

Three Views on the Book of Revelation

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NT013 – THE BOOK OF REVELATION

ASSIGNMENT: ESSAY

PAPER ON “FOUR VIEWS ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION”

Summarize and evaluate three of the four views presented in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, edited by C. Marvin Pate (Zondervan, 1998).

Present your summary with the help of tables.

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The Book of Revelation in the Bible has been viewed by many as a figurative book providing a visionary description of the future, the conflicts between good and evil, and the eventual end of the world, the Apocalypse. Four main interpretations put forth in the attempt to unravel the mysteries in the Book of Revelation are *preterist*, *idealist*, *classical dispensationalist futurist*, and *progressive dispensationalist* (Pate & Gundry 1998: 17).

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate and summarize three of the four views based on the book, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, edited by C. Marvin Pate and Stanley N. Gundry (Zondervan, 1998). The three views are: *preterist*, *idealist*, and *classical dispensationalist*. A quick reference guide of the three views is also included in this paper in the Appendix, presented with the help of tables.

Preterist takes a historical interpretation of Revelation by relating it to its original author and audience, sustained in the attempt to root the fulfillment of the prophecies in the first century A.D. The word ‘preterist’ is derived from the Latin word ‘praeteritus’, which means ‘gone by’ or the past (Pate & Gundry 1998:37). Preterist “holds that the bulk of John’s prophecies occur in the *first century*, soon after his writing of them. Though the prophecies were in the future when John wrote and when his original audience read them, they are now in *our past*”. The theological stand of the preterist is based on the postmillennialism doctrine, which sees the return of Christ as after the Millennium (Pate & Gundry 1998:19-23).

Preterist views the first vision in Revelation 1:12-20 as “Christ in history, walking among the churches as their ever-present protector and head” (Pate & Gundry 1998:49). Revelation 4-5 depicts God preparing John for the impending fearsome judgment, by spiritually transporting him above history to His throne room in heaven (Revelation 4:1-2), where the focal judgments begin in chapter 6. The *seven seals*, presented in parallel with Jesus’ Olivet Discourse, see the contexts of both prophecies as relating to first-century events (Revelation 1:1, 3; Matthew 24:2-3, 34; Pate & Gundry 1998:53), with the *seven trumpets* and the *seven bowls* referring to the spiraling forward, from different angles, the intensity of the crises. The 144,000 saints refer to racial Jews who accept the Lamb of God for salvation, the number of which is symbolic rather than literal. The beast of the sea is seen as possibly Roman Emperor Nero, along with other emperors represented by the seven heads. The beast of the earth is the false prophet, and Babylon is referred to as Jerusalem. The New Creation is viewed by the preterist as ‘anyone [who] is in Christ, he is a new creation’ (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:10; 4:24; Galatians 6:15; Pate & Gundry 1998:52-90).

Idealist, sometimes called the ‘spiritualist’, interprets Revelation from a spiritual point of view, symbolically, as “representing the ongoing conflict of good and evil with no immediate historical connection to any social or political events”, wherein in understanding the reason why the book is written, the text can be interpreted “for its time, our time, and all time” (Pate & Gundry 1998:23). Chiastically structured, the key to the Book of Revelation “is to be found in 10:1-15:4, with its description of the struggle

and liberation of the oppressed communities of the world” (Pate & Gundry 1998:27). Idealist “acknowledges the apocalyptic nature of Revelation”, but stands on a strong hermeneutical foundation that sees what is more important is what the text teaches at that point of time, and through good hermeneutical principles, identify the genre before interpreting literature. This is to say idealist, although acknowledges Revelation as containing some predictions of particular events, does not treat the book as a book of prophecy, but as a text presenting spiritual precepts through symbols for interpretation as apocalyptic literature (Pate & Gundry 1998:127-131).

Idealist sees the Millennium as a non-literal ‘thousand years’, referring to the entire period of history between Christ’s first and second comings, which include the present time, where Christ is now reigning at the right hand of the Father (Pate & Gundry 1998:27). To the idealist, the *seven seals* do not belong to a particular time, nor follow chronological succession. This deals with the whole history of the church and of the world throughout the Christian age, representing the calamities that fall upon the children of God. The idealist sees it “unnecessary to dwell on particulars of the plagues” and calamities from the *seven trumpets* and the *seven bowls*, for the significance is simply that “God uses every department of creation to punish the unrepentant”. The beast of the sea is seen as agents used by the dragon to attack the church, representing the spirit of the world that opposes and persecutes the church. The beast of the earth is seen as false religion and false philosophy in whatever forms it may appear. Babylon is referred to as the worldly city or center of wickedness that allures, tempts, and draws

people away from God, or the world in the church, the unspiritual or earthly element that has infiltrated the body of Christ (Pate & Gundry 1998:104-125).

Classical dispensationalist, which is the most popular interpretation among the masses during the twentieth century, divides “salvation history into historical eras or epochs in order to distinguish the different administrations of God’s involvement in the world” for “a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to the will of God” (Pate & Gundry 1998:28). The theological viewpoint of the classical dispensationalists is centered on pre-millennialism and pre-tribulation rapture, that is, Christ will come in two stages, the first for the church before the Great Tribulation, and the second in power and glory, to conquer His enemies and establish a temporary one thousand year reign on earth from Jerusalem (Pate & Gundry 1998:28-31). Classical dispensationalist “holds that the book [of Revelation] is primarily prophetic rather than apocalyptic and that biblical prophecy deserves literal interpretation, just as do other literary genres of Scripture” (Pate & Gundry 1998:224). “If a writer intended his words to be understood non-literally, that is the way to interpret them; if, however, he furnishes no such indication, then he meant them literally.” (Pate & Gundry 1998:225).

Classical dispensationalist sees the *seven seals* as following the pattern of Jesus’ Olivet Discourse, revealed in symbolic mode to John concerning the beginning of birth pangs and the soon-to-come Great Tribulation. Following the telescopic relationship theory, the *seven trumpets* and the *seven bowls*

are seen as the mounting intensity of God's wrath, with the last bowl containing the last seven plagues poured out in a future period just before Christ returns. Literal interpretation sees the 144,000 servants of God "as ethnic Israel, physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Pate & Gundry 1998:196). The 144,000 "are not the entirety of the faithful remnant of Israel, but are a group of them charged with the special task of witnessing for Christ during the world's darkest hour", with eventual "martyrdom for faithfulness to their task" (Pate & Gundry 1998:197). The beast of the sea is seen as a future false-Christ type of figure, who will rise to world rulership just before Christ returns, possibly an aggregate of world empires. The beast of the earth is a man who is a travesty of the slain Lamb, "a malevolent person who will embody satanic forces in controlling the final world empire" (Pate & Gundry 1998:200). Babylon is seen as the city on the Euphrates River. The imposing influence of this city and its dominance in world affairs are major considerations during the period just before Christ returns to judge her. After the future temporal kingdom of a thousand years on earth and the consignment of Satan and the beasts to the lake of fire, the next scene is the new creation of Christ's eternal kingdom on the present earth. Proper hermeneutics allow the material existence of a new Jerusalem, new heaven and new earth with ethical perfection that exceed human comprehension because no human has yet experienced it (Pate & Gundry 1998:191-210).

From the discussion and summary of the three views mentioned in this paper, it can be seen that there are many diverse views and interpretations of

the Book of Revelation. Despite this diversity, all the views are in unison on one fact, that Christ will return to judge the world, and good will eventually triumph over evil. As Christians, therefore, we must all affirm in oneness our confidence in Christ and hold fast our faith to the end in the midst of hermeneutical variety.

For a Quick Reference Guide of the three views on the Book of Revelation, please refer to the table in the *Appendix* of this paper.

APPENDIX

Three Views on the Book of Revelation

Quick Reference Guide

Three Views on the Book of Revelation

Adapted from: Pate & Gundry (eds) 1998. *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*. Michigan: Zondervan.

	Preterist	Idealist	Classical Dispensationalist
Ideology	Historic. 'Preterist', which means 'gone by', is derived from the Latin word 'praeteritus'. Preterist views Revelation's prophecies as reflecting actual historical events in apostle John's near future, which have been fulfilled in first century AD (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:22, 37).	Symbolic / Spiritualist. Text in Revelation is seen as dramatization of predominantly apocalyptic literature, the meaning of which is not in the past or future, but as an ongoing struggle between good and evil (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:25, 129).	Prophetic / Futurist. 'Dispensation', which means the administration of God's earthly household, is seen as dividing salvation history into historical eras or epochs, where fulfillment is perceived as still future (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:28-30).
Methodology	Historical interpretation relative to original writings and audiences (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:19, 91).	Hermeneutical foundation presenting spiritual precepts through symbols, rather than predictive prophecy, identifying the genre before interpreting literature through chiastic structure (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:127-131).	Literal interpretation of prophetic Scripture based on grammatical-historical method of exegesis (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:29-30, 180, 224, 227).
Audience	First century Church (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:19, 22, 49).	For believers like you and the apostle John, who find that following the Lord is a way of contradiction piercing inmost thoughts. Revelation offers a message of assurance, hope, and victory (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:98).	The Church and Israel, where distinction is made between the two. The church does not replace Israel in the plan of God, but is a parenthesis in the outworking of God's plan (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:29).
Purpose	To steel the first century Church against the gathering storm of persecution, and to brace the Church for a major and fundamental re-orientation in the course of redemptive history - the destruction of Jerusalem, which is fulfilled in AD 70 (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:19, 22).	A call for heroic living in times of suffering to endure to the end, and to warn Christians of the enemy within - 'the false Christian'. Christ is presented as achieving ultimate victory over Satan and his hosts, with evil eventually overthrown (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:23, 25, 97).	To develop in greater details the 'things that must happen', the series of events leading to the establishment of God's kingdom on earth which Daniel prophesied, and to remind of the book's continuity with Old Testament Davidic covenant (Daniel 9:24-27; Revelation 1:1; 22:6; 20:1-10; Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:182-184).

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	Preterist	Idealist	Classical Dispensationalist
Structure	Spiral, Historical. Involves the recasting of earlier prophecies with occasional glances backward, and the reconsidering of events from different angles, rather than relentless chronological progression (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:38-39).	Non-Chronological, Chiastic. Key to be found in Revelation 10:1-15:4, which describes the struggle and liberation of the oppressed communities of the world (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:27).	Linear, Futuristic. Based on Revelation 1:19, 'the things which you have seen', 'the things which are', and 'the things which will take place' as referring to Revelation 1; 2-3; and 4-22 respectively, with 'the things which will take place' yet to occur in history, hence future (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:30, 185-187).
Time of Fulfillment	Past. Fulfilled in first century AD.	Not restricted to a particular historical period. Ongoing and applicable for all time.	Future. May commence at any moment upon termination of the period of 'the things which are' (Revelation 1:19).
Theology	Post-Millennium - Christ will return after the Millennium. The Millennium begins in the first century, but its length extends beyond the near or soon time frame, hence number 1000 is seen as symbolic (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:82).	Amillennium - Non-literal 'thousand years', referring to the entire period of history between Christ's first and second comings, including the time now, with Christ reigning at the right hand of the Father (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:27).	Pre-Millennium - Christ returning in two stages, the first for His church to spare them from the Great Tribulation, that is the Pre-Tribulation Rapture, and the second in power and glory to conquer His enemies (Pate <i>et al</i> 1998:29-30, 189-191, 231).
Seven Seals	Parallel with Jesus' Olivet Discourse, contexts of prophecies of which relate to first century events, such as Roman-Jewish war of AD 67, Jewish revolt against Rome, civil war in Jerusalem, famine and death, and the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.	Each seal does not belong to a particular time, nor follow in chronological succession. This deals with the whole history of the church and of the world throughout the Christian age, representing the calamities that fall upon the children of God, even while the provident God sits on His throne.	Following the pattern of Jesus' Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21), and revealed in symbolic mode to John, the discourse divides the period just before Christ's return into two parts: the beginning of birth pangs, and the Great Tribulation.

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	Preterist	Idealist	Classical Dispensationalist
Seven Trumpets	New series of judgments spiraling forward from different angles and intensifying the crises.	Punishment awaiting the wicked persecutors of the church. The trumpets indicate a series of happenings or calamities that will occur again and again throughout the earthly existence of the church.	Following the telescopic or 'dovetailing' relationship theory, the seven trumpets comprise the seventh seal, and the seven bowls comprise the seventh trumpet, explaining the mounting intensity of God's wrath.
Seven Bowls	Further judgments on Israel and Jerusalem.	Similar to the plagues in Egypt (Exodus 7-10), the bowls runs parallel in time to the trumpets, the difference of which is the intensity, affirming that Revelation is not chronological. It is therefore unnecessary to dwell on particulars of the plagues, for the significance is God uses every department of creation to punish the unrepentant.	The seven bowls comprise the seventh trumpet. The vision progresses with the last bowl containing the last seven plagues poured out in a future period just before Christ returns, representing an ongoing chronological framework in the telescoping of the seals, trumpets, and bowls.
144,000 Saints	Number 144,000 as symbolic, referring to racial Jews who accept the Lamb of God for salvation.	The triumphant church in heaven with congregation of a complete number, without one missing soul. These 144,000 have not accepted Satan's lie, hence, enjoy the blessedness of their redemption.	Literal interpretation sees the 144,000 servants of God as ethnic Israel, physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These 144,000 are not the entirety of the faithful remnant of Israel, but are a group of them charged with the special task of witnessing for Christ during the world's darkest hour, with eventual martyrdom.

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	Preterist	Idealist	Classical Dispensationalist
Beast of the Sea	Roman Empire / Roman Emperor / Nero / Subsequent Ungodly Roman Empires.	Agents used by the dragon to attack the church, representing the spirit of the world (1 Corinthians 2:12) that opposes and persecutes the church, operating in and through the spirit of this world and its government.	A future false-Christ type of figure, who will rise to world rulership just before Christ returns, possibly an aggregate of world empires.
Beast of the Earth	False Prophet. One who receives his authority from the political power.	False religion and false philosophy in whatever form it may appear.	One of the slain heads of the first beast, this is one who is a travesty of the slain Lamb, a malevolent person who will embody satanic forces in controlling the final world empire.
Harlot of Babylon	Jerusalem, the great city. Some suppose it can also represent Rome because she sits on the seven hills, but Prof Iain Provon of Uni Edinburgh feels the case of Babylon being Jerusalem is indisputable because the first mention of 'the great city' in Revelatiion (11:8) points to Jerusalem.	1) The worldly city or center of wickedness that allures, tempts, and draws people away from God (Ezekiel 27-28). 2) The world in the church, the unspiritual or earthly element that has infiltrated the body of Christ, or even a false church like Jerusalem.	The city on the Euphrates River (Revelation 9:14; 16:12). The imposing influence of that city and its dominance in world affairs are major considerations during the period just before Christ returns to judge her. It is the empire of the beast yet future.

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	Preterist	Idealist	Classical Dispensationalist
The New Creation	First century setting, the Christian's new condition in Christ - 'Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:10; 4:24; Galatians 6:15).	Paradise restored with the redeemed enjoying intimate fellowship of marriage to the Lamb. 2 Peter 3:12-13 suggests the new heaven and earth may be a rejuvenated and transformed version of the old, perhaps this planet in the final and eternal home of God's people, or an eternal dwelling place that is beautiful, safe, and secure. The new Jerusalem refers to a people rather than a place, or may be the holy city descending from heaven to fulfill the continuation between the old and new covenants.	After the future temporal kingdom of a thousand years on earth and the consignment of Satan and the beasts to the lake of fire, the next scene is the new creation of Christ's eternal kingdom on the present earth. Proper hermeneutics allow the material existence of a new Jerusalem, new heaven and new earth with ethical perfection that exceed human comprehension because no human has yet experienced it.

Reference

Pate, C. Marvin and Gundry, N. Stanley (eds.) 1998, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*. Michigan: Zondervan.