

## ~Introduction to the Revelation~

By David Curtis

The vivid imagery and dramatic message of Revelation have long captivated the attention of Christendom although most of the interest is based on a radical misunderstanding of the very nature and purpose of the book. As church historian **Philip Schaff** noted over eighty years ago, "*The literature of the Apocalypse, especially in English, is immense, but mostly impository rather than expository, and hence worthless or even mischievous, because confounding and misleading.*"

The publication by Edgar C. Whisenant is an example of the *misleading* nature of literature on the Apocalypse. Six million copies of his work caused quite a stir among evangelicals in the summer and fall of 1988. Mr. Whisenant laboriously demonstrated why Christ would return to the earth in September, 1988. Regional news reports noted that a number of Christians took his message so seriously that they quit their jobs in anticipation of Christ's imminent return. I called to order a book from a major Christian book outlet only to be told by a recording that the employees had the day off to spend with their families before the Lord returned. Needless to say they all came back to work disappointed that the Lord didn't show. The "end of the world" frenzy of the 19th century has spawned many groups such as the *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons)*, the *Jehovah's Witnesses*, the *Christadelphians*, and countless other "last days" groups. In recent times, the "frenzy" has continued with the teachings of interpreters like Marshall Applewhite (Heaven's Gate cult leader). This "frenzy" continues to survive today because of modern misconceptions about the purpose of the prophetic events in Revelation and the time frame for their occurrence, which was the first century.

The sad thing about all this confusion is that the clear purpose of the book of Revelation is to reveal, not to conceal and confuse. Revelation is the most "Biblical" book in the Bible. John quotes hundreds of passages from the Old Testament, often with subtle allusions to obscure religious rituals of the Hebrew people. In order to understand Revelation, we need to know the Bible backward and forward, we need to be willing to work and think. 1 Thessalonians 5:20-22 instructs us, "Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil" (NKJV).

The word test is from the Greek word dokimazo which is a technical word for testing money to determine whether or not it is counterfeit. We are to test all things; the majority of believers don't test anything so they live by their moods and not by their minds.

As we study the book of Revelation you must be willing to think, you need to set your emotions and traditions aside, and carefully and closely study the Word of God. The book of Revelation is nothing less than inspired revelation from God and deserves our thoughtful attention.

Before we can study the text of Revelation, three questions require our thoughtful consideration:

1. When was it written?

2. What is the proper approach?

### 3. What is its theme?

The most important issue that confronts the interpreter of Revelation is the date that it was written. Two views compete for validity: the late date view (AD 95-96) which is the current evangelical opinion and the early date view (AD 65-66). The early date view says that Revelation speaks of the birth pangs of the Kingdom, the beginning of Church history. The late date view allows for a wide variety of interpretations; it views the book as the end of the kingdom and of Church history. Does Revelation speak of a looming great tribulation which will bring worldwide chaos upon the scene of contemporary history? Or did it inform the first century Christians of grave and trying times that they would face which would demonstrate that Christianity could weather the storms? This is a very practical matter.

The late date view comes *exclusively* from external evidence based on a statement made by *Irenaeus* (A.D. 120-202). Irenaeus is the only source for this late dating of Revelation; all other sources are based on him. There are other early writers whose statements indicate that John wrote Revelation much earlier. Our safest course, therefore, is to study the Revelation itself to see what internal evidence it presents regarding the date of its writing.

The text of Revelation provides a self-witness for the date it was written.

**Revelation 11:1-2** (NKJV) Then I was given a reed like a measuring rod. And the angel stood, saying, "Rise and measure the temple of God, the altar, and those who worship there. 2 "But leave out the court which is outside the temple, and do not measure it, for it has been given to the Gentiles. And they will tread the holy city underfoot for forty-two months.

These verses refers to a temple standing in a city called the 'holy city'. Based upon Old Testament Scripture, we can surmise that a Christian Jew such as John would have had the historical Jerusalem in mind when he spoke of the holy city.

**Isaiah 52:1** (NKJV) "Awake, awake! Put on your strength, O Zion; Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city! For the uncircumcised and the unclean shall no longer come to you."

**Nehemiah 11:1** (NKJV) "Now the leaders of the people dwelt at Jerusalem; the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to dwell in Jerusalem, the holy city, and nine-tenths were to dwell in other cities."

#### *For further identification of this city:*

**Revelation 11:8** (NKJV) And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.

This city is the site of our Lord's crucifixion; this can only be the historical Jerusalem. What temple stood in Jerusalem? Obviously the Jewish temple which was ordained of God, known as Herod's Temple. Herod the Great came to power in 37 B.C. and determined that he would please his Jewish subjects and impress the Romans with his kingly qualities by making the Jerusalem Temple bigger and better than it had ever been.

This reference to the temple must be the historical structure for three reasons. First of all, it was located in Jerusalem. Secondly, according to Revelation 11:2 it was to be under attack for 42 months. Nero commissioned Flavian Vespasian, a Roman general, to engage Israel in war in February AD 67. He

actually entered the Promised Land and engaged in battle that spring so that the Jewish war with Rome lasted from spring AD 67 until the temple fell in August AD 70, forty-two months later. Luke 21:20 contains Jesus' prophecy regarding the destruction of the temple: "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near." The time from Revelation 11 fits with what history tells us of the Jewish war. Finally, the structure of Revelation 11:1&2 parallels Jesus' statement in His Olivet discourse found in Luke 21:20-24. In Luke 21:5-7 the disciples point to the temple and ask about its future. Jesus tells them it will soon be destroyed, stone by stone. In Luke 21:24 He speaks in terms which are echoed in Revelation 11:2. These two passages speak of the same event, the destruction of Jerusalem.

When was Revelation written? Is the late date view or the early date view correct? We know from historical and archaeological evidence that the temple was destroyed in August of 70 AD. If this temple was still standing when John wrote, he must have written before 70 AD.

**Revelation 17** is the second major piece of internal evidence for the early date view of Revelation. In Revelation 17 a vision of the seven-headed beast is recorded. This vision offers clear evidence that Revelation was recorded before the death of Nero Caesar. We know that Nero committed suicide on June 9, 68AD.

**Revelation 17:1-6** (NKJV) Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and talked with me, saying to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, 2 "with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication." 3 So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. 4 The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. 5 And on her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. 6 I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I marveled with great amazement.

**Revelation 17:9** (NKJV) "Here is the mind which has wisdom: The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits."

**Verses 1, 3, and 6** of Revelation describe a vision and verse nine gives us clues to the meaning of the vision. Almost all scholars recognize that the seven mountains of Revelation 17:9 represent the seven hills of Rome. John points out that the wise one will understand; the recipients of this letter lived under the rule of Rome which was universally distinguished by its seven hills. How could the recipients of this letter who lived in the seven historical churches of Asia minor under Roman imperial rule understand anything else by this geological reference?

**Revelation 17:10** (NKJV) "There are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come. And when he comes, he must continue a short time.

**Revelation 17:10** says that the seven heads also represent a political situation: "There are also seven kings." Revelation 17:10 shows how the seven heads also correspond to the line of the Caesars. "Five have fallen", (past tense): The first five Caesars were Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius. "One is", (present tense): Nero, the sixth Caesar, was on the throne as John was writing the Revelation. Nero reigned from October 54 AD until June 68 AD, when he committed suicide because his empire was

in civil war. "And the other has not yet come. And when he comes, he must continue a short time," (Future tense): Galba, the seventh Caesar, reigned for less than 7 months (June, 68 AD to January, 69 AD).

**In Revelation 17:7** the angel says, "Don't wonder--I'll show you what it means"; in verses nine and ten the vision is explained. The seven heads refer to a historical place, Rome, and the political scene, Nero's reign. Revelation must have been written before Nero committed suicide in 68 AD. The internal evidence points clearly to the early date view.

The second question that is key to understanding Revelation is: 'what is the proper approach to the book of Revelation?' There are four basic approaches: a historicist view, the idealist view, the futurist view, and the preterist view. Each view provides a different interpretation of the book as a whole.

The historicists view Revelation as a panorama of church history from the apostolic era until the final future return of Jesus Christ. The different judgement scenes are applied to different historical events. This school is always in revision as history unfurls.

The idealists hold that Revelation is not to be taken in reference to any specific events at all; it is an expression of those basic principles on which God acts throughout history. The Revelation is thus a theological poem setting forth the ageless struggle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. This view denies any specific historical fulfillment of events in Revelation in the past or future.

The futurist view sees the prophecies of Revelation, particularly after Revelation 4:1, as set in the distant future from John's time. This view understands that Revelation deals with the ultimate historical outcome of world and/or church history. This is undeniably the most popular view today due to the influence of Dispensationalism which came into being during the nineteenth century, about 150 years ago. There are two fundamental Dispensationalist teachings: God has two differing peoples, Israel and the Church who have differing promises, different destinies, and different purposes; eschatology is the second distinctive of Dispensationalism. They teach that someday soon, (it's always soon) Christ will return to the earth invisibly and snatch away all the Christians--the rapture. After God has removed the Church, He will go back to dealing with Israel. There will be a seven year period called the tribulation in which many Jews will be saved. At the end of the tribulation Christ will return and inaugurate the Millennium. At the end of the Millennium there will be a rebellion and Christ will come and the eternal state will begin (I count three comings). The entire scheme of Dispensationalist eschatology, though popular in recent years, has no roots in historic Christian interpretation of the Scriptures. This view is held by most end time cults, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Armstrong's World Wide Church of God.

Then we have the preterist view which is divided into the partial preterist and full preterist camps. The partial preterist understands that most, but not all of the prophecies in Revelation have already been fulfilled. They believe that all of the book has been fulfilled up to chapter 20. They see us as now being in the millennium of chapter 20.

The full preterist understands that all of the prophecies in Revelation have already been fulfilled. The full preterist sees us as now in the 'new heaven and earth' of chapter 21 and 22. We obviously don't see the 'new heaven and earth' as a physical utopia but as a spiritual reality. Revelation prophesies issues and events beginning with John's own day; from our perspective these events are in the distant past, hence the designation 'preterist' from the Latin word for past.

There are evangelical adherents who interpret Revelation based on each of these schools but most of the

Church holds to either the futurist or the partial preterist view. We will look at Revelation from the full preterist view which I believe is the only consistent view. Most people are futurist and have never even have heard of the preterist view. Please have an open mind.

Most commentators of Revelation violate the basic hermeneutical principle of *audience relevance* which seeks to discover what the original readers understood a passage to mean. The concern of the evangelical interpreter is to understand the grammar of a passage in light of the historical circumstances and context of the original audience. To whom was Revelation written? It was written to seven historical churches.

At least three 'audience relevance' factors in Revelation emphasize the original audience and their circumstances; these three factors move us toward the preterist position. First of all, Revelation 1:4 clearly states that John wrote to particular historical individual churches that existed in his day, and in Revelation 1:11 he names those churches. John was not writing a panoramic perspective--he was writing to historical churches. Chapters two and three contain letters to each of these churches and deal with their specific circumstances.

Secondly, John wrote to these churches in order to be understood. John fully intended that his work be a revelation (Greek: apokalopsis), which means to uncover or disclose. He didn't write to obscure the truth but to reveal it. Revelation 1:3 tells us that he expected his audience to hear with understanding so that they might apply the principles. He says to all seven of the churches, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Finally, in **Revelation 1:9**, John said he was a companion with his audience in the tribulation. John and the seven churches are all in the tribulation together as he writes.

Revelation's contemporary expectation together with the factors of audience relevance argue strongly for a preterist view of Revelation. In Revelation 1:1 John specifically states that the prophecies of Revelation would begin to take place in a very short time. He emphasized this truth in a variety of ways through language. He carefully varies the manner of his expressions as if to avoid any potential confusion on the matter. The Greek word translated 'shortly' in Revelation 1:1 is tachos. According to **Arndt and Gingrich**

**Lexicon**, tachos is used in the **LXX** and certain non-canonical writings to mean *speed, quickness, swiftness, haste*. John uses the same word in Revelation 2:16; 3:11; 22:6,7,12,20. John also uses the Greek word engus which is translated 'at hand' in Revelation 1:3 & 22:10. This term speaks of temporal nearness and John uses it to **bracket** the book. The third Greek word is mello; it is translated 'about to' in Revelation 1:19 & 3:10. The phrase in 1:19, "the things which shall be hereafter" is literally "the things which are about to occur" and in 3:10, "which shall come upon all the world" is literally "is about to come upon the whole world." If we apply the principle of audience relevance, what would the original readers have thought when they read this? John strategically places these words at the introduction and conclusion of the book. John was telling the seven churches to expect these things at any moment.

Some try to redefine these terms to fit their theology. One Dispensational writer explains the use of tachos in Revelation 1:1 this way: "The idea is not that the event may occur soon, but that when it does, it will be sudden". What consolation would this have offered to those persecuted saints? Interpreting this passage to mean that Jesus will come rapidly some two or three thousand years in the future mocks their historical circumstances. Revelation hails the advent of Jesus as a relief; the original audience would not have been consoled to hear that once He started to come, in a couple thousand years, He would come quickly. How does this author use his definition of tachos in:

**Philippians 2:19** (KJV) But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy shortly unto you, that I also may be



of good comfort, when I know your state.

Does this mean that whenever Timothy does come to them he will come running?

A major objection to the preterist view is the issue of Christ's second coming. In several of these passages reference is made to Christ's coming (Revelation 2:16, 3:11, 22:7). "Behold I come quickly" resounds in these verses. Did Jesus Christ come in the first century? I believe that He did. Just as he said he would.

The partial preterists say that these verses in Revelation only refer to His coming in judgement upon Israel, and not to his second advent. The Revelation truly does speak of his coming in judgement on Israel. The theme verse says,

**Revelation 1:7** "Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen."

This is reminiscent of Old Testament cloud comings, when God came in judgement.

**Psalms 104:3** (NKJV) He lays the beams of His upper chambers in the waters, Who makes the clouds His chariot, Who walks on the wings of the wind.

**Isaiah 19:1** (NKJV) The burden against Egypt. Behold, the LORD rides on a swift cloud, And will come into Egypt; The idols of Egypt will totter at His presence, And the heart of Egypt will melt in its midst.

**Psalms 18:7-14** and **Joel 2:1-2** also speak of cloud comings. Christ's coming spoken of in Revelation 1:7 is a judgement coming which focuses upon first century Israel: He is coming upon those who pierced Him.

As a consequence of His coming in judgement, "all the tribes of the earth (or land) will mourn because of Him". Earth is translated from the Greek word *ghay* and it means soil, country, earth, ground, land, world.

"The tribes of the land" is a familiar designation for Israel. The Jews crucified Jesus and they were punished for it. "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." Acts 2:36

Jesus told the Jewish leaders that they would personally witness the judgement coming.

**Matthew 26:63-64** (NKJV) But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" Jesus said to him, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven."

The destruction of Jerusalem evidenced Jesus' coming in the clouds for that historical group of people. But are we to see it only as a coming in judgement on Israel? The full preterist or consistent preterist sees this judgement coming on Israel as the second advent of Christ. Jesus said that he would come in the lifetime of his disciples not just to judge Israel but: he said he would come in the glory of His father, with His angels, to reward every man.

**Matthew 16:27-28** (NKJV) "For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. 28 "Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

**Revelation 22:12** (NKJV) "And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work.

At Christ's coming, He was to judge the wicked and reward the righteous, and it was to happen quickly. In the parable of the tares in Matthew 13 we see that the judgement of the wicked and the reward of the righteous happen at the same time.

**Matthew 13:30** (NKJV) 'Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."

We see here that not only are the tares burned in judgement, a picture of the destruction of Jerusalem, but the righteous are gathered into the Father's barn.

**Matthew 13:36-43** (NKJV) "Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field. 37 He answered and said to them: He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. 39 The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. 40 Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. 41 The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, 42 and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

The partial preterist say this gathering will happen at a future second coming which would actually be the third coming. But the Scriptures teach that it happens at the same time as the judgement of Jerusalem. At the end of the Old Covenant world.

The Scriptures also teach that both the righteous and the wicked dead will be resurrected on the same day. We see in 1 Thessalonians that the dead in Christ will rise on the day of his return.

**1 Thessalonians 4:16** (NKJV) For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

This resurrection is described by John as being on the "last day," referring to the last day of Old Covenant Israel.

**John 6:40** (NKJV) "And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day."

This day of resurrection is also reserved for the wicked according to John.

**John 5:28-29** (NKJV) "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice 29 "and come forth; those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

The time of this resurrection was not some far distant time over two thousand years away. The time had

arrived in that generation.

**John 5:25** (NKJV) "Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.

We could conclude that the gathering and the resurrection of the righteous and the wicked will occur at the same 'last day', when the Lord Jesus Christ was to come again. The coming of the Lord in the destruction of Jerusalem was the second coming, and it happened in the first century. His coming to judge the wicked and gather the saints was to be a **comfort** to the first century believers, Jesus would give them rest at His coming.

**2 Thessalonians 1:6-10** (NKJV) "since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, 7 and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, 8 in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, 10 when He comes, in that day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.

He tells them that this second coming is not only to bring judgement but it is also to be a gathering of the saints.

**2 Thessalonians 2:1** (NKJV) Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ **and** our gathering together to Him, we ask you,

In **Matthew 24:29-31** Jesus predicted his coming to judge Israel and to gather together the saints in that generation (the first century generation).

In **1 Thessalonians 4:16-17** Paul spoke of the coming of the Lord to gather the saints. We need to ask ourselves a question, "how many comings of the Lord, with his angels, in fire, in power and glory, to gather the saints, are there in the New Testament?" There is only one, and it happened in AD 70.

The moderate, or inconsistent, preterists believe in two second comings of Christ, one in AD 70 to judge Israel; but they believe the literal, final coming of Christ is still in the future. Which means that they believe we are still under the Law, the Old Covenant, because it was to be in effect until heaven and earth pass away, which was speaking of Old Covenant Israel. See message on "Heaven and Earth passed away."

**Matthew 5:17-18** (NKJV) "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. 18 "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.

As we saw in our study last week, "The Rapture-- physical or spiritual," 1 Thessalonians 4-5 and Matthew 24 are dealing with the exact same coming, judgement, and resurrection. There is no biblical evidence for a third coming. The only coming that Jesus spoke about was to come to that generation, it was to come **quickly, soon, shortly, it was at hand**. Listen how John under the inspiration of Holy Spirit ends the book of Revelation.

**Revelation 22:6-7** (NKJV) "Then he said to me, these words are faithful and true. And the Lord God of



the holy prophets sent His angel to show His servants the things which must shortly take place. 7 Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."

**Revelation 22:10** (NKJV) "And he said to me, Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand."

**Revelation 22:12** (NKJV) "And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work."

**Revelation 22:20-21** (NKJV) "He who testifies to these things says, Surely I am coming quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus! 21 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen"

How could he have stressed more clearly that He was coming soon? The destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD was a major apologetic point in the first century because Jesus clearly said that people of that generation would see His coming in the judgement of Old Covenant Israel at the end of the age. And John expected all these events to take place soon after he had written. It is my opinion that the full preterist approach is the best choice for interpreting Revelation in light of original relevance. Revelation was written to the seven Churches of Asia Minor to tell them of things that would happen soon, *soon to them*, not *soon to us* two thousand years later. To them the book was a prophecy of near future events. To us it is history, it tells us of events that happened two thousands years ago.