

THE
MYSTERY
OF CHRIST
IN THE
REVELATION

A Commentary on the Book of Revelation

BY: TED BYLER

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Carlisle Printing
OF WALNUT CREEK Ltd.

2673 Township Road 421
Sugar creek, OH 44681

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THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST IN THE REVELATION

PREFACE

The Revelation of Jesus Christ recorded by St. John is probably the most challenging Book of the Bible one can study. While it is written in a form common to prophetic books of the OT like Daniel and Isaiah, the Book of Revelation stands alone in the NT. The language is deeply rooted in the rest of Scripture; in direct quotes, allusions, and word associations.

One of the reasons for Jesus' revelation to His people was to show *things which must shortly come to pass* (1:1). It is therefore a foretelling of what His people should expect to face during the intervening time until His return. The difficulty is that while some of the prophecies are explained, most are veiled in language often hard to understand. This has led to widely varied interpretations and speculations, many of which do not come close to expressing what the Spirit of God really means to reveal. Some people choose to completely avoid the book, and some even believe it is not understandable.

In the last one hundred years or so, there has been increased interest in end-time prophecy, spurred mostly by new ideas and theories popularized over the pulpit and by so-called prophecy seminars. Some prophecy teachers even claim special revelation from God, for their teachings cannot be found in the Bible. The old-fashioned interpretations of the Revelation have been scorned, along with many other teachings that our contemporary churches proclaim to be out-dated and out-of-style. Prophecy interpretation must be held to the standard of God's Word, but in this day of tolerance we seem to find it hard to reject un-Biblical teachings, something the Anabaptists and early Christians did not hesitate to do, and for which they paid with their very lives many years ago.

Several reasons motivated me to write this commentary, the major one being the absence of any other in-depth study of the Book of Revelation from

an Anabaptist perspective. A second motivation is to open the Book to more general use in churches, for many avoid it simply to keep away from interpretation disagreements. This serves to make the visions even more obscure and misunderstood, which is an unfortunate development, for the Book has much to give to the Church, especially those facing hardships and trials.

The Book of Revelation inspires us to live our faith more than does any other book of the Bible. Leaving eschatology aside, where do we find a more beautiful illustration of redemption and the marvelous sacrifice of Christ than in Revelation 5? Or the great defeat of Satan in Chapter 12, the inspiring picture of heavenly bliss in Chapter 21, and the coming marriage of the Bride of Christ to the Lamb of God in Chapter 19? The Book is full of these pictures that add real emotional feeling to the Biblical expressions of mercy, grace, love, faith, and salvation. Every Christian, regardless of their personal view of eschatology should be able to appreciate these pictorial parables of Christ's Revelation. He spoke in human parables when He walked this earth, and now from heaven He shows us spiritual ones.

This book does not attempt to refute the many different ideas and teachings about the end of the world. That is a study entirely of its own. Our goal is not to present the "correct" schedule of the end of the world, or even to advance one eschatological view. The purpose of this work is to progress verse-by-verse through the only book of the Bible that promises a blessing to those who read it. We will encounter various topics as we go, and will turn often to other Scriptures for a deeper and more complete understanding. In general, we have avoided giving the views of other commentators, seeking the Spirit's intended meaning independently, not because of mistrust, but in order to keep an open mind.

I want to acknowledge and thank the many people who have helped me in writing this book. Especially I want to thank my father, William, and my brothers, who spent many evenings discussing with me the ideas presented herein. Those who agreed to pray daily for me during the 5+ years I spent studying and writing share in the success of this work. And also my grand father, Dan JB Byler, whose life and witness was a great inspiration to me, and whose writings on types and shadows and the Revelation are well known in the Mennonite Church.

The many commentaries on the Revelation and eschatology reveal that each author has his own set of premises and agendas based on his own particular theology which colors his interpretations. My own pet ideas and concerns derive from my conservative Mennonite heritage, and I do not hesitate to say that they affect my thoughts as well.

We have sincerely sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit in studying this great and last book of the Bible. In searching and comparing the Scriptures, the absolute inerrancy and agreement of the Bible with itself was profoundly revealed. Though human writers wrote the individual books over many centuries of time, the author is the all-knowing God who purposefully created heaven and earth. Over and over in the Book of Revelation phrases and words are carefully used that have previous associations and meanings which agree minutely with details being presented by the visions of John. Often the cryptic and obscure sentence becomes clear and meaningful when one discovers that it is based on previously written Scripture.

I thoroughly acknowledge that this work is not error-free. It is only a human effort. My highest goal is to give the correct interpretation, and have earnestly sought it in much study and prayer. The Holy Spirit is the giver of the warnings and prophecies in the Book, and my greatest fear is to present something that was not His intended meaning. It has made me stay as close to the Bible as possible to avoid inaccuracies. The mistakes are mine; learn from them as you grow in the understanding of this great Book.

METHODS OF STUDY

THE THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE REVELATION

Perhaps no topic has inspired more argument and opinion than the events involving the Second Coming of Christ. Volumes have been written by scholars and commentators down through the years, each championing some system of interpreting the Scriptures. We now stand some 18 centuries after the first interpretations of the Apostle John's vision, a position that allows us to evaluate and learn from men of God what the Revelation meant to them. It allows us to test the prophecy teachers, as God instructed the Israelites to do. If a prophet's message did not come to pass, he had *spoken it presumptuously* (Deut 18:22) and his words were not to be trusted. Such a test would certainly produce failing marks for many recent prophecy scholars, whose predictions must constantly change to keep up with world events. These teachers easily find almost every new world tragedy or war in prophecy, for according to their scheme, virtually all prophecy is to be fulfilled in our own time, or at least in the very near future. In our opinion it is an error to hold one's own era of time in such high value. The *last times* began with the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom of Christ (I Peter 1:20; Heb 1:2; Luke 16:16) and encompasses the entire Age of Grace. When David said *my times are in Thy hand* (Ps 31:15), did he not speak for every Christian regardless of when or where he lived?

A review of recent Revelation commentaries reveals that time has not narrowed man's ideas and interpretations. Rather, it has greatly expanded them, even to the point that a seeker may despair at the many divisions and subdivisions of the three major ways of interpreting the Book. Even within the

same view of interpretation commentators advance ideas that contradict the standard view of that interpretation, leading to a quagmire of sub-divisions that conflict and overlap indiscriminately. With all this confusion, it is not surprising that many do not even study the Revelation for themselves, but are completely content to let someone else (whom they trust) tell them how and what to believe. We do not trust men with our salvation; do not trust them with the Revelation. Study it for yourself. You will find wonderful blessings there and a deeper admiration for the precise agreement of Scripture among its many earthly writers whose pen moved at the will of the Holy Ghost. The beautiful pictures inspire us with longing for heaven and keep our eyes lifted upward to Christ, away from earthly distractions and turmoils.

The three general methods of interpreting the Revelation are called Preterism, Futurism, and Historicism. The criterion used to divide these views is determined by answering one all-important question: when are the prophecies to be fulfilled? Arguing the symbolic meanings of words, figurative or literal interpretation techniques, and even the applications of the visions to earthly events are all subordinate to the underlying premise of when one believes the prophecies will come to pass. The time-frame within which the Revelation is fulfilled is so important that it alone will determine which of the three views you will take. Certainly we form our conviction of that time-frame by the content of the Book, but once formed, it will override all other criteria of interpretation. We do not say this critically, for this commentary itself is thus influenced. Let us settle first then, the question of when the prophecies of the Revelation are to be fulfilled.

Preterism sees the Revelation fulfilled in the first few centuries following Christ, and therefore Preterists seek applications for the prophecies in the distant past. Futurism believes the entire Book will be fulfilled during the last years of world history, and their applications are accordingly found only in future (or current) events. Historicism views the prophetic scenes as events occurring throughout the Church Age, and therefore fulfillments are sought in both the past and the future. Though commentators argue their applications of the visions of the Revelation individually, the first and foremost premise of every application is subordinate to the time of fulfillment.

Generally, Futurists never consider past events as possible fulfillments of the Revelation, and Preterists do not consider future events as likely fulfillments.

PRETERISM

The Preterist view believes that the majority of the prophecy is past, and was fulfilled mostly in the destruction of Jerusalem and the decline of the Roman Empire. Preterists are usually A-millennial and non-Dispensational (we will define those terms a little later). This view requires the Book of Revelation to be written before A.D. 70 (the date of Jerusalem's destruction), an indefensible position in our opinion. The early Church writers (see Irenaeus) affirm that the Apostle John wrote the Revelation during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96).

Preterism is based upon a strict interpretation of Jesus' promise, *Behold I come quickly* (found three times in Chapter 22 alone), and the phrase *the time is at hand* (1:3, 22:10). Full Preterists believe that God would be deceitful to say Jesus was coming soon and then tarry for 2,000 years. Therefore, they believe Jesus' Second Coming took place during the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. But the difficulties of Preterism are insurmountable, for although there are a few verses that could be taken to mean that Jesus' return would be soon after His ascension, there are many others implying that it would be a long time before His return (see pages 33 and 80). Peter's second epistle answers the Preterist's question about Jesus' apparent delay in returning for the faithful: *There shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of His coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation... Be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance... And account that the long suffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you (II Peter 3:3-15)*. Peter says that God counts time differently than humans do. The fact that this passage

is in the Bible strongly hints that rather than returning immediately, Christ's return would be a long time coming, by human reckoning. Peter says the day will come (and now is) that many will scoff at the promise of His coming, seeing that it was given so long ago and that He still has not returned.

Because of the failure of many of Futurism's prophetic claims, and the fact that Christ continues to tarry, Preterism is increasingly attractive to some denominations. It is hard to understand why these well-intentioned Christians can believe that Christ would return only 40 years after He ascended to His Throne. The mighty Kingdom of Christ has gathered millions and millions of souls into heaven since A.D. 70, and NT teaching is clear that the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the world will culminate the earthly aspect of the Kingdom and usher in the eternal heavenly one.

Indeed, a chief reason for the three views of the Revelation is disagreement on the Biblical meaning of the *Kingdom of Christ*, also called *the Kingdom of God* and *the Kingdom of heaven*. We believe the Kingdom of Christ began with His ascension into heaven (Rev 5), and that His *Kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever* (Daniel 2:44). Every man who seeks the God of heaven presses into this *everlasting Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (II Peter 1:11; Luke 16:16). (See page 290 for a more detailed discussion of the Kingdom.)

FUTURISM

The Futurist camp believes that the Vision is entirely future, all of Chapters 4-22 taking place after the Church Age has ended. The Futurist program, also called Millennialism, believes the next prophetic event will be the Rapture, an event which removes the Church and the Holy Spirit from the earth for a period of seven years during which God will renew His previous OT Covenant with national Israel. After the seven years, Jesus will return and reign on the earth with the resurrected saints and Jews for 1,000 years, a millennium of peace during which Satan is bound. At the end of the Millennium, Satan will be loosed from his prison and will deceive the people of the Kingdom into

rebellious against Christ and joining him in the Battle of Armageddon. There Satan is finally defeated and along with his demons is confined forever in hell, while the saints go to be forever in heaven.

Futurists are divided into Pre-millennialists, who believe the Rapture takes place before the Millennial reign, and Post-millennialists, who believe it takes place after the Millennium. There are also at least three types of Pre-millennialists; Pre-tribulation, Post-tribulation, and Mid-tribulation, again based on when the Rapture is to take place. The most popular view of Futurism is Pre-tribulation Pre-millennialism.

HISTORICISM

Historicists believe much of the Vision is past, being fulfilled in church history from the Apostles to the present. They do not believe in a literal earthly Millennial reign of Christ at all, which is why they are often called A-millennialists (A- is the Latin/Greek prefix for "not"). This is actually an inaccurate term, for A-millennialists do believe in the Millennium. However, rather than a future age of earthly peace, they see the Millennium as symbolic term for the Kingdom of the Church of God, and the spiritual blessings she receives with Christ as her King during this Age of Grace. They believe the Second Coming of Christ is one short event at the end of the world when Christ returns for His saints and judges the wicked.

Historicists are divided into literal Historicists and spiritual Historicists, with the spiritual Historical view the more popular one presently. Most of the trusted, older Bible commentators like Matthew Henry, Adam Clarke, and Albert Barnes were literal Historicists. Literal Historicists believe the Revelation contains world prophecies literally fulfilled down through history including that of the very end-time. They find events like the Reformation, the French Revolution, and the rise of the Islamic religion in the visions of the Revelation. Spiritual Historicists also believe the prophecies are fulfilled throughout the Church Age, but that the visions are largely fulfilled in the spiritual sense, presenting warning messages for the Church, illustrating God's eternal plan for man, and showing what is happening in the spirit world during the Church Age.

Some students of eschatology divide literal and spiritual Historicism into two separate views, making four primary schools of interpretation: Preterism, Futurism, Historical, and Spiritual. But the Historical and Spiritual views share all of the major premises of interpretation, and therefore should not be divided, except as sub-groups. The difference in their applications of the visions of the Revelation at times are simply specific versus general—literal Historicists will see a prophecy completely fulfilled in a single event of history, while spiritual Historicists interpret the same prophecy to be fulfilled in many, repeated events in history. Thus, spiritual Historicists believe the purpose of the Revelation is as much evangelistic as it is prophetic. They see the visions often fulfilled in the spiritual realm and in abstract concepts like mercy and grace.

This book is based upon the Historical view, largely the spiritual Historical view, though if a comparison is made to books written under the same position, (Hendriksen, Mauro, Alexander) differences will be seen. Literal and spiritual Historicists are closely related and often share identical interpretations (see Smith, Barnes, Clarke). We differentiate between the two in order to show the reason for their differences, which begins with what one believes to be the primary purpose of the Book. Literal Historicists tend to see the Book as a careful prophetic chronology of world events during the Age of Grace, from the Cross to the Second Coming of Christ. Spiritual Historicists, while not rejecting the idea that prophetic events are prominent in the Revelation, view the Book foremost as an unveiling of the spiritual realm, a “behind the scenes view” of Christ’s spiritual Kingdom on earth (John 18:36).

The veil that lies between the physical reality and the spiritual is mysterious and a little scary, being so unfathomable to the human mind. We believe a primary purpose of the Revelation is to lift that veil a little so that we can see beyond the present and into the *hereafter*, revealing what is happening in the spiritual realm and glimpsing the joys and delights of eternity with Christ. And though the human mind cannot really know or even comprehend life after physical death, we are able to grasp it by association through the graphic word-pictures and figurative language that the Holy Spirit communicated through the Apostle John. The highly figurative language and the allegorical nature of the Revelation is due to the inability of the natural man to “see” into

the spiritual realm and understand it without these literary aids, which were also used by Christ and the Apostles in the rest of Scripture.

We said earlier that the first and foremost premise of applying the Revelation is based on when one believes the time of fulfillment is to be. This is one thing the text does not directly state. I am a Historicist; first because that view best corresponds with my understanding of the content of the visions, and some of the most easily substantiated arguments for the Historical view are detailed a few pages later under the topic “Arrangement of the book.” Secondly, I am a Historicist because that view best corresponds with my understanding of the NT; that salvation is possible only through Calvary, and is available equally to Jew and Gentile. The greatest event this world will ever know was the death of God the Son to redeem sinful man. Future events are secondary and dependent upon that superlative occasion. Thirdly, I am a Historicist because the end of the world throughout Scripture is presented as a single event. The Rapture, the appearing of Jesus in the clouds, the burning up of heaven and earth, and the great white Throne Judgment cannot be separated by a thousand years without distorting the plain teaching of the Bible (page 142).

QUESTIONS

It is clear that Preterism, Futurism, and Historicism are each based on their individual premises of when the visions are to be fulfilled, and the Millennium question is obviously dependent on the same premise. Futurism and Millennialism are virtually synonymous, for both pre-suppose Revelation 20, the Millennium chapter, to be in the future. Very generally speaking then, the greatest disagreement concerning the Revelation is when the prophecies are to be fulfilled, rather than what the prophecies mean.

An additional factor could be called the Jewish question: What is God’s plan for physical Israel? Is there a future for national Israel? Dispensationalism is the term used for those who believe that God will revive the natural Jews as His chosen people sometime in the future. Dispensationalists believe God has not yet honored His promises to Israel given to Abraham and the prophets, and they propose a seven-year era immediately following the return of Christ

in which those prophecies are fulfilled. While the overwhelming majority of Futurists are Dispensationalists, virtually all Historicists and Preterists reject the tenets of Dispensationalism.

We believe the NT teaches that Israel after the flesh is no longer, nor ever again will be, the people of God. When the Son of God came to this earth, He fulfilled the OT Law and Prophets completely, and now it is spiritual Israel, *they which are of faith*—Jews and Gentiles alike—that make up the people of God. This last epoch of God’s dealing with man will continue until Christ returns for those who are trusting in Him. (See page 231 for a full discussion of Dispensationalism.)

A simple way to determine a person’s beliefs about the end of the world (eschatology) and how he understands the Book of Revelation is to answer three questions, which also form the primary points of conflict between Preterism, Futurism, and Historicism:

1. When are the prophecies to be fulfilled?
2. What is the Millennium?
3. What is in store for the Jewish people?

PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

With all due respect, there can only be one correct meaning that the Spirit of God intended for the symbols and visions of John. We must obtain that meaning strictly from its Author, and not from human intellect. The Spirit searches the *deep things of God* and reveals them to those who truly seek. He speaks primarily through the Word of God; there we are sure to find the answers we seek.

This work is based on three premises that we have diligently attempted to follow, the first being: **Use Scripture to interpret the Book of Revelation.** The Book is written in highly *signified* (Rev 1:1) language, but it cannot be totally symbolic. Without at least some literal language the Book would be completely obscure. How do we know what is symbolic, and how do we know what the symbols mean? In using Scripture to interpret the Revelation, we assign spiritual meanings only to those terms that have been used figuratively elsewhere in the Bible, and then we use only those same meanings in

the Revelation. If a term is not used symbolically elsewhere in Scripture, we will not attempt to use it so in understanding the Revelation.

In order to interpret the Book correctly it is absolutely essential to discern whether the language is symbolic or literal. This is one of the most difficult parts of interpreting the Revelation, and we must make every attempt to let the Holy Spirit instruct us, for no man can rightly understand these visions by his own wisdom (II Peter 1:20). It is just as wrong to take something literally that the Holy Spirit meant to be understood figuratively as it is to take something figuratively that He meant to be understood literally. Despite the statements of literalists to the contrary, interpreting symbolically (often called "spiritualizing" in a derogatory way) does not lead to liberal views in other teachings. Just the opposite is true, as any survey of the wide range of literal commentaries will demonstrate.

We read the visions naturally and take the overall meaning of the particular theme—each seal or trumpet, for example. Then we cross-reference other Scriptures that John was quoting to help understand the message. We do not invent new meanings for symbols or ignore the general intent of the language by finding symbolism in every word. Symbolism helps us understand the meanings; it does not actually become the meaning. When symbolism is the only standard of an interpretation system, the visions become vulnerable to human speculation.

There are numerous symbols in the Revelation whose meanings are directly stated, and by these we can examine whether our approach is correct. Without exception, every symbol is used consistently and appropriately throughout the entire Scripture. For examples, study the lampstand (11:4), the Dragon (12:9), the Lamb (5:6), and the sea (17:15). A word study on any of these will show that when they are used symbolically in other contexts they carry the same meanings and connotations. One note of caution: some words have more than one figurative meaning. Fire, for example, is a symbol for the Holy Spirit (Mt 3:11; Acts 2:3; Ex 13:21; Rev 4:5), but it also is used figuratively as a weapon of punishment from God (Deut 4:24; Ps 18:12; Is 30:27; Eze 1:13; Lev 10:2; Rev 14:18). A limited glossary of figurative words is given in the back of this book.

Those meanings which are not directly stated in the Revelation can be found by studying other Biblical passages. Consider Jesus' teachings, which contain more symbolism than any OT prophet. *I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, how can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth My flesh, and drinketh My blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day* (John 6:51-54). We know by searching the Word what Jesus intended here, but the skeptics did not. Any sincere seeker studies Scripture by comparing passages and letting the plain ones reveal the obscure ones. Why should we do differently when studying prophecy and the Revelation?

Sometimes a phrase or sentence has a figurative meaning that is not meant to be broken up into individual words with separate meanings. Searching the Scriptures is again the key to correctly understanding the symbolic connotations of phrases. Sometimes we can tell just by its usage throughout the rest of Revelation that a phrase has its own figurative meaning. For example, the phrase *thunderings, lightnings, and voices* occurs about five times in the Revelation, and though these words may each have individual meanings, together they form their own meaning. Care must be taken not to break up a figurative phrase into pieces, or the true purpose of the vision could be lost.

Let's summarize how we will study a seal, trumpet, or vial. The first step is to visualize the overall picture and its implications. Then we will research and study the figurative meanings of its parts to add detail to the overall intent of the picture. The symbols will support the overall meaning, and will not conflict with it, or lead away from the clear intent of the particular vision. After we have a fair understanding of a passage, we apply its meaning to something: an event, warning, condition, etc. We must use the entire seal or trumpet in context with the others to determine the setting, the audience, and the intent of that particular vision. The whole interpretation must agree with the surrounding visions, and the entire Bible itself.

The second premise this study is based upon is that **prophecy will not contradict other doctrines** taught in the Bible, nor will it institute new ones.

At first glance this may seem to be an obvious statement, but to many commentators the idea that prophecy speaks about future eras brings freedom to advance theologies about the future that do not harmonize with the New Testament. We must not allow teachers to discount Bible commands about divorce and remarriage, the ordinance of the head-veiling, and feet-washing with the argument that “they were for that particular time.” Neither should we allow them to set aside NT teachings such as separation from the world, Jesus is the only way to God, and non-resistance with the argument that these will not be part of God’s requirements in a future age. Numerous NT writers affirmed that the last age began with the sacrifice of Christ (I John 2:18; Heb 1:2; I Peter 1:20), and we are told not to accept *any other gospel*, even if *an angel from heaven* would preach it (Gal 1:8). We have God’s final and permanent Word in our hands, according to it there will not be another. All prophecy is subservient and harmonious with all of Scripture (Rev 19:10).

The third premise of this study is that **prophecy is relevant for all ages**. In the OT, the prophets warned the wicked of impending judgment, and comforted the righteous with promises that God had not forsaken them. Their messages were for the people of their own era, but they are also timeless in that for centuries Christians have used them for comfort, blessing, and warning. Throughout the Bible, the chief purpose of prophecy is not simply to foretell the future, but also to warn sinners and encourage the saints by showing the big picture of God’s plan. This was the way the prophets spoke in the OT, and the way *That Prophet* spoke to His disciples. If we go far afield from this Biblical precedent, we are on dangerous ground.

SOME THOUGHTS ON HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is an in-depth verse-by-verse commentary of the Book of Revelation, and for some readers it will be difficult to read from cover to cover. For this reason, we have tried to make each part self-teaching, so that one can begin reading at any point and not miss too much. Repetition is unavoidable with this approach, but we have limited it by providing page and verse links so that readers can jump to associated passages. Many of the visions are associated with others, and it is important to study these related passages to

understand the full meaning. The best study approach is to read the book from beginning to end, or at least a section at a time. But this is a reference book, and we have tried to make it useful both in answering questions about single verses and in deeper study of the Book's overall purpose and meaning.

For easy reference, the 22 chapters of this book have been made to correspond to the 22 chapters of the Revelation, and a short outline is given at the beginning of each section. A limited glossary of symbolic words appears at the end of the book to aid additional study, and to show how the meanings of figurative words are consistently used in the Bible. Throughout the book, I use the pronoun "we" to indicate that the interpretation given fully agrees with those I have consulted. The few times the pronoun "I" appears are those in which the idea given does not have their unanimous support.

This is a commentary, which means that it contains one man's ideas of what God intended the Revelation to mean to the Church. We do not claim to have the full and infallibly correct understanding of the Revelation, though we have sought it carefully in prayer. This book does not take the place of personal study of the Scriptures—we hope that it will stimulate more study and research. Write your own thoughts and helpful verses in the margins and underline the parts that are especially meaningful. When you disagree, write the reasons why, and study those Bible passages that relate.

For group study, we recommend a structured, verse-by-verse, beginning to end approach to studying the Revelation as opposed to an open, topical approach. The first sessions should focus on determining the audience, purpose, and theme of the Book, and this should be periodically re-evaluated during group study. At the end of the study, a final discussion should be held to determine if those intentions have been met, and to examine ways the Revelation can aid the Christian's walk with God (see Epilogue).

TO WHOM IS THE REVELATION WRITTEN?

The Revelation is written to the people of the Kingdom, the Church of Christ. This statement seems simple enough, especially in light of the first four verses: *John to the seven churches which are in Asia*. The messages are not limited to only those seven churches addressed, else the majority of the

NT must be declared inapplicable on the same grounds. The seven churches represent all the churches (page 38). The churches are commanded to *hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein* (1:3). Dispensationalists teach that the Church is gone from the earth by Chapter 4, and that most of the Book tells of the future for the Jewish race. This work rejects that premise as incompatible with the content of the Revelation and unsupportable by even common logic. We are confident that this *testimony of Jesus* is deeply concerned with His Bride, the apple of His eye, those whom He has redeemed by the offering of His blood on the cross of Calvary. The great love and care Christ has for the Church are revealed frequently in this great Book; indeed, it is for this reason that the visions were given.

It is a sad fact that many pastors and churches avoid the Revelation because of Dispensationalism's claim that it was not written about or for the Church, but about and for physical Israel. But the Apostle John was not a Jewish prophet, he was a Christian prophet. Futurism's notion that from Chapter 4 onward the Revelation does not concern the Church cannot be correct. The Book begins by addressing Christians as the audience (1:4) and ends with a similar concluding statement: *I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches* (22:16). We appeal to common sense. Why would the triumphant Christ leave His own purchased possession—the Church—wondering about her earthly future, now 2,000 years old? Does it not seem probable that He would leave behind a chart of events foretelling the things which she must endure for the long interval between His comings? If the New Covenant is such an improvement upon the Old, why would 16 chapters be devoted to foretelling the return of Christ to the Old Covenant for the shockingly brief time period of seven years? Sixteen chapters for seven years, and it doesn't even affect the Church?

We believe the entire Book is for God's people throughout the Gospel Era. Its message tells us of the overwhelming power of God in working behind the scenes for the good of His people. Though Satan attacks with many wicked devices and methods, Christ is in control, and in the end He will purge humanity like a farmer threshes wheat, separating the good from the bad. The Revelation tells the Church what to expect in the Gospel Age, and is timeless in that His coming is always *at hand*. The Revelation tells the Church

to expect evil, suffering, false doctrine, persecution, imitations, signs, warnings, and even judgments. Throughout the vision, Christ is ever-present and exceedingly powerful and authoritative. No longer to ever be spat upon again, He rules the nations with a rod of iron and sword of fearful destruction. He sits on a heavenly Throne and heads a spiritual Kingdom of love and peace that has influenced the world and history like no other person or institution has even come close to rivaling.

ARRANGEMENT OF THE BOOK

The Revelation is very ordered and builds upon itself to the last chapter. Often, new terms are explained later in the Book, showing a continuity of thought. There are seven distinct divisions in the Book: Christ among the Church (Chapter 1-3); The Throne and the Seven Seals (4-7); The Seven Trumpets (8-11); The Woman and the Beasts (12-14); The Seven Vials (15-16); The Judgment of Babylon (17-19); The Millennium (20-22).

Except for the first section containing Christ's letters to the seven churches, each of the divisions gives an account of the end of the world. Almost always this occurs at the very end of the section. In the Seven Seals section, the sixth seal is without doubt a description of the end. We see the stars falling from the sky, the mountains and islands moved out of their places, and the heavens departing as a scroll when it is rolled up (6:12-17). In the Seven Trumpets section, the seventh trumpet presents the end, when comes *the time of the dead, that they should be judged* (11:18). At the end of The Woman and the Beast section we see the Son of Man descending from heaven on a white cloud, reaping the earth with a sharp sickle. The Judgment of Babylon ends with another description of the final destruction of the earth, and judgment of the wicked (Chapter 19). And in the Millennium section we read of that final day in Chapter 20, followed by a beautiful description of heaven.

However, not all agree that these divisions each describe an aspect of the Church in the world to its end. In fact, right here is a key factor in determining your view of the Revelation: are the sections chronological, or parallel? That is, do they follow one another sequentially as a single story, or do they

each topically tell the story seven times? We believe the evidences that they are parallel are extremely strong. Each section is a capsule detailing a phase of God's interaction with man, ending accordingly with the final destruction of the world. Parallelism is a common literary device in the OT. Daniel's world empire vision, for instance, was given to him on three separate occasions, using different symbolic characters each time.

Interpreting the entire Book chronologically from beginning to end cannot be done without contradictions that can only be explained away with complete speculation. How else can one explain the end of the world being described at the opening of the sixth seal as early as Revelation 6? Charles Ryrie, a Dispensationalist, says in his study Bible notes that the sixth seal is not a description of the end, but only that people will act like the end has come! This is from someone who professes to "interpret the text literally and plainly, regardless of the implications." Impossible. If even one literal star would fall to the earth, the world would be obliterated.

The visions dovetail perfectly with each other if viewed as seven presentations of the Gospel Age, each emphasizing its own particular theme. Within each of the seven sections symbols and characters are employed which best explain that particular theme. The sections warning the wicked emphasize the coming judgment and the terrors of Hell, while the parts describing the martyrs will show the joy of those who have overcome the world in heaven with Christ. We also see the same primary characters reappearing throughout the Book, and often the same symbols recurring in other visions. If the Revelation were chronological, we would not expect the Beast, for instance, to reappear after he had been destroyed and cast into Hell earlier in the Book.

The most convincing proof that the Revelation is written in seven parallel sections is found by carefully studying the content of the sections themselves, and understanding how they relate to each other. Again, don't take my word for it, or anyone else's. Study for yourself, compare Scripture with Scripture like the Apostle Paul said, *Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual* (I Cor 2:13). The following chart of the Revelation shows the major events of the Gospel Age, the end-time, and the eternal states within each section. Reviewing them will help reveal the divisions of the Book.

TIME PROGRESSION

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	The Gospel Call	End of the World	Heaven and Hell
Seven letters to the Church (Ch 1-3).			
Seven Seals foretell what the Church will face during the Age of Grace (Ch 4-7).	Rev 4:1-6:11	Rev 6:12-17	Rev 7:1-8:1
Seven Trumpets call for repentance and warn of coming judgment (Ch 8-11).	Rev 8:2-11:6	Rev 11:7-13	Rev 11:14-19
Analogy of woman, Manchild, and the three beasts that afflict her seed (Ch 12-14).	Rev 12:1-13:18	Rev 14:6-20	Rev 14:1-20
Seven Bowls pour out the last plagues upon an evil world (Ch 15-17).	Rev 15:1-16:16	Rev 16:17-21	Rev 16:19-21
Analogy: the wickedness of Babylon and her final destruction (Ch 18-19).	Rev 17:1-19:10	Rev 19:11-19	Rev 19:20-21
The 1,000-year reign: souls in Paradise and New Jerusalem (Ch 20-22).	Rev 20:1-5	Rev 20:6-10	Rev 20:11-22:5

Each of the seven sections foretells the end of the world. Notice that the seven sections are obvious and natural divisions of the Book. The seven messages to the churches, the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls each comprise a topic of concern from Christ to His people. The analogy of the Woman and the Dragon comes between the seven trumpets and the seven bowls, and is also an obvious division. The division of the last two sections are controversial to some because of the teaching of Millennialism.

THE PURPOSE OF THE REVELATION

For the Christian, the theme of the Revelation is redemption in Christ; victory, glorious victory over sin and death; and perfect union with Him in the eternal, heavenly realm. In the writing of this book, no single thought became clearer to me than this primary purpose of the Book of Revelation. As the visions unfold we will see again and again the redeemed experiencing the beauties of heaven with Christ and the angels. Over and over they rejoice in their redemption, singing and praising the One who has made it all possible. From the sacrificial Lamb in Chapter 5 to the Bridegroom of Chapter 19, Jesus is presented in various figurative pictures illustrating His works and attributes.

Consider the very title: *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (1:1). *Revelation* in the Greek is an unveiling, a revealing of something previously not known. We are told about Jesus in the NT in detail, but the Revelation reveals Him in a different way: *The Unveiling of Jesus Christ*. We cannot, of course, literally see Jesus. But the Revelation lifts the veil between life and death, and with our spiritual eyes we can “see” into the spiritual realm. We see Jesus seated on His heavenly Throne, reigning gloriously on high. We see the souls of those who have passed that veil rejoicing on the sea of glass with harps and song. We see the defeat of Satan and his banishment from heaven, and we see the terrors of Hell for those who have rejected the Gospel message. It is then that prophetic fulfillments in the physical realm seem weak and insignificant; they are simply passing events of small importance in the grand, eternal plan of God. In the Revelation, Christ is exalted for His deeds of greatness, while man and his accomplishments fade in an instant into nothing.

The scope of the Revelation encompasses the whole plan of God for His creation: man, earth, and heavens. The ongoing spiritual conflict between God and Satan is described, and the lines between good and evil are clearly drawn. Satan’s goal is to corrupt everything that God has created, and his special target since his defeat on the Cross is the Christian. God has limited Satan’s powers, but he is still a terrible adversary of man’s soul, and he wants to deceive and corrupt as many unwary Christians as possible in the short time he has left. The Revelation warns us about this in some of the darkest,

fearful pictures imaginable. How sad that many will not detect his snares and will fall eternally into his clutches.

The purpose of the Revelation is to reveal Jesus Christ and His spiritual Kingdom on earth and in heaven. Accordingly, earthly events are foretold in the visions, but only those of greatest significance for His people. We believe the Revelation is given to exalt Christ and His eternal plan—to aid Kingdom saints in their earthly journey—rather than to convince people of the Bible’s authenticity because of fulfilled prophecy. Our study will show that the primary purpose of the Revelation is not to explain exactly how the Lord will return for His people—though that event is described—it is to warn His people of the difficulties and trials to come and to encourage them to endure faithful to the end. How natural that the last book of Bible is for and about that dearest of possessions to Christ—the blood-bought Church, *the Bride*, *the Lamb’s wife* (Rev 21:9).

THE LANGUAGE OF THE REVELATION

The language of the Revelation can be difficult to understand with just surface reading. Is it written to be understood literally, or figuratively? Though many are quick to argue the merits of reading either literally or figuratively, looking honestly at the actual interpretations we think this issue is only a smokescreen. In fact, everyone takes much of it figuratively. Many of the symbols are defined within the text, and others are so well known that all accept them (the Lamb, the Dragon, the candlesticks, etc). Some of the text is not so easy, and generally it is simply the commentator that determines whether the language is literal or figurative based on agreement with his interpretation of that text, and whether it corresponds with the rest of his view. We have read commentators that speak long and eloquently on the benefits of reading simply and literally, no matter how difficult it may be, later confidently explain a text as expressive language not meant to be taken as having actually occurred. Other commentators invoke symbolic language on passages that to me seem very difficult to defend as such. I have made every attempt to let other Scriptures guide this difficult discernment, as discussed earlier in my first premise.

The literal/figurative argument has continued for 150 years now, and is probably here to stay. But keep in mind the following facts. All agree that much of the Bible outside of the book of Revelation is written in highly figurative language. Writers of poetry and prose have for millennia used figures of speech to help readers draw mental pictures of what they are describing, and to play on their emotions. In today's literature many of the literary devices like personification, synecdoche, apostrophe, metonymy, hyperbole, etc are no longer used. Even metaphor, simile, allusion, and allegory are rare. The Bible uses these and other techniques to an astonishing degree. The beauty and grace of the King James Version is mostly due to its faithful translation of these emotional pictures. *The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want* (Ps 23:1); *Behold, the Lamb of God* (John 1:29). So much can be conveyed by a few words with carefully chosen figurative meanings!

The Revelation has hundreds of metaphors and similes, which we will begin to see immediately upon opening the first chapter and reading John's description of Christ. Nothing about that vision can be taken literally, every part of it is said to be *like* or *as* something else. Even the personage of Christ is *one like unto the Son of Man* (1:13). But there is perfect agreement among all prophecy students on this picture!

Figurative language is especially suited to describing things outside the natural realm. Spiritual leaders, spiritual wars, and spiritual influences are real, and they greatly affect the Church. God, Christ, and Satan are described in some of the most figurative language of the entire Bible. The advantage is that such language can describe attributes and character, illustrating abstracts much more clearly than is otherwise possible.

Supposedly, Historicists read the text figuratively and Futurists read literally. This is an utter myth. In my opinion it is more correctly stated the other way around! Literal Historicists find exact fulfillments of the Revelation in historical events, with very little use of figurative language. For example, Historicists say Chapter 8 describes Islam and Chapter 13 Catholicism, and in both the details are taken to be literally fulfilled. On the other hand, Futurists, the "plain and literal" crowd, are able to find nuclear bombs, tanks, helicopters, and television in language with only horses, swords, and crowns. Moreover, nobody takes the star falling from heaven in 8:1 as a literal star, and nobody

believes the beasts of Chapter 13 are literal beasts. Why? Because they do things that stars and beasts cannot do—they speak, they act like men, they oppress righteousness. It is time to give up this argument of literal/figurative language as an overall method of interpretation, for neither side practices what they preach! True, there are many pictures in the Revelation that we argue about whether they should be understood literally or figuratively, but these should be studied individually to determine the correct intent of the passage.

The error of Catholic transubstantiation, the Anabaptist tragedy at Munster, and the Preterist teaching that Christ has already returned in A.D. 70, are examples of a hyper-literal interpretation of the text. There are dangers in over-spiritualizing as well. The key to correctly dividing the Word of Truth is to study the passage in its context and within the intent of the rest of Scripture. Obscure passages must not be interpreted in a manner that contradicts or circumvents those passages that are clear and explained in the Scripture. My experience has been that the most vitriolic defenders of a “plain and literal” approach to understanding the Book of Revelation are also the most likely to explain away commands and doctrines of the Bible so that they are not required to do them. This illustrates again that too often the real criteria used to interpret the Word is finding there what one wants to find, as opposed to sincerely seeking with an open heart what the Holy Spirit has written for us. My honest hope and prayer is that this work would be as close and faithful to all of Scripture as much as my limited knowledge of it will allow. We do not want to *stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God* (I Cor 2:5).