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Q&A#70 Reading Revelation

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Today's question: "There seem to be a number of different overall approaches to interpreting the book of Revelation. Can you briefly explain what each of these are and then share your own preferred interpretative approach? Perhaps some recommended reading too?"

Commentaries, books, and other material mentioned:

Peter Leithart, Revelation 1-11 (<https://amzn.to/2CloERy>), Revelation 12-22 (<https://amzn.to/2CGKB3u>)

David Chilton, The Days of Vengeance: <https://amzn.to/2CddlzC>

Richard Bauckham, Climax of Prophecy: <https://amzn.to/2Eru3OO>

G.K. Beale, Revelation (NIGTC): <https://amzn.to/2yy0hBC>

Ian Paul, Revelation (TNTC): <https://amzn.to/2CcmSHf>

James Jordan, The Vindication of Jesus Christ: <https://amzn.to/2CGfnJF>

204 James Jordan lectures on Revelation: <http://www.wordmp3.com/product-group.aspx?id=79> (although I HIGHLY recommend you buy it as part of this collection instead: <http://www.wordmp3.com/details.aspx?id=13689>)

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, there seem to be a number of different overall approaches to interpreting the book of Revelation. Can you briefly explain what each of these are and then share your own preferred interpretive approach? Perhaps some recommended reading too.

Thank you. There is a fairly standard taxonomy for positions on the book of Revelation and these can be positions on biblical prophecy more generally. The first responds to the question, to what does the book refer? And associated with that question is how does the book refer? Which is a question of hermeneutics.

Is this a book that should be read with a very literal hermeneutic? Is it a book that should be read very much in terms of typology, allusions, symbolism, these sorts of things? Or is it a book that should be read more allegorically where you abstract from the very specific reference to something more general, more general patterns? And the three key approaches on this, the typical division, and then I'll explain some of the ways in which they shade off into different options. The first is idealism, which is a very popular position in the history of the church, which is more associated with an allegorical reading of the text. That sees within the book of Revelation timeless spiritual truths and abstract types.

Now, these may have association with specific events and we can apply these to specific events, but fundamentally the book is about more general patterns of God's dealing in history. The meaning of the church, the conflict with evil, the nature of Christ's kingdom, the nature of God's rule in heaven and the relationship between events in heaven and events on earth. These sorts of issues are issues that come to the fore within a more idealist reading of the text.

The second approach is a historicist approach, which sees these events as having taken place historically or in the process of taking place historically. And that can be seen in a more ongoing approach, whether that's people who will read in this text, all these different events from the history of the church and society and interpret those in terms of the prophecies of the book. And others will see it as referring to a specific set of events very near the time of the text, the text itself.

So, for instance, the more ongoing approach might see events such as the church under the papacy within this situation. So the beast might be the Pope or it will be associated with events like the French Revolution or Hitler. These sorts of events will be read into the text.

This is a book about historical events. It's prophesies the history of the church and the people of God. And so we should look at these historical events and recognise that within

scripture they have already been foretold in some form.

And so when they take place, we know how to interpret them and we can respond to them in a faithful way. The more preterist approach and the preterist approach is one that sees these things as having already taken place generally in the very early years of the church. There are different forms of these preterist approaches.

For some, it refers to the events of the fall of the Roman Empire. That is a very popular view. So, for instance, Babylon being associated with Rome and the fall of the Roman Empire is a very significant event in the history of the church.

And this is something that the writer John is drawing our attention to, foretelling this event as an event that is of great moment within the identity, developing identity of the church. For others, and I would include myself here, the book refers primarily to events that occurred in the run up to and in the events of AD 70 with the fall of Jerusalem. And this, of course, requires a certain type of hermeneutic, a type of hermeneutic that places a lot of emphasis upon symbolism, typology, and that does not take the more literal approach to prophecy that others would take.

The final approach is a futurist approach. And in the futurist approach, typically this book refers to events on the near horizon of our present day. And there have been various forms of futurist readings of the text over the church's history.

And these have been very popular, particularly in the 20th and 21st century. If you read Tim LaHaye, for instance, his work, then that's a vision of a futurist approach that all these things are about to take place. And the Left Behind series will give you some sort of imaginative portrayal of what that might look like.

And that is a form of futurist approach and it's been very popular within American dispensationalist circles. Whereas the pressurist approach has achieved more popularity in recent years as well. It's been associated with certain groups such as Reconstructionists as well.

It's been popularized by people like N.T. Wright and others who have recognized these patterns within the Gospels. And it's also associated with a certain way of reading the prophecy and scripture more generally. And reading the biblical references to the destruction of Jerusalem is things of deep importance.

And you read through the whole of the Gospels, you read through the epistles, and this event of the fall of Jerusalem is hanging over it all. And I believe that's a fundamentally correct approach, that the fall of Jerusalem is an event of epoch-defining proportions for the church. It is the thing that wraps up the old order and establishes finally the new order.

It's where the old order falls away and there is this new order that's established. The

second question that helps to divide different views on the meaning of Revelation refers to the Millennium. In chapter 20 we hear John talk about a thousand year reign.

And what does that mean? And the key question is how does this Millennium relate to the coming of Christ? And so there are three fundamental positions and then there are various shades of those as well. So the first position is a pre-millennial position, that Christ returns before the thousand year reign. So Christ returns to earth and then there's a reign of a thousand years, after which there's another rebellion and Satan is unleashed and there's a final end at that point.

Then there's a millennial position, which is popularised by Augustine and others. And in the a millennial position, this is a symbolic period of time, a symbolic period of time running from the period of Christ's ascension to the end of the church, the church age and the wrapping up of all things. The next position is a post-millennial position.

Christ returns after the Millennium. And so the Millennium refers to, it can refer to a number of things. It can refer to a specific golden age of the church.

Now we may already be in that. We may be awaiting that. It may be a literal thousand years.

It may be a symbolic thousand years. But this is the significant question is where does Christ return relate to that? And so for post-millennialists, Christ returns after the Millennium. And that period of time is one of gospel blessing, of growth of the church, these sorts of things.

And that is associated with things like the Puritan hope, as it's being called. And there are other forms that you can encounter which will associate it with a very literal period of a thousand year reign. And then there are things that are associated with this still, things like the question of how did the Jews fit into this? Are the Jews going to be restored as a people? And that question has been a very live one in the context of dispensationalism.

And certain forms of post-millennialism as well historically have held to a restoration of the Jews and the blessing of the Jews, the Jews coming to faith. And then that will lead to the full flowering of the people of God. And so these different positions have a number of sub positions that arise from those.

A significant offshoot of the pre-millennial position is the dispensational pre-millennial position associated with people like Schofield and Ryrie and others like that. And this can come in various forms as well, post, mid or pre-tribulation rapture. And so that's the question of how the rapture relates to the tribulation and then how the tribulation relates to the millennium and then how Christ's return relates to the millennium.

All of these are questions that underlie a certain approach to the interpretation of the prophecy of Revelation. Now, my position is a post-millennial position. I believe that this

refers to a period of time.

It refers to a period of time that begins with the fall of Jerusalem. And I think it continues to the present. We are in the millennium.

It's a symbolic period of time. It's a period of growth and maturation. It's a period of the gospel progressing in various ways.

Now, we may think that we're in a time of decline, but in many ways we're in a time of great advance around the world. And this post-millennial approach is not a sort of Pollyanna-ish attitude of everything's getting better all the time. No, it's not that.

There's plenty of backwards steps. There's plenty of periods of declension and failure. But fundamentally there is a growth of the kingdom of God.

And this post-millennial view is not that dissimilar in principle from certain...it's an optimistic amillennial view in some respects. It sees the period of time as symbolic. It associates that period of time, not in my case with the start of Christ's ascension, but with the fall of Jerusalem.

But it is a symbolic period of time that we are in in the present. And it's not a literal thousand years. And this is distinguished from many post-millennialists historically who have believed in a thousand year reign that we are looking for in the future.

And that will come and it will be the golden age. And there will be sort of maybe anticipations of that prior to it. But fundamentally we're looking forward to this golden age that's going to come.

And after that golden age, Christ will return. So these are the fundamental positions. I believe that the biblical position is a post-millennial and partial preterist position.

I don't believe that all of the prophecies of Revelation are fulfilled. We're somewhere in the middle of chapter 20 at the moment. But there are a lot of things that even in those later chapters, chapters 21 and 22, have already been anticipated in various forms.

There is already an anticipation of the heavenly Jerusalem. There is already an anticipation of the summing up of things. And this is not the same thing as saying that the resurrection has already taken place in the full sense that the Bible looks forward to it.

That has not taken place. And so there's a difference between partial preterism and what some have called complete or full preterism. Some would call consistent preterism.

I don't believe that it is consistent, but I don't believe that it has yet taken place in its fullness. When you look through the Gospels and when you look through the epistles, I think what you see again and again is a sense of these events on the near horizon.

Events on the near horizon that are of catastrophic, apocalyptic import.

That there is about to come this event that will redraw all the boundaries, that will re-found the people of God, that will establish a new order. And I believe that this is associated with the fall of Jerusalem and the final establishment of the church in that context. So this is seen in Christ's prophecy, which is very much focused upon the fall of Jerusalem and that bringing the end of the age in Matthew 24 following in the Olivet Discourse.

I think we see the same thing in a number of the references in the epistles. So for instance, in Hebrews, the reference to this fiery judgment that awaits or the shaking of all things that's taking place and the things that will endure beyond that. And then the references to faith and endurance and patience in that context are very much rooted in a situation where there is an imminent judgment.

I think we see the same thing in 2 Peter, where 2 Peter is dealing with a situation where people are wondering, is Christ going to return? They're expecting this on the near horizon and Christ hasn't yet returned. And it seems the people are dying off. Christ has said that before all the people standing there had passed away, that he would return.

And there seems to be a problem. The problem is that there are still very few left to actually witness Christ and his ministry. And so the question is, is Christ going to return when he promised? And then in that context, Peter gives a very strong presentation of the assurance of Christ's return.

He points back to things like the transfiguration, which occurred immediately after that statement, which was an anticipation, a sort of dress rehearsal of the later revelation of Christ's glory. So as Peter says to the reader, he has already seen the glory of Christ on the heavenly mount. And so he knows, in effect, that when Christ comes, it's not a matter of, it's not as if God is struggling to keep a schedule.

A thousand years for God is as one day. God may have made this promise a thousand years ago, but it was just as sure as if it were made yesterday. Likewise, a day is as a thousand years.

God's not in a hurry. God does not need to mend his pace. God is in control of history.

He's over time. And in that respect, he's not in a hurry. He can work these things out and he will never need to hurry up because he is about to come.

He's about to return and he will fulfil these promises and then things will be shaken and there will be a melting down of the old order and the establishment of a new order. And this, I think, is something we find elsewhere in the expectations of the New Testament, that there is this coming event that is on the near horizon. And this is the context into which Revelation is written, a context prior to AD 70.

Again, that's a controversial question. When was this book written? I believe it was written prior to AD 70. And it's referring to things like Babylon, I think, is Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is the city that is filled with the blood of the saints. It's also this context where John is to unseal this book, this book of judgment. And within the book of Daniel, there's this instruction to seal the prophecy because it refers to many days hence.

But in John's prophecy, again and again, we're told, I am coming soon. And there is this unsealing because this thing is on the near horizon. This is just about to take place.

And so in the fall of Jerusalem and its temple, all of the events pretty much of the bulk of Revelation occur. And there is this great apocalyptic occurrence. What John gives us in his prophecy is not just a description of, not just a sort of cryptic description of what's taking place, but a theological and typological framework within which to understand the meaning of what is taking place.

So, for instance, Jerusalem is associated with Sodom and Egypt and Babylon. And that helps us to understand what Jerusalem is, what it stands for, and these deeper patterns that are taking place. And here, I think it can be helpful to understand that there are a variety of different positions, that these different approaches to reading the book of Revelation, because you hold one, doesn't mean that you have to neglect or reject the benefits of the others.

So, for instance, what I mentioned here is patterns that emerge as we associate Sodom and Egypt and Babylon with Jerusalem and their fates with the fate of Jerusalem. And these are basic patterns in history and patterns of God's dealing. A type refers to an underlying or an overarching pattern that unites various events.

But we focus very much upon that rootedness, the groundedness of that pattern within the events themselves, rather than just abstracting it and dealing with it in a very abstract form. But that recognition of patterns does help us to see some of the merit of an idealist approach. That in an idealist approach, people recognize these patterns, these deeper structures.

And an idealist commentary on the book of Revelation can be very illuminating when it's alert to these sorts of things. Likewise, a historicist approach that is non-preterist, that recognizes patterns over history, how these things recur. Again, as we read prophecy, even in the Old Testament, there's something about the prophecies of the Old Testament that are not so firmly rooted in their original context that they don't have reference beyond that.

So if you're reading something like the book of Isaiah, if you're reading some of the other prophecies of Scripture, what you see are patterns that recur in history. Patterns that are fundamental to God's manner of dealing in history. And they teach us wisdom.

They teach us how to read history more generally. That what prophecy gives us is a certain sort of historical wisdom to see the ends of things, to see the ways that history moves, the ways that empires rise and fall, the ways that God acts in history and with his people over history, the way he delivers, the way that he judges. And so as we learn to read the book of Revelation, we will be learning not just how to read the events of the first century, we'll be reading events of our own age in a more thoughtful and insightful way.

So it helps us to read things over history. It also helps us to read events in the future, to see how things are heading in this moment here and now, to read the signs of the times. And the book of Revelation does refer to events in the future.

I don't believe that it is in the near future. I'd be surprised if it's in the very near future, but it might be. When we're talking about the millennium, I believe we are in the millennium at the moment.

And so these events, there are certain events still to come. And when we read the book of Revelation in this way, I think we can recognise that even amidst the difficulties and the challenges of reading a very complicated symbolic book, we can see that there are benefits to be found in a variety of different readings. That doesn't mean that each reading is right in every respect.

It doesn't mean that each reading is equally helpful. I don't think that's the case. I find partial preterist reading by far the most helpful.

And to recommend a few books, more recently the books I've read, I've read Ian Paul's commentary on Revelation in parts. I've read Peter Lighthouse's commentary on Revelation. I've read, looking back through Richard Bauckham's Climax of Prophecy, books that have really influenced my reading of Revelation over the years.

The first one to really make an impact on my reading of Revelation was Days of Vengeance by David Chilton. Other books I've found helpful have been, I've found James Jordan's series on Revelation very helpful. He has a 200 part lecture series.

I'll give the links for these things below. The commentary I'd recommend most on the book of Revelation at the moment is Peter Lighthouse's Revelation commentary, which is deeply stimulating, controversial, as you'd expect. It has many interpretations that I'm not completely persuaded by and some I'm not at all persuaded by.

But of all the books I've read, it's by far the most stimulating on the book of Revelation. The most fodder and the thought, the most stimulating for thinking through some of these things. And as I found reading James Jordan and Peter Lighthouse over the years, even when you don't agree, you will find so much to make you think and to illumine your own thinking.

And often as you read them and then return to them at a later point, you find that you agree with them in ways that you didn't before. And that's a sign for me of a good reader of scripture. When you revisit them and as you've read scripture more yourself, you'll begin to recognise that they are seeing things that you had not seen before.

And I've really enjoyed Peter Lighthouse's work on Revelation, so I highly recommend that book. It's one of the few commentaries I've been prepared to spend a large sum of money on. When I usually buy commentaries, I look for them second hand, but this book I just had to buy new.

And so that, together with Craig Keener's book on, or full volume series on the book of Acts, I spent over £200 on those two sets of commentaries together. And I haven't regretted it at all. They're absolutely superb, very stimulating.

If you have any further questions, please leave them on the Curious Cat account. If you would like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account. And Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow.

God bless and thank you for listening.