

# Lesson 4

Last week we began looking at various approaches to the book of Revelation. We started by looking at the **dispensational** approach, and we discussed why that approach is not the right approach. We then began looking at the **historical** approach, which treats the book of Revelation as a timeline of the history of the church after its establishment in Acts 2. We had just started looking at some problems with that approach when class ended last week.

The first problem we identified with the historical approach is that it implicitly assumes that we are now living near the end of time — which is something the Bible tells us that we have no way of knowing.

If the historical view were true, then wouldn't that mean we could know about when Jesus was coming again? Couldn't we just track the history in Revelation, and see how close we were to the last chapter? But we know that can't be right. The end of the world will come like a thief in the night; there will be no signs! For all we know, there may be a million years of church history yet to come in which case the two thousand years we have seen so far will seem like just a drop in the bucket. Any theory that is based on an assumption that we can know, even implicitly, that we are living in the end times is deeply flawed! It is based on a faulty premise.

Martin Luther fell into this trap. Luther and almost all of the other leaders of the Reformation believed that the Antichrist was the Roman Catholic church. Luther favored the historical approach, but he taught that the book of Revelation was focused on only two time periods — the early church and the church in Luther's own day. For that reason, Luther thought the end of the world was imminent — that the world could not last much beyond the year 1600.

The historical view has a second major problem. It ignores John's clearly stated time frame for the book, that the things described therein were not to be sealed up but rather were to shortly come to pass.

Third, the historical approach makes the book of little significance to its initial readers — those persecuted first century Christians who needed a message of comfort.

And, finally, the historical approach quickly becomes absurd in its attempt to match historical details to the visions in the book. As with Nostradamus, something in Revelation can be found to fit almost any historical event if the context and time frame are ignored. Luther, for example, thought that the advancing Turks of his day were Gog and Magog.

For those reasons, I don't think that the historical view is the right approach to this book.

### **The Extreme Preterist Approach**

The Extreme Preterist (preterist just means past) approach is also called Realized Eschatology, the 70 AD Theory, transmillennialism, or Max Kingism. I generally will not spend too much time on what could be called "crackpot" theories about Revelation, but since this particular crackpot theory was popularized by some in the Lord's church, I think we should spend some time discussing it.

This view seems to have originated with a man named James Stuart Russell, who was a Congregational clergyman in England before his death in 1895. He wrote a book entitled *The Parousia*, from the Greek word for "coming."

Perhaps the best way to begin a discussion of Max Kingism is to look at some things that Max King himself has said about it. A good place to start for that is the debate that occurred between Max King and Jim McGuigan. (Brother McGuigan is a superb scholar and teacher of God's word, and I recommend all of his books.) There were several propositions at issue in that debate. Here is one with which Max King *disagreed*:

*Proposition Four:* The New Testament teaches there is yet to be a day in which all the dead will be raised to life. And that they with the people yet alive on that day will be judged relative to where they shall spend eternity.

And, yes, Max King *disagreed* with that statement. That alone should be enough evidence for us to know that he had seriously gone off the rails!

Max King claims that although the kingdom came on the day of Pentecost following the ascension of Christ, it did not come with power and glory until AD 70. Max King claims that the event commonly referred to today as the "second coming of Christ" has already happened, and it occurred with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Max King claims that both the Christian and Jewish faiths were in operation from the day of Pentecost until AD 70. When the temple was destroyed, the church (the body) was resurrected—it had been buried under Judaism for forty years.

Max King claims that there is no resurrection of the body and that Christ will **never** return to claim his people. According to Max, all prophecy was fulfilled in AD 70, and there is not a single prophecy that has not been fulfilled. He said: “The destruction of Jerusalem did not leave unfulfilled one single prophecy, promise, or blessing.”

One religious encyclopedia describes his views this way: “AD 30 to 70 represented the millennial reign of Christ, and this Last Days period transformed all things and ushered in the covenantal kingdom.”

It is tempting to disregard this view as just so much nonsense, but we should be careful. First, there are many sincere members of the church who have been led astray by this false doctrine, and I personally know of two congregations that have been divided because of it. Second, although presenting himself as still in the church, Max Kingism denies basic tenets of the Christian faith including the second appearance of Christ, the resurrection of the body, and the final judgment.

Fortunately, their headway into the church seems to be on a drastic decline, most likely because congregations are now more aware of what they teach and are able to spot it early. Perhaps that is why the Max King movement is looking for new ground to conquer. In one of their recent publications, they say that they have now “opened their ministry to others with a view to trans-denominationalism” (whatever that means!).

So that we can confront Max Kingism when we see it, I want to quickly go over several key reasons why their *approach* to prophecy is wrong.

Max King’s view violates one of the interpretive rules we discussed earlier: Similarity of language does not prove identity of subject. There are many judgments in the Bible (Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Edom, Jerusalem, Rome, and the final judgment), and the same language is often used to describe each. King focuses on the Jerusalem judgment in the New Testament and assumes that all judgment language in the New Testament refers to it. That is a basic flaw with his approach.

We often confuse the judgments ourselves, and King exploits that confusion to get his foot in the door. I will be the first to agree that many passages that

some often take to refer to the end of the world actually refer to the end of Jerusalem. (Matthew 24:1-34, for example.) But that does not mean that *all* such verses refer to the end of Jerusalem.

A second flaw is that Max Kingism is based on the premise that the focus of Revelation is the fall of Jerusalem and that the book was thus written prior to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. That idea is contrary to all of the evidence — both internal and external — and is one of Max Kingism's weakest links. If we can disprove that assertion by Max King (and we can), then Max Kingism collapses.

Those criticisms go to his *approach*. As for why the *consequences* of his approach are wrong, there are many verses that can be used to respond to his false view. For example:

- **Acts 1:11**, for example, tells us that Jesus will return in the same manner as he left — “this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.”
- **1 Corinthians 11:26** tells us that the communion proclaims the Lord's death until he comes — “For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.”
- **1 Corinthians 15:25-26** tells us that death will be destroyed when Christ returns — “For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.”
- **2 Timothy 2:17-18** reminds us that those who deny the resurrection can overthrow people's faith — “And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some.” Sadly that has happened with many of Max King's followers. If Max King is in any way different from Hymenaeus and Philetus, I don't see it.

God's word is not decided by majority vote, but we should be concerned when we come up with something that no one has ever thought of before. **Novel theories about the Bible are generally wrong theories about the Bible.** Max Kingism is just such a theory. Yes, we have to be careful anytime we are tempted to reject something solely because that is not the way we have always heard it, but when we hear something different from what we have always

heard, that should raise a red flag that causes us to open our Bible and study what it says on the subject.

If you want to know more on this subject, I recommend the written debate between Max King and Jim McGuiggan, which is available in used book stores on Amazon.com. I recommend any book on prophecy written by Jim McGuiggan. My own interest in the subject comes from a videotape course on Revelation by Brother McGuiggan that was shown to me in a Bible class in the late seventies.

So far we have looked at and rejected the dispensational approach, the historical approach, and the extreme preterist approach. What is left?

### **The Preterist or Contemporary Historical Approach**

The Preterist (not extreme!) or Contemporary Historical Approach applies the book primarily (or completely) to the conflict between the church and first century Rome. I won't say too much about this approach now for the simple reason that we are about to spend about a year discussing it.

Some taking this approach apply the book to the conflict between the church and Jerusalem, but that theory is seriously flawed. As we have already discussed, and as we will see in great detail later, the villain in this book is Rome, not Jerusalem. That's not to say that Jerusalem is not discussed anywhere in the book — some see Jerusalem all throughout Chapter 11. We shall see when we get there.

The preterist approach does not violate John's claim that the prophecies in Revelation were to come to pass shortly. This approach makes the book meaningful to its initial readers in that it gives comfort and assurance of victory to those being persecuted. According to this approach the book is *not* primarily eschatological— that is, it is not primarily concerned with the end of the world, but is instead concerned with the end of Rome and the victory of the church over Rome.

I am *not* an extreme preterist, but I am a preterist. I believe this book is primarily about the first century conflict between Rome and the church, and the purpose of this book was to provide comfort and a promise of victory to the first century Christians being persecuted by Rome.

So does Revelation have anything to say about the end of the world? Not nearly as much as most people think, which is the answer we would expect in view of the very first verse: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto

him, to shew unto his servants things which must **shortly** come to pass.” As for what it does say about the end of the world, let’s answer that question as we make our way through the text.

Can we understand Revelation? Yes! (But it will be challenging!) One problem with studying Revelation is that it is difficult to say what anything means until one has decided in a sense what everything means.

But despite its many challenges, the book is meant to be understood. Chapter 1, verse 3, provides a blessing to those who read and understand the book. Also, the very name of the book indicates that the message is **revealed**.

Some might argue that Revelation falls into the category of items dealt with by Deuteronomy 29:29 (“The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.”) But Revelation is not a secret thing! Revelation has been revealed! We were meant to understand it, and we can understand it.

Why is Revelation so difficult? Even with the confidence that we can understand Revelation, we must all agree that Revelation is difficult to understand because it is so very different from anything we find in the New Testament and in almost all of the Old Testament. What makes it so different? The main reason it is different is that it is written in what has become known as **apocalyptic language**.

What is apocalyptic language? Revelation is called *Apokalupsis* in Greek, and it is from that word that we get the word apocalyptic, which means unveiled, uncovered, or revealed. We have already seen such language in our studies of Daniel and Zechariah.

Apocalyptic language is composed of symbols that are often lurid in color, violent in tone, and easily remembered. They strike the imagination and grab hold of the mind. In addition to Revelation, such language can be found in Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Isaiah, the minor prophets, and even in the gospels and epistles.

Apocalyptic language is almost always used to denote conflict and victory. It is used when God judges and smites an oppressor and vindicates his people. It is used to describe times of crisis and judgment.

All apocalyptic literature deals with these events: the sin of the present age, the terror of the time between, and the blessings of the time to come. It sees the present world as beyond mending. It looks forward to a new world after

this present one has been shattered by the avenging wrath of God. It is continually attempting to describe the indescribable, to say the unsayable, to paint the unpaintable.

Why does God use apocalyptic language? Some think it was used in Revelation to shield the church from Roman retaliation. But that explanation has never appealed much to me. If we can understand the book two thousand years after it was written, then surely Rome could understand the symbols at the time it was written.

I think the reason it was used is that God wanted to use it! This book is an oil painting from God. Numbers 12:8 reminds us that God does not always speak clearly, but sometimes uses dark language, and perhaps such language is reserved for times of conflict and judgment.

God speaks us to us in different ways in his word. We saw a good example of that in our study of Zechariah and Ezra. Ezra was a straightforward historical account of what happened, while Zechariah — looking at the same events — described them in very different language, while explaining their future significance. Haggai, another prophet also looking at the same events, described them in a very different way than did Zechariah.

Likewise, here. We see the persecution in Acts and the epistles, and we see the persecution in the opening chapters of Revelation. And we also see that persecution in the vision that begins in Chapter 4 of Revelation — and we see it described with very different language.

But shouldn't we always interpret the Bible literally? The usual approach to interpreting the Bible is that we understand a passage literally unless forced to do otherwise. (For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told us that if our right hand offends us, we should cut it off. We understand that is not to be understood literally.)

This usual approach is reversed for apocalyptic language—we should understand apocalyptic language figuratively unless we are forced to do otherwise. Why? Because apocalyptic language by its very nature uses vivid and dramatic symbols to describe vivid and dramatic events. How do we know that? We know that because explanations of what the symbols mean are sometimes given in the text itself. We will see that in Revelation, and it occurs in Daniel, also. Also, we know that because in many and perhaps even most cases of apocalyptic language, it is not possible to understand what we read literally.

But shouldn't all prophecies be taken literally? No, and I don't know anyone who does.

- To literalize **Genesis 3:15** is to reduce it to just describing a conflict between snakes and humans.
- To literalize **Zechariah 14:12-13** requires those that just had their flesh, their eyes, and their tongue consumed away by a plague to then lay their hand upon their neighbor and create a great tumult.
- To literalize **Isaiah 11:6-10** is to deny that Paul applied it correctly to the first century in **Romans 15:10-12**.
- To literalize **Ezekiel 16:53-55** would require the resurrection of the inhabitants of Sodom to their former prosperity despite what we read in Jude 7.
- To literalize **Ezekiel 37:22-25** would require that David and not Jesus be Israel's eternal king.

Whatever approach we take, we should apply it consistently. Those who say that they take all of Revelation literally are never consistent in that regard. They **always** take some things figuratively. To Hal Lindsey, the 144,000 Jews in 7:4 are literal yet the locusts in 9:3 are Cobra helicopters and the demonic horsemen are tanks. To John Walvoord, the ten days in 2:10 are figurative yet the thousand years in Chapter 20 are literal. We can avoid many of their errors just by being consistent in our interpretation of the text — but, of course, we must be consistently right!

What about the Greek text? The language of Revelation is unique. The Greek usage and vocabulary in Revelation are so different from that of the other books of the New Testament that it has been necessary for textual scholars to develop a special grammar to deal with the text. The book is written in what some have called *Hebraic Greek*.

**J. B. Phillips:** Revelation piles word upon word remorselessly, mixes cases and tenses without apparent scruple, and shows at times a complete disregard for normal syntax and grammar. ... And generally speaking, the tumultuous assault of words is not without its effect upon the mind.

There are a number of passages in which the author seems to violate the simplest rules of Greek grammar. "The book seems openly and deliberately to defy the grammarian." Why?

Some suggest that perhaps John wrote down what he saw *during* the visions, and there is some support for that idea in the text itself — several times John is commanded to write what he is then seeing.

But perhaps the best explanation for the unusual grammar is that it was used *intentionally* to make a theological point. For example, in Revelation 1:4, in the KJV, we read: “Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come.”

Barclay tells us that John bursts the bonds of grammar here to show his reverence for God. Where we have “from *him* who is,” John retains the nominative case and in effect has “from *he* who is.” John’s reverence for God would not allow him to alter the form of his name even when the grammar demanded it!

But perhaps John just made an *unintentional* grammatical mistake there? The evidence suggests otherwise. That same preposition is found thirty-one times in the book of Revelation, and each time it is used correctly, with this one exception.

Further, where we have “from him who was,” John has “from the ‘he was.’” John uses a grammatically impossible construction to avoid using a form of “to become” that might imply that God could change. Those suffering persecution were particularly concerned with the *changelessness* of God, and the inspired text reinforces that theme even with its grammar!

Some have used the Greek usage in Revelation to argue that the same person could not have written this book and the gospel of John. But I would turn that argument around on them — that the same person wrote both books confirms that the unusual language and awkward grammar in Revelation were intentional.

But is there any evidence we can point to to confirm that the same person wrote both books? Yes, there are some remarkable links between the two books. A recent commentary by Warren Gage is entitled *John’s Gospel: A Neglected Key to Revelation*. While I don’t agree with all of the linkages he proposes, they are all interesting. Some that we can see immediately are the many links between the **opening** chapter of John and the **closing** chapters of Revelation.

*John 1:1 — In the beginning was the word.*

*Revelation 22:13 — I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.*

**John 1:3** — All things were **made by him**; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

**Revelation 21:5** — I **make all things new**.

**John 1:14** — And the Word was made flesh, and **dwelt** [lit. tabernacled] among us.

**Revelation 21:3** — Behold, the **tabernacle** of God is with men, and he will  **dwell** with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

**John 1:29** — Behold the **Lamb of God**, which taketh away the sin of the world.

**Revelation 22:3** — And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the **Lamb** shall be in it.

**John 1:32** — I saw the Spirit **descending from heaven** like a dove, and it abode upon him.

**Revelation 21:2** — And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, **coming down from God out of heaven**, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

Those are just a few examples, but the book I mentioned includes many others. I certainly don't agree with everything in that commentary, but his central thesis is very interesting — John's gospel account may be helpful in our study of Revelation. They were likely written close to the same time. Almost certainly, John's gospel was written after the fall of Jerusalem — why? Because of the four gospel accounts, John's account is the only one that omits Jesus' warnings to flee the city of Jerusalem before it was destroyed. There would have been no need for John to repeat those warnings after the city had already been destroyed.

In short, I think the same inspired apostle John wrote both the gospel of John and the book of Revelation, as well as the epistles of John, and the odd grammar of Revelation certainly does not establish otherwise.