

CLASS & READING SCHEDULE

September 19	Session 1: Introduction and Chapter 1 Reading: Revelation 1, Introduction
September 26	Session 2: Letters to the Churches and Rethinking the Rapture Reading: Revelation 2-3, Rethinking the Rapture
October 3	No Class
October 10	Session 3: The Seven Seals Reading: Revelation 4-8:5
October 17	Session 4: The Seven Trumpets Reading: Revelation 8:6-11
October 24	No Class
October 31	No Class - Halloween
November 7	Session 5: Dragon and Beasts Reading: Revelation 12-14
November 14	Session 6: The Seven Bowls Reading: Revelation 15-16
November 21	Session 7: The End of All Things Reading: Revelation 18-22

OPENING THOUGHTS

In our study of the Revelation to John, I am going to ask you to do something that may be difficult. I am going to ask you to read Revelation in a way that you may not have done before, but I believe in the way the book was meant to be read. That is the issue after all, isn't it? How is this book supposed to be read? Almost everyone agrees that it is a difficult and foreign book. Most of us have not read anything like it before or after, but here it is in the Bible and we have to figure out not only what to do with it, but how is God speaking to his church through it.

Most people in this day and age have read Revelation one certain way. We've read it almost like it was a history book written in advance. This is known as dispensationalism, and you may know it from books like the Left Behind series or teaching from Hal Lindsey or John Hagee. In fact, you may not even be aware that many Christians have not understood the book of Revelation or "End Times Prophecy" quite the same as the dispensationalists. Furthermore, you may not even have considered that this would be an issue.

My first understanding of Revelation was dispensational. I learned that there would be a rapture that would take Christians away into heaven and then that would be followed by seven really terrible years called, "the Tribulation." There are many other parts to this teaching that you may be familiar with. The outcome of this teaching was that we were to look for signs that the world was entering into these last days. When political movements happened in Europe or the Middle East, then they could be the beginnings of the end. Perhaps the leader that was going to falsely unite the world was already alive and we were just years away from Armageddon?

I began to wonder though, is this the way Revelation was meant to be read? Is this what God had in mind? That's an important question, isn't it? What exactly does God intend to communicate to us through Revelation? The thing that really became the key issue in my reading Revelation in a new way was my becoming convinced that this book, Revelation, was written to Christians in seven churches almost 2,000 years ago and on the other side of the world and **it must have meant something to them**. I wasn't sure how visions of Russia uniting with the European Union under the guidance of a Czechoslovakian born leader who utilized Apache helicopters, computer systems, and nuclear war would have made any sense or have been of any use to people in Asia Minor living under Roman rule in the first century. Wasn't God speaking a word to his people then? Wasn't he speaking a word to his people in 500 AD? And 1,000 AD? Isn't Revelation more than a word to 20th and 21st Century Western Christians? That bothered me.

Then I discovered that Christians for centuries had been reading Revelation in much different ways. I am not saying that everyone else agreed how to read it, but rather that there were ways that people understood Revelation that seemed to take into consideration that this was God's word to people in the first century as well as today. I also learned something else that was both surprising but also made a lot of sense. When people say that they are reading Revelation in its plainest sense, what they are really doing is reading Revelation in its plainest sense to them. How we see the world has been shaped by the time and culture in which we live. In 21st century America, we may expect much different meaning from a book of visions than someone in 1st century Asia. So, we are back to the question of how this book is supposed to be read.

In the section that follows we are going to consider some important parts of Revelation that have to do with its setting. This means that we have to consider what sort of people first heard this message, why this would have been given to them, and what sort of genre Revelation is. After considering these things I have come to believe very strongly that we are not to read Revelation as if it were a history book in reverse. This is not because I have a problem with the strange visions or the wrath of God. I simply believe that the book was not written to be read in this way. And if I am right (along with many Biblical scholars), that God did not intend for us to read it this way, then we absolutely must try to hear this book on its own terms and not ours, no matter how uncomfortable it is.

What exactly I do mean by this new way of reading Revelation will be best explained as we study the text together, but I will ask you to begin by considering this. Perhaps we should first take Revelation, specifically chapters 4-22 as a series of visions. The order that we read about the visions is the order that John gives them to us. The order of the visions is not necessarily telling us anything at all about the chronological order of events at the end of time. When we read, "After this I saw," or "After this I heard," then we should understand that we are reading about the next vision, not necessarily the next event on the world's timeline. What we do have are visions that are telling us something about God, Jesus Christ, God's people, God's judgment, God's enemies, God's redeeming work, and God's ultimate plan for his creation. We must consider the possibility that people come to scripture with questions that the text is not addressing. Perhaps we are asking questions such as, "when will the end come," and "how will the end come," when God is answering questions of "Who is the center of history," and "what is he up to?"

I will close this section by stating two things. First, I am not proposing a reading of Revelation that takes us outside of the orthodox Christian faith by any means. In fact, I would suggest that this understanding of Revelation is at the heart of orthodoxy. Second, while I may believe that the dispensational reading of Revelation is incorrect, I am not at all questioning whether dispensational believers are Christian. Because of this, while this study may touch on a few points of the dispensationalist interpretation, the main thrust of the study will be our interpreting the text together. This is not a point-by-point comparative study. Rather it is simply an attempt to better understand this book of the Bible. It is a study of the apocalypse: John's visions and our decisions.

INTRODUCTION

When one approaches new territory it is always helpful to get a lay of the land in order to help you on your journey. The purpose of this introduction is to help us establish just a bit of the lay of the land by examining some of the setting and purpose of Revelation.

Author

In some ways the identity of the author of Revelation is simple and straight forward. We discover immediately, in chapter 1, that it is John (1:1,4,9). On the other hand, we don't know much beyond this. Is it the apostle John? Is it another John that has not been mentioned in scripture up to this point? Scholarship is unclear as to exactly who John is. It is known that he was respected enough to have been an important voice for the churches in Asia Minor. John also tells us himself that he was exiled on the island of Patmos because of his faith in Christ (1:9). However, John of Patmos makes no claims to apostleship, nor does he use the title the elder or beloved disciple (found in John's letters and the Gospel of John). Perhaps we know all that we are supposed to know. After all, Revelation is not about John, he is only the messenger. It is the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

Date

In determining the date of the writing of a particular part of scripture, in this case the book of Revelation, scholars weigh several factors in order to give the best approximation as to when it occurred. Context clues throughout the book are examined as well as church tradition, such as from the earliest church fathers. There are two possible dates that have the acceptance of most contemporary biblical scholars. The first and earlier date would be at towards the end or immediately after the reign of Caesar Nero (AD 54 – 68). The second date is at some point towards the end of the reign of Caesar Domitian (AD 81-96).

I tend to operate from the assumption that the second date is more accurate as there appears to be stronger evidence to support this. Some of the most important pieces of evidence for the later date are:

- referring to Rome as Babylon
- Persecution of Christians outside of Rome
- The description of Domitian's Emperor cult matches Revelation better

The reference to Rome as Babylon makes more sense after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. In 70 AD the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple just as the Babylonians had done centuries earlier. Therefore, a parallel was drawn between Rome and Babylon. There was persecution of Christians during Nero's reign (most notably following the great fire of 64 AD), but that persecution was within the city of Rome. There is, however, evidence of sporadic persecution of Christians during the reign of Domitian (see below) and that fits better with the picture given in Revelation.

Genre

Initially it may come as a bit of a surprise to some that biblical study calls for us to consider the genre of a book of the Bible. However, in everyday life we consider the genre of most everything else we read. For example, if you receive a letter from the love of your life, then you have certain expectations for what is contained and how you should read it. If the letter states that you stole this person's heart, you understand what that means. The meaning can change drastically though with a change of genre. A police report stating that you stole someone's heart may mean something very different. The reader's expectations change, as do accepted rules applying to meaning and form based upon the genre. The form and style of a script for a play are much different than a novel or biography. Works of fiction have different rules and expectations than works of non-fiction. Much of the time readers' expectations and

understanding shift subconsciously according to the genre they are reading, but what if the genres are unfamiliar? Or, what if the reader is assuming one genre, but the writer used a different one? These things can easily happen with the book of Revelation. Therefore, it is important for us to take a moment to examine the genres at work.

There are three genres of writing at work in the book of Revelation: apocalyptic, prophecy, and epistle (a letter). The first verse states that this is the apocalypse (revelation) of Jesus Christ as given to John. The Greek word "apocalypse" is translated "revelation" and this gives us a sense of what it means. Something is being revealed or uncovered. It is not this first verse alone, however, that determines that this is an apocalyptic work. Revelation's use of vivid imagery, the visions delivered by an other-worldly being that grant insight, depictions of the end times, these are all common to the apocalyptic genre. Apocalyptic writing was used from about the 2nd Century BC until the 2nd Century AD. Part of the difficulty today in properly interpreting this book lies in the fact that it was written in a style that fell out of usage roughly 1800 years ago. This brings us to an important point that will be emphasized below. It is important for the contemporary reader of Revelation to keep firmly in mind that this is a piece of literature written towards the end of the first century, for people who lived at that time, and in a culture vastly different than ours. How exactly this affects interpretation may be debated, but it should affect interpretation because God chose to reveal himself in that particular context and today's reader should honor that.

Revelation is not simply apocalyptic, but also prophetic (1:3). In fact, John understands himself as standing in a long line of prophets spanning back through the Old Testament. This becomes evident not only stylistically, but also in 22:9 an angel says he is a comrade with John and his fellow prophets. Furthermore, among the many other Old Testament allusions is the one found in chapter 10 where John is instructed to eat a scroll just as the prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel 2 and 3. What is meant by prophecy though? This is an important point. In many popular contemporary Christian discussions of prophecy, one may be led to believe that prophecy basically means predicting the future accurately. Predicting future events was a part of prophecy as found in the Old Testament, but there is more involved in prophecy than that. In fact, the prediction of the future is not the end in and of itself. It served a purpose within the greater scheme of prophetic works. Prophets spoke as the mouthpiece of God. Throughout the prophetic books we read about the Word of the Lord coming to the prophet. Prophets were often the ones who spoke truth to those in power. The story of the prophet Nathan speaking truth to King David in 2 Samuel 12 is an example of this. Therefore, when we read in Revelation 1:3 that the one who reads this "prophecy" aloud is blessed, we must keep in mind what is meant by the term prophecy. Furthermore, we must now ask how the prophetic and the apocalyptic interact. Ben Witherington proposes that we understand the work as that of "apocalyptic prophecy" where the "apocalyptic symbols and ideas serve the cause of the prophetic interpretation of numerous OT texts."¹

Finally, it must be noted that this is an epistle, or a letter, written "to the seven churches that are in Asia" (1:4). Again, if we are going to take this seriously, then we must recognize that there was an intended audience for this piece of literature, and they lived in a very different time and place than we do. Furthermore, it must be understood that this letter must have meant something to the original audience. It will be the position of this book study that taking 1:4 seriously means that today's reader of Revelation cannot simply treat everything from chapter 4 on as a prediction of the future that could only be deciphered nearly 2,000 years later. This cannot be stressed enough. Revelation is written from John, to the seven churches that are in Asia.

The consideration of genre is an important one for the serious reader of the book of Revelation. As a letter to 7 churches in the first century, this literary work has a time and place, or a context that is outside of our own. Furthermore, it uses one genre, apocalyptic, that is foreign to us, and another, prophecy, that is often misunderstood. This does not doom us to failure, rather it warns us that we may very well have to set

¹ Witherington, *Revelation* (2003), p.12

aside some preconceived notions we have if we are going to hear this book on its own terms. Revelation was written to 7 churches that were in various spiritual states, as well as in various levels of safety in regards to their relationship with Rome. It is in the form of apocalyptic, which suggests that it is using powerful, colorful, and sometimes shocking imagery to "unveil" what is really occurring in history from God's point of view. In fact, being prophecy it is a word from the Lord. And, consistent with Old Testament prophetic tradition, this word from the Lord tends to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comforted.

A final and crucial word is in order in regards to reading Revelation. We consider the genre of the book because we take very seriously the integrity of the book. In other words, the book of Revelation, just like any book in scripture, was written as a literary unit and should be read that way. The Bible should not be treated as a jigsaw puzzle, mixing and matching individual verses, or 2 to 3 verse chunks with each other in order to find a big picture. When readers piece together verses into a big picture the result has been shaped by that person as opposed to scripture shaping the reader. The text is not ours to mold. Instead, we will work hard to understand the message of the scripture itself and on its own terms and then place our faith in the Holy Spirit to shape us. This may be a difficult task, but it is a worthwhile one. If we are to be a people who take seriously the inspiration of scripture, then we should also take very seriously the task of interpretation and understanding scripture in such a way that it impacts our lives.

Setting

The seven churches that received this letter from John were located in Asia Minor in the area that is modern day Turkey. Asia Minor was a part of the Roman Empire, but what was its relationship to Rome like? What was the cultural situation and political climate? The book of Revelation has some powerful critiques of Rome, so these questions are important ones.

Ben Witherington has some very helpful insights as to the social setting in Asia Minor in his socio-rhetorical commentary on Revelation². The residents of Western Asia Minor did not consider themselves as oppressed subjects of Rome. There were no legions stationed there, and no rebellions during this time. Furthermore, years earlier, Caesar Augustus had canceled all the debt that this area owed to Rome. The political structure of Asia Minor was set up so that the elite class would maintain power. Honorable families became members for life of the ruling council. Because of these things, society was set up in a hierarchy according to politics and wealth. Asia Minor contained some of the largest and most important cities in the Empire at the time. All of these factors combine to solidify the relationship between the Roman Empire and the people in Asia Minor. If anything disturbed the relationship, then people within Asia Minor had something to lose.

One of the most important ways that Asia Minor stayed connected to Rome was by means of something known as the imperial cult. The imperial cult was the means that citizens would worship emperors through things like sacrificial meals, prayers, gifts, and rituals. It is important to remember that the religious scene for people in this time and place was much different than it is today. For people who believed that there were many different gods, worshipping one more was not a religious taboo as we might see it. In fact, it would have been seen as a wise thing to do politically. Asia Minor was on the cutting edge of the imperial cult. All seven cities mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3 had a connection to this form of worship, whether by an active Imperial Cult, an Imperial Altar, or an Imperial Priest³. If Revelation was written during the reign of Domitian, then emperor worship is even more relevant. While emperors had encouraged worship of themselves prior to his reign, Domitian went even further by insisting on greater divine titles for himself, such as "Lord and God."⁴ The worship of the emperor was a common bond for the citizens in this time. Therefore, those people who did not join in worship of the Emperor would not simply

² The following observations are drawn from p.22-23 of Witherington, *Revelation* (2003)

³ Ibid., p.24-25

⁴ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, (1999), p.6, 10 and Witherington, *Revelation* (2003) p. 5-6

be pressured by the authorities. Instead it was pressure from within the population that affected Christians in Asia Minor. To refuse to worship the Caesar was to refuse fellowship with one's neighbors. It was anti-social and unpatriotic.⁵

Besides the political pressures to conform to the demands of the imperial cult, there were also financial pressures. In this culture, temples served many functions that were connected with the financial areas of life. They were storage places for property and even loaned out money.⁶ Trade guilds within cities also had gods that they viewed as their patrons. In other words, these guilds would see themselves connected with these minor gods and this connection would be a part of their fellowship with one another. When the trade guilds would have dinners to honor their gods, which also included the proper worship of the emperor, then people participating in the guilds would be expected to pay proper respect and participate in the festivities.⁷ With these two aspects of the financial lives of people in Asia Minor at this time, it is easy to see how great financial pressure could be applied to anyone who refused to worship more than one God.

All of this leads us up to a consideration of what persecution would have been like for the Christians addressed in Revelation. There is no evidence to suggest systemic persecution by the Roman Empire against the Christians at that time. However, there is evidence that Christians were occasionally turned over to the government and given the choice of worshipping the Emperor or execution.⁸ This means that along with the pressures detailed above, the possibility of exile (as in John's case 1:9), there was also the possibility of execution (see also 2:13). Many scholars believe that there is good evidence suggesting many Christians did lose their lives. Further compounding the situation is the strain that developed between those of Jewish faith and those of the Christian faith. In the Roman Empire it was only legal to worship another god in the homeland of that religion. The only exception to this rule was for those of Jewish faith, which means they could worship Yahweh outside of Palestine. For some time, there was little distinction made between Judaism and Christianity by those on the outside of the faith (with Christianity beginning as a movement within Judaism).⁹ However, at some point, some Jewish believers began reporting Christians as being outside of Judaism in order to get them in trouble with the authorities. Overall, persecution during this time appears to have been sporadic, but the climate would have been dangerously antagonistic and the future unsure for Christians. The pressure was to conform and compromise in order to stay safe and live. In fact, there were Christian teachers who were apparently encouraging compromise, and it is these teachings we hear addressed in some of the letters to the churches in chapters 2 and 3.

Methods of Interpretation

From early on in the Christian movement, Christians have wrestled with the question of how exactly to understand Revelation. Is it a book that predicts the future? Or, is it a book that describes timeless truths to the people in the church? The early interpretations that understood Revelation as referring to future events, focused on the justice and faithfulness of God. Christian writers such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus believed that God was going to redeem creation, so that Revelation was interpreting God's work on the earth at some point in history. These writers focused on the prophets, such as Isaiah, in their understanding of the Biblical message teaching that God would work in creation. Other scholars, such as Jerome, tended to focus on the message being more abstract and timeless. Revelation was seen to be teaching Christians to overcome worldly temptations and to exhibit self-control. It is important for anyone studying this book to realize that Revelation has been understood and interpreted in a variety of ways.

⁵ Witherington, Revelation (2003), p.24

⁶ Ibid., p.24

⁷ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, (1999), p.30

⁸ Ibid., p.28-29

⁹ Ibid., p.30-31

Modern study of Revelation has broken these methods of interpretation into four categories: Preterist, Historicist, Futurist, and Idealist. These categories will be helpful in giving us insights as we approach this book.

Preterist: The preterist understanding of Revelation sees the book as only referring to events in the past. The preterists understand Revelation being fulfilled either in the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD or in the fall of Rome in the 5th century AD.

Historicist: The historicist interpretation comes in many forms because it tends to understand Revelation as describing the events of church history leading directly up to the time of the person interpreting it. The historicist interprets much of Revelation be fulfilled up to their particular point in history. So, for example, some interpreters during the Protestant Reformation understood Revelation in light of the events in the church at that time. This led to interpretations of Revelation 13 where the beast was understood to be the Pope. As you can imagine, the historicist interpretation of Revelation changed in Europe during the 1940's.

Futurist: The futurist interpretation holds that much of the book (4:1 – 22:5) refers to a point in the future just before the end of history. There are two types of futurist: dispensational and modified. The dispensational futurist holds to an interpretation of Revelation that is most common in popular Christian teaching on the end times and prophecy. The dispensational interpretation of scripture includes a secret rapture of the church prior to the tribulation, and it also interprets Revelation in a sort of literal manner. The dispensational interpretation also interprets scripture as teaching that God's people are currently in two groups, Israel and the church. The modified futurist interpretation holds to more symbolism in Revelation, does not include the secret rapture, and it understands the church as the new Israel.

Idealist: The idealist interpretation of Revelation takes a more symbolic and timeless understanding. For the idealist interpretation, Revelation describes the conflict between good and evil through history.

In this book study the approach will affirm things from these approaches but not necessarily stick strictly to any one of them. We can affirm that Revelation spoke to people in the first century and therefore it addresses things that occurred around that time historically as the preterists teach. However, there is still a portion of the book that is to occur in the future, namely the return of Christ and the new heaven and new earth. Being a part of Holy Scripture, Revelation has in it some themes and instruction that apply to us today, as the historicist would claim. Finally, while we cannot remove Revelation's message from the context of history, as the idealist approach may do, we can still see that Revelation does speak to us about the greater battle between good and evil, between God and Satan. With these things in mind we approach Revelation asking, "What message does Jesus Christ wish to reveal to us, his church, today?"

BIBLIOGRAPHY

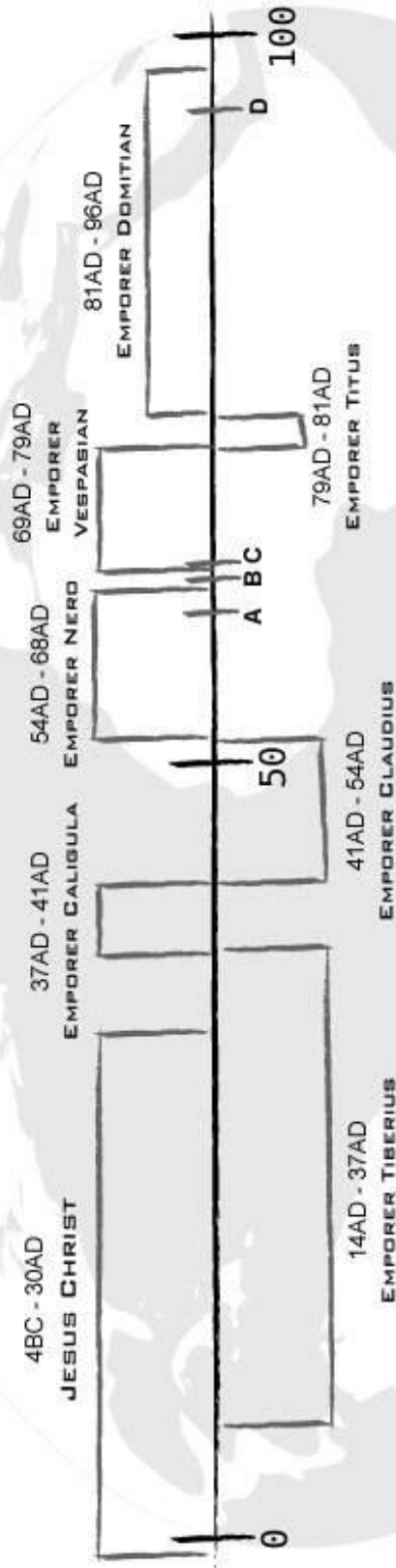
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Witherington, Ben. "Revelation" The New Cambridge Bible Commentary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

**The 7 Churches of Revelation
located in Asia Minor
Modern day Turkey**



TIMELINE



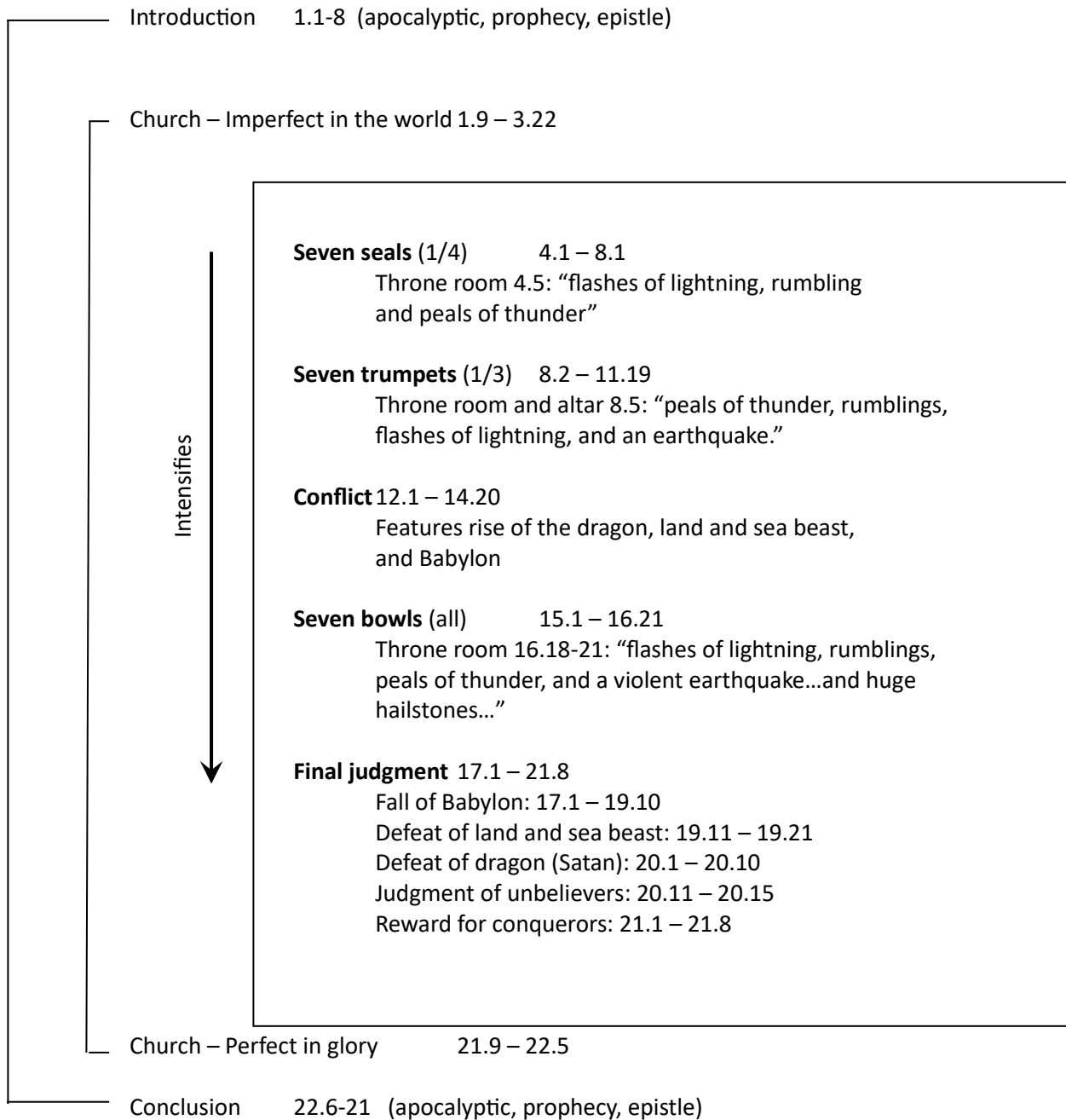
A - 64AD The great fire in Rome followed by persecution of Christians in Rome by Nero
This may have been when Paul and Peter were killed

B - 69AD The "year of four emperors." There were four emperors in this year: Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and finally Vespasian.

C - 70AD The sacking of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple by the Romans (led by Titus)

D - 90AD Somewhere around this time Revelation was most likely written

Breakdown of Revelation



Chapter Titles

Give each chapter a brief title or description, to help you remember it. Also, we will fill in the groupings on the side to help us see the flow of the book.

	1.	_____
_____	2.	_____
	3.	_____
	4.	_____
	5.	_____
_____	6.	_____
	7.	_____
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	14.	_____
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	16.	_____
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	18.	_____
	19.	_____
	20.	_____
	21.	_____
	22.	_____

Introduction and chapter 1

The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ

Quotes to consider:

"...what the original author and audience could not possibly have understood the text to mean (e.g., the Beast is the European Common market, or the anti-Christ is the Pope, etc.) cannot be the meaning of the text today either, if one believes meaning is not in the eye of the beholder but rather resides in the text, encoded by the original author.

It is true that an author can say more than he or she realizes, and this may well be the case with John. However, the trajectory of meaning must be grounded in what John did understand he was talking about and must be consistent with it."

Witherington, *Revelation*. P.70

How is Jesus described in chapter 1:

vv. 5-6

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

vv. 12-16

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

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10. _____

11. _____

vv. 17-18

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

RETHINKING THE RAPTURE

It may come as a surprise to some people that not all Christians believe that there will be a secret rapture of the church. It may also be a surprise to some that there are many Bible believing Christians who do not believe that the secret rapture is taught in scripture. There are contemporary Christian songs about the rapture, as well as books and movies that portray the end times with a rapture of the Church as a central element. The dominant voice (or at least the loudest) in North American Christianity in regards to interpreting Revelation and eschatology (the end times) is dispensationalist. Therefore, this is the teaching about the end times that most people are familiar with. How did we get to this cultural moment in Biblical interpretation? Is that the only stance on the secret rapture? These are the sorts of questions to which we now turn.

As we begin to explore the development of the rapture theory, it is important to examine the context in which the rapture came to be taught. The teaching of the rapture was developed and rose to prominence in the 1800's in the United States. During this time period there were two developments that particularly shaped the culture in which the rapture first came to be taught. These were the rise of Protestant Liberalism and the birth of several religious groups focused on eschatology.

There was a tension rising between a philosophical rationalism that increasingly denied the supernatural and those who held to a more orthodox understanding of scripture. This was evident in the rational deism of some of the Founding Fathers, such as Thomas Jefferson's "Jefferson Bible" where he removed references to events he deemed as supernatural. It can also be seen in the struggle and debate surrounding the rise of Darwinism and evolutionary theory. One way the church responded to the rise in rationalism was in theological liberalism (which means something very different than American political liberalism). Within the Protestant Liberal movement came a study of scripture known as historical criticism, which cast doubt on the historical authenticity of many books of the Bible. The response to 19th Century Protestant Liberalism was Fundamentalism. One of the main contentions of the fundamentalist movement was that the theological liberalism of the day was a grave threat to orthodox Christian faith. Fundamentalists formally adopted their 5 fundamentals of the faith in 1895, with the inerrancy of scripture as one of them. This understanding of scripture ended up shaping how the Bible was read. The fundamentalists were affected by the rise of rationalism as they read scripture as well. Historian Justo Gonzalez writes,

"On the other hand, it is significant to note that, while fundamentalism declared itself a defender of traditional orthodoxy, it gave rise to new interpretations of the Bible. Its emphasis on biblical inerrancy and its rejection of many of the conclusions of biblical scholars made it possible to juxtapose texts from many different books of Scripture, and thus to develop a number of schemes outlining and explaining God's actions, past, present, and future. The most successful of these schemes were those of the 'dispensationalists' – of which there were several. The most popular dispensationalist scheme was developed by Cyrus Scofield, who divided human history into seven 'dispensations' – the present one being the sixth."¹⁰

Gonzalez then points out that fundamentalism became closely tied with dispensationalism. It was in dispensationalism that the teaching of the rapture was found. One of the main ways dispensational theology spread was through the Scofield Bible, a Bible with study notes that detailed the dispensational interpretation. The Scofield study bible was the bible of choice among those in the fundamentalist movement¹¹. While dispensational theology may not be a requirement of those who are more theologically conservative, it is easy to see how it became closely associated with those on the conservative end of the theological spectrum in many churches. Furthermore, it became associated with an approach to theology

¹⁰ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*. Vol.2. (1985). pp.257.

¹¹ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*. Vol.2. (1985). pp.256-257.

that held scripture in a high view. Therefore, for some, a rejection of dispensational theology can emotionally feel like a deeper rejection of conservative understandings of scripture and orthodox belief.

In the 1800's there were several movements that demonstrate a cultural mindset particularly susceptible to a new teaching such as the end-times rapture of the church. There was a rise in revivalistic movements, first found in the Cane Ridge camp meeting revival in Kentucky, in 1801 and through the inner city revivals of Dwight Moody. These emphasized the emotional and experiential aspects of faith. There were movements that predicted the end of the world or the coming of Christ, such as the Seventh Day Adventists, whose founder, William Miller proclaimed the return of Christ would occur in 1843. The Jehovah's Witnesses were founded by Charles T. Russell, in 1881. He said Christ's second coming occurred in 1872 and that the end of the world would be in 1914. Others claimed to either have experienced the return of Christ as well. The Shakers were a religious group in the 19th century founded by Mother Ann Lee Stanley, who claimed to be the second incarnation of Christ. The Shakers lived communally, and believed that sex was the root of all evil. Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of the Christian Science church, believed that the second coming of Christ came in the inspiration of her book, "Science and Health with a Key to Scripture." She was not the only one who claimed divine inspiration for her writings. In the 1820's, Joseph Smith founded the Mormons, or Church of Latter Day Saints, after claiming an angel named Moroni showed him the secret location of golden tablets that only Smith could translate with the help of "seer stones" he also found. Smith translated the tablets hidden behind a curtain, while others wrote it down and this became the Book of Mormon. This is the setting in which the rapture was born. It is a time when people were focused on the end of the world. It is a time when charismatic leaders challenged the authority and traditional teachings of the church and claimed to have discovered the true teachings of God. This is not to say that the rapture is the equivalent to a cult, but rather to point out that there were some things going on during the time the rapture came to be taught that could easily shape the understanding of scripture at the time. We would be wise to be aware of this.

The teaching of the "pre-tribulation" rapture of the church claims the return of Jesus Christ will come in two parts. First, Jesus will secretly come (with trumpet sounds that only the faithful will hear) and Christians will be snatched up and away from the earth to meet Christ in the air. From there, Christ and the church will return to heaven, leaving many confused and distressed people on the earth. After the rapture, the world will go through a 7 year period called the great tribulation. Finally, Christ will return again to reign. There are a couple of questions that should arise from this account of things. First off, does the Bible really teach that Jesus will return twice? Second, how did this interpretation of things come about?

The beginnings of the secret rapture theory occurred in 1830 in Glasgow, Scotland, when Margaret MacDonald attended a healing service. During the service she received a vision of a two part return of Christ. A preacher named John Nelson Darby heard the story and began to teach and expound upon this theory of a two part return of Christ. Part of this expansion was to clarify the first part of Christ's two part return as the secret rapture of the church. The term "rapture" comes from the Latin "raptus" which was used to translate the Greek word "arpadzo," which is "caught up" in English. Darby taught about the rapture and made many trips to America during the Civil War period (1859 – 1877). Darby became the founder of the Plymouth Brethren, and perhaps the rapture would have been a teaching limited to that group, if not for Dwight Moody. Moody became a big believer in this theology and began spreading it in America and abroad. Moody, of course, was also the founder of the very influential Moody Bible Institute, Moody Press and Radio Network. In 1909, a Moody trained Bible teacher named Cyrus Scofield published a reference Bible that contained not only theology on the rapture, but also the breakdown of history and prophecy into 7 eras, or dispensations. Thus, dispensationalism was born. Dispensationalist theology arose out of a legitimate concern for understanding prophecy. It came to life in an era when the culture that seems to have been fascinated with the end times. As mentioned above, there were numerous groups in the 19th and early 20th century in the United States that arose around a concern for the end of time.

Furthermore, it became intimately connected with a larger movement, Fundamentalism, and therefore part of a larger and more emotionally charged debate. Is it what the bible teaches though?

While the rapture of the church is most often associated with the book of Revelation, it really is not mentioned there. Dispensationalists may point to Revelation 4:1 as suggesting the rapture, but it is a suggestion at best. The central verses to most teaching on the rapture are found in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and Matthew 24:36-44.

In Matthew 24:36-44, Jesus is teaching on the necessity of being watchful because the time that the Son of Man comes will be unexpected. Jesus draws a parallel between this coming and the time of Noah, and this parallel is crucial in understanding the point of the text. In Noah's time, people were engaging in normal activities when judgment came in the form of the flood and swept them away. The important point here is that the ones swept away were the ones under judgment. It was not good to be taken away (by flood waters!) in Noah's day. Therefore, this does not seem to be suggesting a secret rapture of the faithful, because in this context the faithful would not be swept away. It may be helpful here to give a brief word about one of the threads of Old Testament prophecy that is important to keep in mind when considering the rapture. Many of the prophecies in Isaiah (such as in 65 and 66) deal with the renewal of creation and the faithfulness of God towards creation. This is what many of the earliest interpreters of Revelation had in mind in interpreting the events of the book in a future sense (see above). God's renewal of creation is crucial to the Judeo-Christian worldview. With this in mind, it is difficult to reconcile this powerful theme of Old Testament prophecy with the rapture, which suggests God's removal of the faithful from creation as well as a destruction of a great deal of creation. In fact, one contemporary dispensationalist suggested we should not be overly concerned with the destruction of the environment considering what God was going to do to it in the future. The message about the return of Christ found in the New Testament is in line with the prophetic voices of the Old Testament and they speak to the faithfulness of God and the ultimate victory of God in his goodness over the forces of evil that destroy and corrupt. This is why Paul in Romans 8 speaks of creation groaning in anticipation. It will be renewed and released from its bondage to decay. The return of Christ will be one of victory, joy, and renewal, as well as a final and complete defeat of evil. This picture does not match up with a clandestine snatching of those who are faithful to God's purposes away from a creation that is bound for destruction. It is towards that joy filled and triumphant return we will now shift our attention.

In 1 Thessalonians 4 and into the first part of chapter 5, Paul is exhorting the Christians in Thessalonica to live their lives in holiness, as children of the light. They are to do this, in part, because the Lord may be returning at any time in victory and judgment, and these Christians should not be caught off guard. The return of the Lord is described within these verses using metaphors to paint a picture of a triumphant return. Bishop NT Wright cites three separate metaphors that Paul uses in describing Christ's return in 4:16-17¹². First, there is the return of Moses from the mountain to the Israelites as he brought them the Torah. There is a trumpet sound and a loud voice is heard. The second metaphor is drawn from Daniel 7 and the vision where God's people are vindicated and are raised up and seated with God in glory. The final metaphor is drawn from a more contemporary scene for those in the first century. When an emperor visited a colony, the loyal subjects in the colony would go out of the city to greet him and process back into the city in a triumphant parade. If these metaphors are being drawn upon in order to provide an image for the Christians in Thessalonica, then that certainly must affect how we interpret the passage. Remember, the people were being encouraged to remain faithful and holy, in spite of the temptations to the contrary. Paul backs up his call for the Christians to be holy by reminding them of Christ's triumphant return. You can almost picture the scene in your mind. There will be a trumpet blast, such as those that announce the coming of a king. God's people will now at last be vindicated, their faith proven true, as their king comes in triumph over all that has held them back. Finally, as true subjects in the Kingdom of Heaven,

¹² Wright, *Farewell to the Rapture*. (2001)

the faithful will go out and meet our returning Lord. This picture assumes that we meet our Lord in order to process back into the city, or into the world as it were, triumphantly. Our King has now returned to rule. While there are other passages that are drawn upon in order to prove a dispensational understanding of the rapture, 1 Thessalonians 4 and Matthew 24 are at the heart of rapture theology. It becomes clear that if these scriptures examined above do not teach the rapture, then the system falls apart. In regards to the return of Christ there are just a few things that Christians throughout history have been in basic and consistent agreement upon. No one knows the day nor hour. Christ will return as judge and as a conclusion to history as we know it. It may be helpful to simply cling to those creedal statements that the church has recited for centuries, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again," and "On the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there he shall come to judge the living and the dead." With this agreed upon knowledge we can hear Paul's exhortation clearly. We must live holy lives as children of the light, so that we are not caught unprepared.