

Resources For Reading the Book of Revelation

**BELLEFIELD CHURCH
SERMON SERIES
SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES**

BEHOLD:

*The Triumph of Jesus
in the Revelation to John*



Bellefield Presbyterian Church

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RESOURCE #1: Revelation Cheat Sheet

The Greek title of the book is literally “The Apocalypse of John”. When we hear the word ‘apocalypse’, we tend to think of a cataclysmic end of the world—but the word originally just meant “to disclose” or “unveil”, hence the translated title, ‘Revelation’. Apocalyptic literature is a specific genre in Scripture including books such as Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Revelation. This genre utilizes rich symbolism and vivid imagery, and often contains visions with overlapping timelines. How should we read such a genre?

Guidelines for Reading Revelation:¹

- 1. Revelation is meant to reveal.** God’s purpose with this book is not to confuse his people, but to assure them of the coming triumph of Jesus Christ. Because the book was intended to be read aloud in early congregations (1:3), it uses vivid imagery and evocative symbolism to communicate memorable truths.
- 2. Revelation is a book to be seen.** The visions John recorded make this “a book of symbols in motion”. The challenge comes from the ambiguity of many of the symbols and the difficulty of making appropriate connections between images and referents. Much of the symbolism depends on paradox.
- 3. Revelation only makes sense in light of the Old Testament.** The vocabulary, imagery, and allusions in Revelation are drawn from throughout the Old Testament, though most heavily from the prophetic books. Proper interpretation of Revelation simply cannot happen apart from this context.
- 4. Numbers count in Revelation.** While it is easy to get carried away, numbers (especially 7, 10, 12, and their multiples) often signal important concepts. The use and interpretation of numbers, however, is flexible. While there are some that are meant to be taken literally, most are symbolic.
- 5. Revelation is for a Church under attack.** The main purpose of Revelation is not to satisfy idle curiosity about ‘the end times’, but to give God’s people courage and assurance while they wait for the return of their King. Revelation depicts the persecuted Church’s struggle against Satan and pagan world powers. The Church must cling to the coming victory of the Lamb, and Revelation emphasizes this.

¹ These are taken and adapted from Dennis E. Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, (P&R Publishing, 2001), pp. 6-23. All quotes are from these pages.

6. Revelation is meant for *all* believers. John is told to record “the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this” (1:19), indicating that Revelation deals with more than just one narrow slice of history. The words of comfort and warning in this book, then, are for first *and* twenty-first century Christians—and all in between. Therefore, interpretations of the events that would be unintelligible and meaningless to most believers, globally and historically, should be suspect.

7. The victory belongs to God and to His Christ. Of all the symbolism and patterns, the most significant by far is “the movement from conflict to victory and the identity of the victors”. The book is not meant to scare, confuse, or weaken faith but rather to encourage believers in their suffering, to strengthen the faith of the Church, and to announce in advance the eternal victory of Jesus Christ.

Major Theological Frameworks for Reading Scripture:

Dispensational: This theological approach to Scripture breaks the history of God’s people into different eras, or “dispensations”, with God relating to his people differently in each era. “Israel” is understood as an ethnic, genealogical, and/or national point of identity, with whom God has established and will fulfill a plan that is distinct from his plan for the Church. The “Church age” (dispensation) is seen as a temporary interruption in the story line of Israel, and God will relate to the two groups differently in the period immediately leading up to Jesus’ return. *(This is a comparatively new theological framework, arising in the late 19th century.)*

Covenantal: This theological approach sees Scripture as one overarching and unfolding storyline centered on Jesus Christ. The promises made to Abraham are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and all who believe in him are heir to those same promises (Galatians 3:29). Even in the Old Testament, “Israel” in its truest sense was not an ethnic, genealogical, and/or national point of identity but a spiritual one, and in the New Testament we see that it is made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus (Romans 9:6-7; 10:12-13). The Church, therefore, is one and the same as spiritual Israel. *(This is the framework found in the Westminster Confession of Faith, which is the theological standard for our denomination.)*

Four Main Schools of Interpretation for Revelation²:

Preterist: This approach thinks that most of Revelation's visions (except chapters 19-22) were fulfilled during the first few generations of Christians. The fulfillment of the prophecies was in the near future for John, but in the distant past for us. The literary and chronological orders of events are not necessarily the same, but visions, symbols, and images tend to have single references. A strength of this approach is that it makes the book understandable to John's first audience, but a weakness is that it tends to minimize the present and future significance of the book.

Futurist: Opposite the preterist approach, futurism sees all of the events in chapters 4-22 to be in John's distant future, describing events will immediately precede—or coincide with—Christ's return. Most futurists link the literary sequence to a chronological sequence and are dispensational in their theology, seeing two distinct 'storylines' for the Church and ethnic/political Israel. Visions, symbols, and images tend to have singular references. A strength of this approach is that it calls Christians to look forward to God's triumph in Christ, while a weakness is that it separates Revelation from its Old Testament foundations and implies that only one generation of believers will ever truly understand or experience most of its contents.

Historicist: In this approach, Revelation is seen as series of visions depicting the history of the Church from John to the return of Jesus Christ. As with the futurist and preterist schools, visions, symbols, and characters are tied to specific referents throughout the history of the Church. The chronological sequence of history follows the literary sequence in the book. The strength of this approach is that it makes Revelation relevant for believers in every age because though we are at different points in the story, we are in the same plotline. Its major weaknesses are: 1. It insists that the historical sequence of the world follow the literary sequence of the visions; and 2. Most approaches attempt to map these events onto an

² Expanded summaries of these schools can be found in Johnson, pp. 351-363. For similar overviews and analyses of these four interpretive approaches, see also G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 44-48; or William Mounce, *The Book of Revelation (Revised)*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 24-30.

exclusively Western European history, making it far less relevant for the vast majority of the global Church throughout history.

Idealist: In contrast to each of the above schools, idealism (or “timeless symbolism”) reads Revelation as a series of visions portraying: 1. The experiences of the Church throughout the time between Jesus’ resurrection and return; 2. The final judgment; and 3. The new creation. Many of the visions and symbols present the same referent from a different vantage point or through different imagery. The literary sequence is just a structural device and may or may not correspond to historical chronology. It reads the symbolism of Revelation through the lens of the Old Testament and offers interpretations revealing the deep spiritual realities of the world that could be equally well-understood by ancient and modern believers. Rather than seeking to link the visions to specific individuals or isolated historic events, idealism understands most of them to symbolize the experiences facing the church throughout history. The exception are the final chapters, which do specifically refer to the events that will take place when Jesus returns. The major storyline is the spiritual battle between the people of God and the forces of Satan, and the coming end of that conflict with the return of Jesus Christ and the arrival of the new heavens and earth. (*This is the approach guided our sermon series.*)

RESOURCE #2: The Cast of Characters In Revelation 12-14

Through the first eleven chapters of Revelation, John has been shown three cycles of seven-part visions which depict the experience of God’s Church during the time between Jesus’ resurrection and return, as well as previews of the final judgment. At the heart of the book of Revelation, John includes a series of visions with evocative imagery and vivid characters—but what is it meant to show us? [All Scripture quotations are from the ESV.]

Is there a cause behind the conflict and strife found throughout history? As Revelation has progressed, the visions Jesus shared with John have given him a “behind the scenes” look the spiritual realities at work. History is in the hands of the King. Even though the Church is exposed to suffering, persecution, and death, she is nevertheless eternally protected and sealed by the Lord.³

At the center of the book, the curtain is fully lifted, and John is shown “a vision of the history behind the history” which many see as “the focal point of the Revelation of Jesus Christ given to John”.⁴ John sees the great cosmic conflict between the Woman and her Son and the Dragon and his Beasts. These are perhaps the most intriguing visions in the book, with many interpretive proposals. What follows is a brief introduction to these characters and the conflict in which they are engaged as read through a covenantal idealist approach.⁵

Chapter Twelve

The Combatants:

The Woman and her Son. The description of the woman in 12:1 is similar to the description in Joseph’s dream (Genesis 37:9) of Israel, the people of God from whom Jesus was born. The woman may also be meant to symbolize Eve, to whom God has promised a descendant that would crush the head of Satan (Genesis 3:15), and Mary, to whom God promised a child who would be the Messiah (Luke 1:35).

Her son, “the one who is to rule the nations with a rod of iron”, is Jesus Christ. After his birth, the woman is both pursued and protected, and the dragon “went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the

³ e.g. Revelation 7:23; 9:4; 11:1-2

⁴ J.H. Bavinck, *And On and On The Ages Roll*. (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019), pp. 24-25.

⁵ For definitions of these terms and how they inform the way Revelation is read and interpreted, see our “Revelation Cheat Sheet”. There are, of course, other interpretive frameworks and corresponding suggestions for the book.

commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus”. This indicates that the woman ultimately represents spiritual Israel, i.e. the Church, made up of Jew and Gentile alike who have placed their faith in God’s Messiah (Romans 9:6-7; Galatians 3:29).⁶

The Dragon. The dragon is, “that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (12:9). He is depicted with seven heads and ten horns, symbolizing his great power.

The Conflict:

The eternal conflict between the Son and the Serpent is described twice in this chapter, first via brief overview (vv. 1-6), then in greater depth (vv. 7-17). In the first description, Satan—aware of God’s promise to send a Savior “born of woman” (Galatians 4:4)—waits in fury for this birth, only to be thwarted and unable to conquer the newborn. The vision of the Son, “caught up to God and to his throne” (12:5) refers to Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. The Woman then flees into the wilderness, where she is nevertheless protected by God.

In the expanded description, John sees back to the original fall of Satan, cast out of heaven and down to earth. History then speeds forward to the announcement of the victory won by Jesus Christ on the cross. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection, Satan has been stripped of his power to accuse believers before the throne of God. Though he and his forces may take the lives of believers, he is ultimately powerless because the grave has been overcome through Jesus’ resurrection.

Knowing that he is defeated and his time is short, Satan nevertheless ruthlessly pursues ‘the rest of the woman’s offspring’, i.e. the Church. We are again told, however, that she is protected by God in the “wilderness” through this “half” of history (“a time, and times, and half a time” = 1,260 days = 42 months, all of which signify something temporary). Satan attempts to kill the Woman by a flood from his mouth. In Revelation, things that come out of the mouth signify words (Jesus has a sword that comes from his mouth in 1:16 and 19:15), and this “flood” probably represents Satan’s ancient tactic of “flooding” believers with lies and false

⁶ This is not what some call “replacement theology”, which says that the Church “replaces” ethnic/national Israel as the people of God. Rather, it could be called “fulfillment theology”, because it understands “Israel”—even in the Old Testament—to be a point of spiritual identity held by all who place their faith in God’s promised Savior. In the New Testament, the good news is that Gentile believers in Jesus are also part of spiritual Israel, a body which Scripture begins to call the Church.

teachings. Satan, enraged at God's protection of the Woman, unleashes his aggression as he stands "on the sand of the sea" (12:17), which is the source of all chaos, turmoil, and death in scripture.

Chapter Thirteen

The Combatants:

The first beast. Arising from the sea, "the chaotic region from which threat and rebellion arise...the proper home of all uncleanness and hostility toward God"⁷ is a beast of gruesome depiction. The description echoes that of the four beasts in Daniel 7-8, explicitly defined as the earthly kingdoms of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Alexandrian Greece, and Rome. This beast is a composite picture of those four, and thus symbolizes any and every corrupt human empire (from ancient Egypt to modern examples like Nazi Germany and Communist Russia) which demands absolute allegiance and attempts to usurp God's authority for itself. Its ten horns and seven heads show its connection to the Dragon (12:3), from whom it receives its false authority.

The second beast. Arising from the land is a second beast, which "performs great signs" and "makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast" (13:12-13). Later, this beast is called the "false prophet" (16:13; 19:20), because although it looks somewhat like the Lamb it speaks with the voice of the Dragon (13:11). This beast represents all false messiahs and those who deceive by eliciting the worship of idols. It is identified by the number 666, which may symbolize something like total imperfection (the number seven symbolizes wholeness/perfection). However, the call to "calculate the number" (13:17) may indicate the practice of gematria, an ancient system of code which assigned numerical values to letters. In this case, the word "beast" in Hebrew adds up to 666. Another possibility is that this beast refers to the Roman emperor Nero, known for his violent opposition to Christianity and his demand that all Roman citizens worship him. "Nero Caesar", in Hebrew, also adds up to 666.

The Conflict: Both beasts are "allowed to make war on the saints" (13:7) by demanding for themselves the allegiance, honor, and worship that rightfully belongs to God alone. Both do this by falsely imitating God's work—a favorite tactic of Satan throughout the ages. The first beast is said to have a "mortal

⁷ Dennis Johnson. *The Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation*. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2001), p. 187.

wound” which was healed, prompting the “whole earth” to marvel and follow him. This is a false imitation of the crucified and resurrected Lamb, and this false christ will be worshipped for his “miraculous” recovery. The response of those who follow it, saying, “Who is like the beast?” is also a false imitation of the praise of God’s people (Exodus 15:11).

These beasts are allowed to attack the saints and even kill them, though they cannot harm them eternally. Believers, those whose name has “been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain” (13:8), are eternally protected. The power of the first beast is “overt and coercive”, while the power of the second is “covert and deceiving”.⁸ Through subtle seduction and forceful oppression both entice people away from God and claim worship for themselves.

Is this the Antichrist?

Futurists⁹ typically identify one of these beasts as the Antichrist: a particular individual who comes to political and/or military power and forces believers and unbelievers alike to stray from God. Is one of these beasts the Antichrist? Are both? What does Revelation say?

Not as much as we may think. The title *antichrist* is not found anywhere in Revelation, and it only appears five times in all of Scripture. All five occurrences are found in 1 and 2 John, and since the same John wrote Revelation, we need to see how he uses the term in his letters. There, he says:

“Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.” (1 John 2:18)

“Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.” (1 John 2:22)

“...and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.” (1 John 4:3)

“Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.” (2 John 1:7)

⁸ Johnson, p. 195.

⁹ One of the major interpretive approaches to Revelation. For more, see our “Revelation Cheat Sheet”.

Notice the following: the “antichrist” is anyone who denies that Jesus is the Christ; the “antichrist” was active and present during the time in which John was writing his letters; and John says that there will be “many”. Therefore, while there may indeed be a specific, particular individual who arises during the time of increased trial shortly before Jesus’ return (perhaps related to the “man of lawlessness” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3), there also may not be. In other words, while there may be one “chief” Antichrist that arises before Jesus returns, we are also meant to see that term as a broad designation referring to anyone who deceives believers and denies that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

Given this, it is perhaps best to understand that the beasts symbolize any world powers, systems, governments, or religions which rise up against God and seek to wage spiritual warfare against God’s people rather than being references to specific individuals.

What is the “mark of the beast”?

This image is one of the most infamous in Revelation, and the cause of much speculative worry. Will believers be forced to get this against their will? Will it be a physical sign like a tattoo, embedded computer chip, or vaccine?

Like the “seal of God” given to believers (7:1-5; 9:4), the “mark” is said to be upon the right hand and forehead, and likely does not refer to a physical mark. God had commanded the Israelites to tie his law upon their foreheads and hands (Deuteronomy 6:8) as a way to signify that they were submitting their thoughts and actions to God’s Word. Believers are now sealed by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13; 4:30), who works to sanctify our thoughts and actions.

While God’s sign is called a “seal”, the beast’s is simply called a “mark”—yet another way in which Satan attempts through false imitation to mimic the work of God. Unbelievers are spiritually ‘marked’ in their thoughts and actions by the beast who stands opposed to God and God’s ways and the “mark” is only given to those who have already professed allegiance to the false prophet.

The “mark” is also said to be “the name of the beast or the number of its name”. Roman coins had the Emperor’s image on them, and if one of the possible references to “the number of its name” is the Roman Emperor Nero, then the idea that “no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark” could simply mean you had to use coins with the “beast” on them to participate in the Roman marketplace.

Those who refuse to worship this beast are allowed to be slain (13:15), so the idea that believers will be unwillingly forced to receive a “mark” that then jeopardizes their salvation is an unwarranted interpretation of the passage.

Chapter Fourteen:

The Characters:

The choir-army. Believers, sealed and protected by the Lord, are now gathered before his throne in worship. As in chapter 7, the number 144,000 is not a literal total, but a number symbolizing absolute fullness and perfection. It is most likely the same “great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” that is described in 7:9. Here, this gathering is described as those “who have not defiled themselves with women”, though this is not meant to be restricted to only chaste males. Instead, it brings to mind the practice of the Israelite armies, who would abstain from sexual relationships prior to engaging in holy warfare (Deuteronomy 23:9-11; 1 Samuel 21:5).

This image depicts the people of God—men and women from every nation—as those whom he has purified and prepared for both conquest and celebration. They are “singing a new song”, which is a response found throughout Scripture when God has acted to deliver and rescue his people (e.g. Exodus 15:1-21; Revelation 5:9).

Conclusion: Behind the scenes of all history lies the eternal conflict between the people of God and their champion King, Jesus Christ, on one hand, and the emissaries of Satan and his frustrated raging on the other hand. The outcome of this conflict, which began when Satan was cast down from heaven, was decided when Jesus Christ achieved victory over sin on the cross, triumphed over death at the empty tomb, and ascended to the right hand of the Father.

Though Satan can no longer accuse believers before the throne of God, he can use pagan regimes and false prophets to flood people with false imitations of God’s truth. The “dragon, through thwarted, defeated, hemmed in, prevented from devouring the child or drowning his mother in lethal lies, is not dead”¹⁰, and he sends his emissaries to attack the saints through the violent force of pagan political systems (first beast) and the sweet seduction of the lies of false prophets (second beast).

In all this, believers are called to endure and persevere (13:10), because their time, though fierce, is short, and the defeat of the Dragon and his beasts has already been achieved and secured through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. None other than God and his Christ deserves our worship. The Son of the

¹⁰ Johnson, p. 197.

Woman is the King of the Ages, and the victory of the Lamb will one day be seen by all.

RESOURCE #3: Telling Time In Revelation

Chapter 20 of Revelation contains perhaps the most heavily debated issue of interpretation in the entire book. What does John mean when he speaks of “the thousand years” in verses 1-6? The way in which these verses are understood impacts the way in which the entire book is read.

There are three main ways in which Christians interpret these verses and the idea of “the thousand years” (‘thousand’ in Latin is *millennium*). Here is a brief description of each, followed by an overview of how they impact the way chapter 20 is understood, and also a comparative visual chart. [*Definitions for underlined words can be found on our “Revelation Cheat Sheet” resource.*]

Premillennialism: Almost exclusively associated with the futurist school of interpretation and a dispensational theological framework, this perspective looks for Jesus Christ to return *before* (“pre”) the “thousand year” period—which is understood literally. Jesus’ return will initiate the battle of Armageddon and will result in the “binding of Satan”, who will then be cast into the Abyss for the thousand years. Believers who have died will be raised, those who are alive will be transformed, the earth will be blessed, and Jesus will rule on earth (typically from Jerusalem) together with his saints for the millennium. Near the end of this time, worldwide rebellion and deception will take place, initiating another war in which the Satan will be finally and permanently defeated. The wicked will then be raised and all will be judged by the Lamb, after which point the new heavens and earth will be created by God and filled by his people.

Postmillennialism: Usually associated with the preterist or historicist schools of interpretation and a covenantal theological framework, this perspective looks for Jesus Christ to return *after* (“post”) the “thousand year” period in which Satan is bound. Since his ascension, Jesus reigns from heaven and administers his kingdom through the preaching of the Gospel and the sending of the Spirit. This will lead to the large-scale conversion of the nations, the worldwide transformation of political and cultural realms, and the presence of global peace and well-being—all of which are evidence of the binding of Satan and the beginning of the thousand years. Some understand the thousand years to be literal and others understand it to be figurative. Near the end of this time, Satan will be “released”, and his forces will be gathered to wage war against the Church. Jesus will then return to destroy his

enemies, bring them to the Final Judgment, and usher in the new heavens and earth.

Amillennialism: Usually associated with the idealist school of interpretation and a covenantal theological framework, this perspective does not look for a literal “thousand year” period characterized by Jesus Christ’s bodily presence on earth (as in Premillennialism) or a period of unparalleled blessing on earth (as in Postmillennialism). Through Christ’s death and resurrection, Satan has been ‘bound’, meaning that is he no longer able to hold the Gentiles in ignorance or gather a worldwide force against the Church. The ‘thousand years’, like almost every other number in Revelation, is symbolic and is a way to refer to the period of time between Jesus’ ascension and his return. [The prefix *a-* means ‘without’, and indicates the figurative nature of “the thousand years”.] The material of 19:17-21 and 20:9-10 does not describe two different battles between Satan and Christ. Rather, like many other places in Revelation, they provide two different portraits of the same event. At the end of the ‘thousand years’, Jesus Christ will return bodily to rescue his persecuted and suffering Church, finally defeat Satan and his armies, judge the wicked and the righteous, and usher in the new heavens and earth. [*This is the interpretive approach that has guided our sermon series.*]

While these three views differ considerably from one another, each has strong advocates among biblical, faithful Christians. Here is a brief overview of how these approaches impact the reading of chapter 20:

Verses 1-3: Satan is said to be cast into “the bottomless pit” and bound for “a thousand years...so that he might not deceive the nations any longer.” The language is so similar to 12:9-17 that it seems to be another description of that same event rather than an entirely different event—a common feature in the book of Revelation. Premillennialists see this as a time when Satan will be removed from the earth while Christ and his saints reign. Postmillennialists see this as a time when the Gospel will spread so effectively that the whole earth will experience a thousand years of peace and well-being. Amillennialists, on the other hand, observe that the New Testament speaks of Jesus’ first coming as the event which has “bound” Satan (Matthew 12:29; Mark 3:27), and that his death and resurrection have brought light and life to the Gentiles (Matt 4:14-16; Luke 2:32; Acts 14:15-17, 17:30-31). The ‘thousand years of binding’, therefore, refer to Satan’s inability to stop the spread of the Gospel and the work of the Spirit to bring people from every

tribe, nation, and language to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ until the time Jesus returns.

Verses 4-6: John sees “the souls of those...who had not worshipped the beast or its image” seated in heaven. They “came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” through the “the first resurrection”. Premillennialists view this as the bodily resurrection of believers who will reign with Christ on earth for a thousand years. Amillennialists understand this to be a vision of thrones in heaven, and the believers are those who reign with Christ now in heaven during the time before his return. The “first resurrection” refers to the fact that believers who die go immediately to be with the Lord (Philippians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:8).

Verses 7-10: At the end of the millennium, Satan is released to deceive the nations and gather them for the final battle against God. Premillennialists see this as a separate event from the previous descriptions in 16:13-16 and 19:17-21, whereas Amillennialists and most Postmillennialists see this another view of the same event. (This is because of the similar language used, e.g. “*the battle*”, and the frequency with which John repeats visions throughout the book.) The names ‘Gog’ and ‘Magog’ are used throughout the OT prophets—especially Ezekiel—to refer to Israel’s pagan oppressors, and so the reference is most likely to any and every enemy of the people of God (physical or spiritual) rather than to two specific political regimes. For all of Satan’s bravado and aggression, the battle is shockingly brief: the forces are no sooner gathered than they are utterly destroyed and “the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever”.

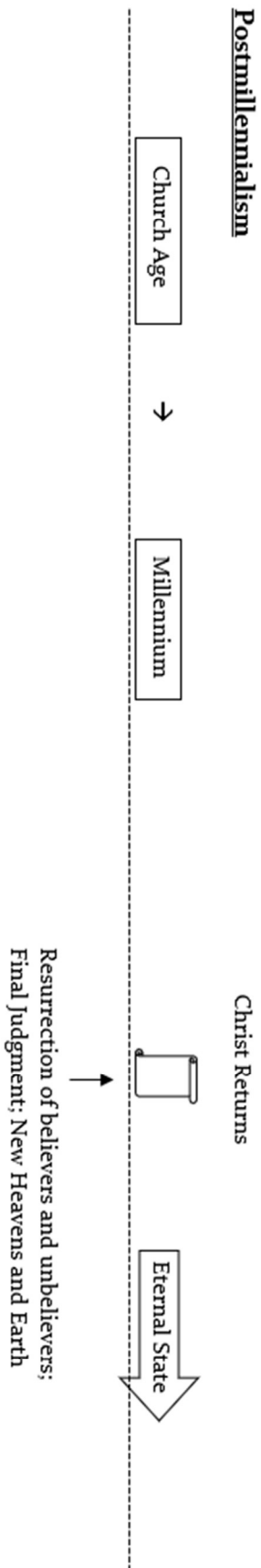
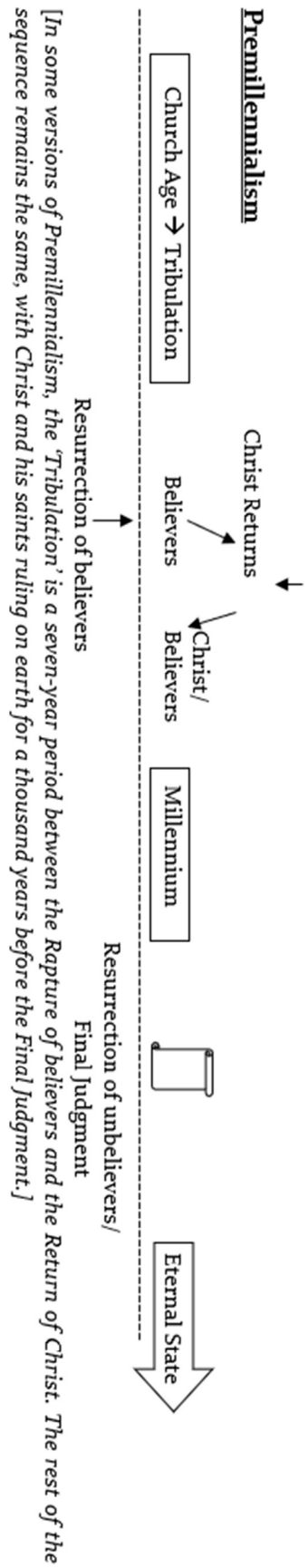
Verses 11-15: At this point, the Final Judgment takes place. John sees the “earth and sky” flee before God, which is another description of the destruction of the first heavens and earth that had been previewed in the sixth seal and seventh trumpet and then described in great detail in the seven bowls and fall of Babylon. All of the dead, believers and unbelievers, “great and small”, are gathered before the Throne to hear the final verdict. While all present are judged by the record of their deeds, there is “another book...which is the book of life”. Unbelievers will be justly condemned for their sins, while those whose names are in the Lamb’s book of life will be spared because of Jesus Christ’s saving work.

SUMMARY (from an Amillennial perspective): The victory that Christ won on the Cross is now brought to eternal fulfillment. Although the Church had experienced suffering and persecution throughout her time on earth between Jesus' ascension and return, that same time was also marked by the proclamation of the Gospel and the ministry of the Spirit—which took place because Satan was “bound” and unable to prevent their world-wide spread. Believers who had died before Christ's return experience life in heaven with him, reigning at his side during the “thousand years” between his ascension and return. Prior to Jesus' return, Satan is loosed, deceiving the nations and marshalling his forces for a desperate and futile last stand against the majestic and triumphant King of kings and Lord of lords. Before the battle can even begin, it is over. The conquering Lamb easily and decisively annihilates the wicked who rage against his name.

Satan is then cast into the lake of fire for his justly deserved and unending punishment, and all who have ever lived are called to assemble before the judgment seat of the King. Every deed they have ever done has been recorded, and the verdict handed down. Because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23), those who are spared are not those who have enough ‘good deeds’ recorded, but those whose names are inscribed in the Lamb's book of life. At this time, Death, “the last enemy to be destroyed” (1 Corinthians 15:26), is finally overcome and its effects eternally removed from the people of God. The cast has been assembled, and the stage set for the creation of the new heavens and earth (chapters 21-22).

RESOURCE #4: Revelation Millennial Views

Revelation: Millennial Views¹



¹ This chart taken and adapted from ESV Study Bible (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008), pp. 2459-2460. In each timeline, the scroll represents the "opening of the books" at the final judgment (20:12, 15).

RESOURCE #5: The Rapture and The Return

Perhaps the most common questions related to the book of Revelation deal with the manner or timing of Jesus Christ's return (or 'second coming') and the event often called the 'rapture'. This resource is intended to explore these topics. [All Scripture quotations are from the ESV.]

Many people associate Revelation with the 'rapture', commonly understood to be an event in which believers are instantaneously drawn up into the air—and then into heaven—to be with Jesus Christ, with unbelievers left here on earth until the day Jesus returns in glory and judgment. One of the most popular views regarding Jesus Christ's return and the rapture of believers comes from a theological framework called 'pretribulational dispensationalism', which is presented in its most familiar form in the series of "Left Behind" books and movies. It's presented as follows:

One day in the (near?) future, Jesus leaves his place at the right hand of the Father and descends from heaven. Although no one sees this, they do see its result: believers vanish suddenly as Jesus takes them back into heaven and puzzled unbelievers remain on earth. This initiates a period of intense tribulation (usually seven years), whose events follow the literary sequence of Revelation beginning in chapter 4. During this time of tribulation, many unbelievers—including many ethnic Jews—come to faith. At the end of this tribulation, Jesus Christ returns bodily and visibly to finally conquer the forces of Satan and his Antichrist, after which believers and unbelievers alike will stand before the judgment seat of God. *(This general framework will be referred to as the 'left behind' approach.)*

Our sermon series did not promote this perspective. To see why not, we'll briefly explore: (1) What Revelation itself has to say about these concepts; (2) What the rest of the New Testament has to say about these concepts; and (3) The biblical and theological evidence against separating the rapture of believers from the return of Jesus.

What does the book of Revelation have to say about Jesus' return and the rapture?

- **The manner and timing of Jesus Christ's return.** Revelation describes Jesus coming again—personally, visibly, and publicly—in glory and judgment (1:7, 19:11-16), though it does not give a specific date for this event.

- **The rapture.** The term itself is not found in Revelation and the concept is never explicitly depicted, only inferred through some theological frameworks and interpretive approaches.

What does the rest of the New Testament say about these things?

The manner/timing of Jesus Christ's return

Scripture consistently teaches that Jesus Christ will return again in glory and judgment, and that it will be a personal, public, and visible event. For example: *“And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’”* (Acts 1:10-11)

“For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.” (Matthew 16:27).

Scripture does not give us a precise day or year for this: *“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.”* (Matthew 24:36).¹¹

A verse often overlooked in this matter is Matthew 24:14: *“And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”*

Here, Jesus himself expressly states that the gospel must be shared with “all nations”—meaning distinct ethnic/language groups, not political states—and then “the end will come”.

Therefore, although we cannot calculate a precise day/year—and thus should be wary of those who claim that they can—Scripture assures us that Jesus *will* return, and that when he does it will be in glory, judgment, and grace, and every knee will bow before him in worship (Phil 2:9-11).

¹¹ By saying “nor the Son”, Jesus was referring to his knowledge of the divine decrees during his ministry on earth. Throughout that time, Jesus willingly restrained some of his divine attributes, e.g., omnipresence. This clause does not refer to the extent of his knowledge now that he has ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father.

The rapture

The word itself is not used anywhere in the Bible. There are a few verses in Scripture that seem to speak of this event, but none of them are in Revelation. The main passage to which people point is 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17: *“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.”*

What we understand by the ‘rapture’ depends on the meaning of the Greek words which are translated “caught up” and “meet”. The first word means “to grab or seize suddenly...in such a way that no resistance is offered”.¹² The second word is rare and is used specifically to refer to “an important dignitary’s reception by the inhabitants of a city, who come out to greet and welcome their honored guest with fanfare and celebration, then accompany him into the city”¹³. (Only two other verses in the New Testament use this word, and they both convey this sense: Matthew 25:6 and Acts 28:15).

The other passage often referenced is Matthew 24:40-41. Here, Jesus is teaching his disciples about his return, and says, *“Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left.”*

It’s typically assumed that those who believe in Jesus will be “taken” and those who do not will be “left”. However, just before that verse, Jesus was comparing “the coming of the Son of Man” to “the days of Noah”, when “the flood came and swept them all away”. Notice that it was the wicked who were swept away in the flood and the righteous who remained to inhabit the earth after God’s judgment. Therefore, it is best to understand the verse in Matthew as saying that the believer in Jesus is not the one who will be “taken”, but rather the one who will be “left” to dwell in the new creation.

In conclusion, neither the term nor the concept of the rapture is explicitly found in the book of Revelation. The passages in Scripture which do seem to reference it present the following scenario: On a day which no one can predict, Jesus Christ will return again in glory, at which time believers who are alive will be “caught up...to meet the Lord in the air” in celebration and praise, escorting Jesus,

¹² Frederick William Danker, ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. (3rd ed). (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 134.

¹³ ESV Study Bible. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), p. 2310. See also, Moisés Silva, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 2, p. 638.

as it were, back to earth to begin his eternal reign and dwell with him forever in the new creation.

Biblical and theological evidence against separating the rapture and the return

At its core, the ‘left behind’ approach views the rapture of believers and the return of Jesus as two distinct events separated by a lengthy period of tribulation from which the Church is excused. While many orthodox, biblical Christians believe this or something similar, the following reasons raise significant concerns about the depth of Scriptural support for such a view.¹⁴

1. *The words used by the New Testament to describe the Second Coming of Jesus describe a single event.* Jesus’ second coming is called a “return”, “revealing/revelation”, and “appearance”, none of which are plural nouns, and do not indicate that there will be a delay between a ‘rapture’ and the ‘return’.
2. *Christ’s Second Coming is presented as a single event that is for his people and with his people.* The ‘Left Behind’ approach speaks of Jesus first coming *for* his people (the rapture) and then, seven years later, coming *with* his people (the return). While 1 Thessalonians 3:13 does speak of Jesus “coming...with all his saints”, it does not indicate that this is a separate event following his ‘coming for his saints’. Instead, Scripture teaches that the believing dead are with the Lord now (Philippians 1:23, II Corinthians 5:8), and thus the picture is one of Jesus returning *for* those believers who are alive along *with* all those believers who have already died.
3. *The clearest description of a potential rapture in the New Testament does not teach a ‘pretribulation’ event.* As we saw above, the words used in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 describe a delegation who go out to meet a dignitary and festively usher them back to a city. The idea that Jesus will meet believers in the air, turn around and take them back to heaven with him for a period of time while those on earth experience tribulation, and then return with them again later is theological

¹⁴ Points 1-5 are taken and adapted from Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 164-172. All quotations are from these pages.

speculation and does not reflect the standard definition or meaning of the word used.

4. *New Testament passages indicate that the Church will experience ‘tribulation’.* Jesus told his disciples that “in the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33). Matthew 24 contains some of Jesus’ most direct teachings about his return, and there he specifically says that his people will be gathered to him “*after* the tribulation of those days” (vv. 29-31). Scripture does not support the idea that the Church will be exempt from suffering—but it does assure us that there is nothing that can separate us from Jesus Christ (Romans 8:35-39).

5. *A two-stage coming is not necessitated by the idea that God will pour out his wrath upon the world.*

The ‘left behind’ approach says that if God is going to pour out his wrath upon a rebellious world, then the Church must be removed beforehand, since it cannot be the object of his wrath. While it is true that Christ has removed the wrath of God from us, this does not mean that the Church on earth cannot experience tribulation, persecution, or suffering. Revelation teaches that believers will be sealed by the Spirit (7:3, 9:4), meaning that they will be protected and preserved. However, “protection from the wrath of God does not imply deliverance from the wrath of man”. The Church may yet experience intense persecution from unbelievers while still remaining protected and preserved by God himself.

6. *The resurrection of those who have died and the transformation of those who are alive are events depicted as simultaneous with Christ’s return.* The trumpet that sounds at the rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) is also the signal for the resurrection and transformation into glory of believers. Scripture does not indicate that there will be a delay between these events. Paul sums up his teachings on the resurrection with these words: “Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)

Conclusion:

The two-stage theory of Christ’s coming found in the ‘left behind’ approach rests on a misinterpretation of several passages and speculative inference that goes beyond what Scripture says plainly. It is necessitated by a previous commitment to a theological approach (dispensationalism) that sees the Church’s storyline as

separate from that of ethnic/national Israel (see “Revelation Cheat Sheet”). The consistent picture that Scripture offers is better seen like this:

The “great tribulation” refers to the entire history of the Church and the persecution she has faced throughout the ages. Nevertheless, prior to Christ’s return this persecution and suffering will likely increase and intensify, after which Jesus Christ will return—personally, visibly, and publicly.

When he returns, there will immediately be a general resurrection of those who have died and a transformation of living believers, which will happen “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). Then, both resurrected and transformed believers together will be caught up in the air to meet Jesus Christ as he descends, thus “coming...with all his saints” (1 Thessalonians 3:13). If we want to speak of a “rapture” for the Church, then it is this. Believers will meet their Lord in the air and descend again with him to the earth. Immediately after this, the final judgment and creation of the new heavens and new earth will take place, and believers will dwell with the Lord as his glorified people forever in the beauty and glory of the new creation.

Can Christians Disagree About This?

Yes, within certain boundaries. The motto for the EPC is, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity”. This topic is a prime example of the value of this framework.

All of the earliest Church creeds profess the return of Jesus Christ as a core teaching of the Christian faith. For example, the Apostles’ Creed says, “*On the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty; from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.*” Similarly, the Nicene Creed says, “*...the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead; and his kingdom shall have no end.*” Likewise, the sixth of the seven “Essentials” in the EPC says: “*Jesus Christ will come again to the earth personally, visibly, and bodily—to judge the living and the dead, and to consummate history and the eternal plan of God. ‘Even so, come, Lord Jesus.’ (Revelation 22:20)*”

The return of the resurrected Jesus to judge the living and the dead and usher in the fullness of God's eternal kingdom is one of the bedrock beliefs of the Christian faith. However, as you can see, these creedal and confessional statements are brief enough that they allow for a wide range of understanding and interpretation when it comes to specific details. What we should seek to do, then, is to be diligent and rigorous in our study of Scripture. We should strive for sound interpretation and application, allowing the text to speak for itself without imposing outside frameworks in an attempt to confirm pre-existing assumptions.

At the same time, we must recognize that there are areas of interpretation in which Christians can disagree and yet remain within the global and historic boundaries of orthodox Christianity. When the time comes that Jesus does finally return, it will be an event of such stunning grandeur and produce such incredible results that no interpretation will have perfectly captured the fullness of its glory.

Resource #6: Revelation Wrap-Up

The following is not a review of our entire study. Instead, it is meant to help us understand why the book of Revelation is important and what impact it ought to have on us. (All Scripture quotations are from the ESV.)

The book of Revelation prompts many questions, and while it is important to try to understand *what* Revelation has to say, it is even more important to understand *why* Revelation is a part of God’s Word.

Whether you read the book casually or spend years studying it, the point is never to simply accumulate winning answers for your next round of Bible Trivia or find the “secret meaning” of headline news. Instead, the book is intended to shape us into those who are confident in God’s coming victory, prepare us for the subtle deceptions and violent aggression of Satan, strengthen us in the face of suffering, and lead us to expectantly await the promised home in which we will dwell. How does it do this?

Here are seven (!) suggested things that Revelation does.¹⁵

Revelation Gives Us True Perspective.

There are times when life seems to be good, and times when life seems to be drowned in suffering. This is not because God is active certain times and absent others. Rather, it reflects the truth that we are living in the ‘time-between-the-times’, that is, the era between Jesus’ resurrection and his return. Sin and death have been overcome, Satan has been defeated, and the Babylons of this world are destined for judgment—but the new creation is not yet here. Revelation shows us that the Church will suffer during her life on earth, but she is ultimately and eternally secure.

Revelation Reveals Our Enemies As They Truly Are.

Appearances can be deceiving, and false beauty can be seductive. The spiritual enemies of God are symbolized in striking and unsettling ways in order to reveal their true nature and teach believers their true danger. The beast shows us the

¹⁵ The following list is adapted from the chapter, “What Should This Book Do to Us?”, in Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation*. (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2001), pp. 333-346. All quotations are from these pages.

danger of immensely powerful pagan political systems. Our allegiance cannot be given to them. The false prophet shows the strategy of all idolatrous beliefs: imitating the true work of God and leading people astray. The harlot shows us the seductive allure of decadent idolatry. Though indulgently sinful living may appear attractive, its end is destruction. The ugly and terrifying reality of Satan's forces are shown in order to remind us of their true nature during the times we are tempted to follow them.

Revelation Reveals Our King As He Truly Is.

Revelation portrays Jesus in vivid and powerful ways to show us that there is more to him than we often realize. Dennis Johnson puts it like this: “When you think of Jesus the Christ, do you see him in all the ways that Revelation’s images portray him? When you think that you have hidden your sins well from others, do you remember his eyes like flames? When fear grips your heart—fear for yourself, your family, or Christ’s church—do you fight that fear with the picture of the rider on the white horse, against whom the devil’s worst, last weapons are impotent? When you are confused, not knowing whom to trust to which path to take, do you hear the voice of the faithful witness ringing in your ears, ‘These words are faithful and true’, and do you turn expectantly to his words to find your way? When the accuser, though disbarred from heaven, renews his prosecution against your conscience, do you stand with John in awestruck wonder, gazing at the slain Lamb who poured out his blood to wash you clean and robe you in his own fine linen, bright and clean, to make you—yes, you!—God’s precious treasure?” Revelation is intended to give us a true picture of our Savior.

Revelation Reveals Our True Identity.

The Church rarely appears to us as it appears to Jesus Christ. We easily see the flaws that are depicted among the seven churches: “lovelessness, false belief, hypocrisy, toleration of lethal heresy, proud self-satisfaction, flagrant immorality, the adultery of idolatrous worship, and more.” How could Jesus look at these blemishes and still see a beautiful Bride? Revelation teaches us that Christ has gone to unimaginable lengths to rescue, redeem, and purify his Church. The Church does not need to make herself perfect in order to welcome her Lord; the Church welcomes the Lord who comes to make her perfect. Christ loves his Church more than we can imagine.

Revelation Prepares Us to Endure.

Persecution and suffering are not experiences confined to the early church alone. Through the first decade of the twenty-first century, nearly 450 Christians were martyred every twenty-four hours.¹⁶ Although American Christians are typically insulated from physical persecution, the Church is often slandered, marginalized, or attacked socially and politically. This is not abnormal! As Peter wrote: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” (1 Peter 4:12-14). Revelation teaches us that God will protect his Church, even in the midst of her suffering.

Revelation Challenges Us to Stay Faithful.

The call to remain faithful rings clearly throughout Revelation. It is sometimes easier to stand against oppressive, violent persecution than it is to remain unstained by subtle, deceptive lies. Believers are told to have no part with the sins of the world, but to remain steadfast and strong, knowing that we are sealed by the Spirit and marked as God's people. Revelation shows us the Church as the Bride who is dressed in spotless linen, which has been given to her by Jesus, and challenges us to avoid compromising our faith in Christ by giving in to the lies of the enemy.

Revelation Equips Us to Bear Witness While We Wait.

In the face of persecution, suffering, and the attacks of Satan, the temptation may be to withdraw or hide in places of spiritual safety. Nevertheless, believers are not called to isolate themselves from the world or take refuge and ‘weather the storm’ but to proclaim joyfully, faithfully, and clearly the “eternal gospel...to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people” (Rev 14:6). Revelation is meant to equip us to do that, showing us that Jesus does reign even over the conflict and tumult of this world and that we are called to be faithful witnesses who know that the day is coming when “the kingdom of the world has

¹⁶ See “Go Figure: Persecution”. *Christianity Today* (April 2011), p. 11.

become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15).

Why did we study the book of Revelation? To learn more of who God is, more of who we are as his people, and more of what he is calling us and equipping us to do as we await the return of our Savior. That’s why we join with believers in every time and place by saying:

“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”

For Further Reading:

There are countless resources on Revelation. The following helped to inform our sermon series, and are recommended by our pastors for those who would like to study Revelation more:

- Bavinck, J.H. *And On and On the Ages Roll: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*. (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019)
- Beale, G.K. *The Book of Revelation*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1999)¹⁷
- Beale, G.K. and Kim, Mitchell. *God Dwells Among Us: A Biblical Theology of the Temple*. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014)
- Johnson, Dennis. *The Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation*. (Philipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2001)
- Mounce, Robert. *The Book of Revelation (Revised)*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1997)
- Mouw, Richard. *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem (Revised Edition)*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2002)

¹⁷ Although this is a very technical commentary on the Greek text, the basic insights and conclusions are presented in a more accessible format in *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, from the same author and publisher.



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