Revelation along these lines in several recent writers. Let me give two examples. The first is Robert Mounce, who writes,

It is important to see with the preterist that the book must be interpreted in light of the immediate historical crisis in which the first-century church found itself. The author employs a literary genre that grew out of his own cultural and linguistic milieu. His figures of speech and imagery are to be interpreted in the context of his own historical setting. They are not esoteric and enigmatic references to some future culture totally foreign to first century readers (e.g., cobalt bombs, Telstar, the European Common Market, etc.).

With the *historicist* it is important to notice that the philosophy of history revealed in the Apocalypse has found specific fulfillment in all the major crises of human history up to the present day.

With the *futurist* we must agree that the central message of the book is eschatological, and to whatever extent the End has been anticipated in the course of history, it remains as the one great climactic point toward which all history moves. This age will come to an end. Satan and his hosts will be destroyed and the righteous will be vindicated. These are historical events which will take place in time. And they are future.

With the *idealist* one must agree that the events of history give expression to basic underlying principles. God is at work behind the scenes to bring to pass his sovereign intention for man. To whatever extent the idealist rules out a consummation, it is difficult to see from history alone any cause for optimism. It is the end that gives meaning to the process.¹⁰

10. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 43–44.

My second example represents an idealist or symbolic approach, but it is still a combination of the different views. J. Ramsey Michaels writes,

Just as chapters 2–3 are now read (much like Paul’s letters) as pastoral messages to first-century congregations with implications for other churches in many different times and places, so chapters 4–22 should be read as a series of first-century visions containing promises and warnings to Christian believers always and everywhere. They remind us, for example, that the world we live in is a battleground between good and evil, that in heaven the battle is already won, and that Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, is now in control (chap. 5). Troubles and disasters on earth are actually part of the divine plan. . . . The devil is active on earth deceiving the nations because he was defeated and thrown out of heaven (chap. 12), not because he ever prevailed over God. Christians will confront the devil’s futile anger in the form of an oppressive state that calls them to worship a human being rather than God (chap. 13).¹¹

Michaels believes that, although in John’s situation “the oppressive state was Rome,” even after Rome has been destroyed, the devil will deceive the nations again, and the conflict will repeat itself.

THE KINGDOM HAS COME

I want us to see one more thing before I end this study. It comes from the fact that (although this is difficult to notice in our English translations) the first verse of Revelation is probably a deliberate echo of Daniel 2:28, but with one important change. (We are going to notice many deliberate echoes of Daniel as we proceed). Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar that God had “made known” to him (the word is “revealed,” just as in Revelation 1:1) “what will be in the latter days.” When we remember that this is said in regard to Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a great statue representing four successive world empires,

11. Michaels, *Revelation*, 25–26.

and that the climax of the vision is about a stone that will strike and destroy the statue and then grow up to become a mountain that will fill the whole earth, we recognize this as a prophecy that the kingdom of Jesus will one day fill the earth. But here is the significant thing: John's opening echo of Daniel's words replaces the phrase "in the latter days" with "soon." In other words, John is saying that, unlike Daniel who was told to seal up the words of his prophecy "until the time of the end" (Dan. 12:9), John's own words are for now, for our time, because Jesus has come and is building his kingdom in our days.

Years ago, when I wrote a book on Daniel, I was unsure about how to interpret this statue vision. I recognized the destruction of the statue's iron legs to be the destruction of the Roman Empire, but I did not know whether the growth of the mountain was a picture of what we would call the church age or a preview of the final kingdom of Christ in the very last days. I said at the time that I probably favored the latter.¹²

I do not see it that way now. I still believe in a future fulfillment of the vision. The kingdom of Christ will be a real, literal kingdom in the last days. I believe in a literal future millennium. But I also see the fulfillment in the present, for it is also now, in this age, that Jesus is doing these things. Daniel looked forward to the coming of the Messiah in the future. John is saying that his prophecies are for now—but also for every age of history until the final culmination in the second coming of Jesus and the last judgment. Which is why the opening paragraph ends with a blessing for those who read, hear, and take to heart what is written (see Rev. 1:3). This beatitude is the first of seven in the book (the others are found in Rev. 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14)—nearly everything in Revelation seems to happen in series of sevens. This first beatitude almost perfectly reproduces the words of Jesus from Luke 11:28 ("Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it") and is matched at the end of the prophecy by a curse on those who do not obey the instruction (Rev.

12. See James Montgomery Boice, *Daniel: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 41–43.

22:18–19). It is also the only blessing in the Bible that is attached to the reading of a particular book.

The words of this blessing show that Revelation was written not primarily to give information for the mind, as if its goal were only to enable us to figure out what might happen at the end of time or even merely to look back at the past and understand it. It was written to enable Christian people to live for Jesus today. And it requires that they do! The book imparts a moral obligation. Revelation teaches us that the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (see Rev. 11:15). Therefore, although the kingdoms of this world seem powerful and sometimes even glorious from our point of view, we must know that the world is destined for destruction and that the kingdom of Christ will triumph—and we must live like we believe it. The empire of Babylon collapsed. Rome was overrun by the Huns and the Goths. But the kingdom of our God is forever. Hallelujah!