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Revelation Intro 1: Different Approaches to Revelation

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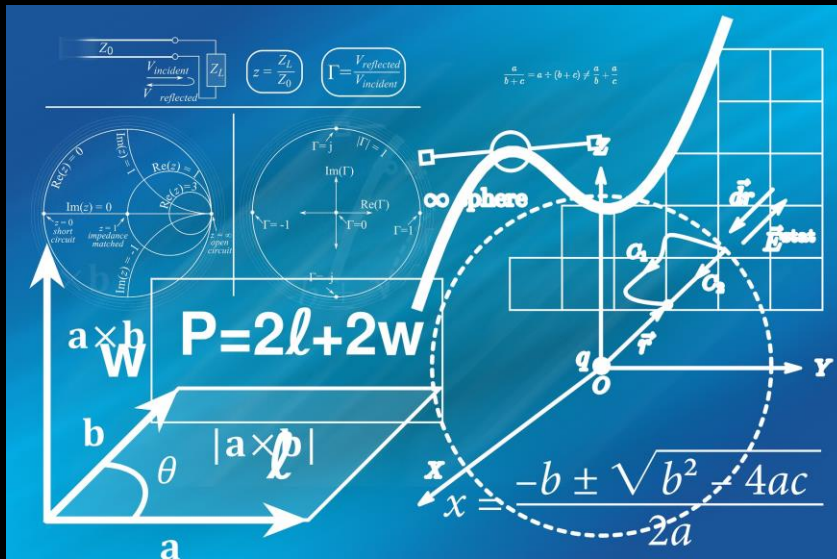
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Create a Learning Site (<https://www.wilrens.org>) is a monthly training letter and blog in the field of biblical studies and teaching.



As we dive in, I want to say three things. First, the book of Revelation is not easy, and second, there is no agreement about how it is to be interpreted. In fact, there's not even agreement about what approach to take to this book. And so it pays off to take time and look at the big picture of Revelation, to look at the book as a whole and especially to think about what approach we should take to this book, which approaches there are, and which one might be the best fit. That is what this unit is about: different approaches to the book of Revelation.

The third thing: first read this book! Stop here and read it all the way through, without stopping for more than a toilet break. Takes less than two hours. Do it.



When I teach the book of Revelation 'live' in a classroom, I usually show a picture like this and ask the students what they would say the mood or the atmosphere of this picture is and whether they think it fits the book of Revelation. I usually get answers like: it's dark, it is threatening. Some will say, but there is also light. And then there is the occasional optimist who will say, I think the sun is just about to reappear. It's not hard for the students to see how this would fit the book of Revelation.

When I then ask them the question, "How does the book of Revelation make you feel?", the most common answers I get are fear and confusion. Some will talk about fascination or excitement and joy, but it is fear and confusion that are the most common reactions to this book.

I suggest that if your approach to the book of Revelation makes you afraid, there is something wrong with your approach, not with the book of Revelation.



This is a very different picture. Does this fit the book of Revelation? What do you think? My students will tell me after some hesitation that yes, actually, this fits as well, especially if we understand the hand as being God's hand, because that is part of the book: God is in control; he holds the world, and he is fully in charge. I then add: "Yes indeed, and the big revelation is God saying: I want my creation back."

The storyline of Revelation is how God proceeds to take creation back. It is a hopeful book and a hopeful message. If anyone should be afraid of reading this book, it is not Christians; it's the devil.

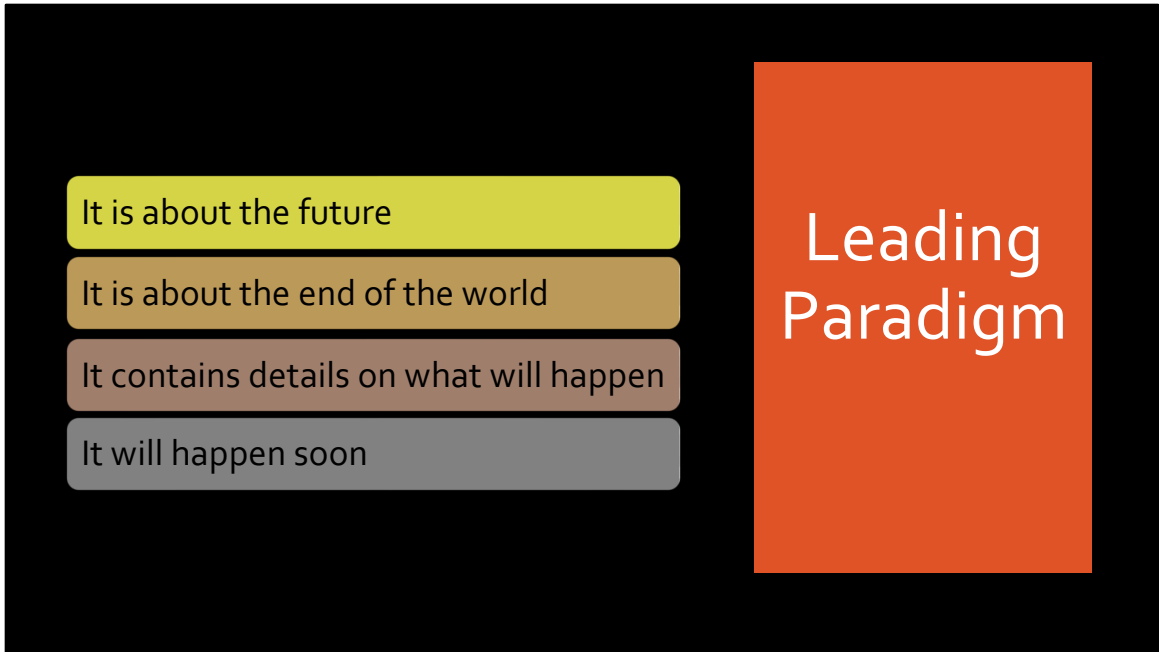
So here we have two very different pictures and two very different ways to look at this book. This illustrates that it is important to think about our overall approach to the book of Revelation, and a different word for this is *paradigm*.



What is a paradigm? Well, it's your basic assumptions about something. It is a framework for thinking about it. We don't normally think about our paradigm, and we may not even be aware that it is there, but it is.



Therefore, a paradigm is a lot like a pair of glasses. We don't normally look at our glasses; we look through them. And when we have coloured glass, our glasses will colour everything we look at.



So what is your paradigm for the book of Revelation? I don't know of course, but I do know that the most widespread paradigm, the most common approach to the book among believers, contains these elements. Revelation is about the future, our future, it is about the end of the world, it contains details on what will happen, and all of this will happen soon. Often, it is also assumed that it is possible to construct a scenario, a sort of timetable or chronology, of events that lead to the end.



READING REVELATION IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEWSPAPER

This approach leads to newspaper exegesis: we end up reading the book of Revelation in the light of the newspaper.



But is this correct? Does it make sense to think about the book in this way? Here is a crucial question:

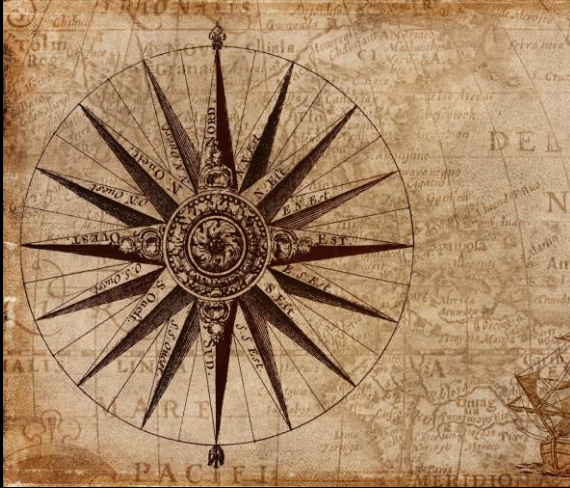


Why would God show John what would happen 2000 years later and put it in a book to give to churches living long before any of it would take place – and call it “what must soon take place” (1:1)?

Why would God show John what would happen 2000 years in the future and put it in a book to give to churches living long before any of it would take place and call it “what must soon take place”? It would mean the book is irrelevant to them because it has nothing to do with their life. Surely it must first have been a message to them.



This widespread paradigm, by the way, is called futurism because it holds that all or most of the book of Revelation is still in the future. Seeing that this doesn't work so well, what alternatives do we have?



HISTORICISM

There are three, and the first one is historicism. This is the belief that the book of Revelation foretells the whole course of history, all the way down to the end. The problem with this view is that those who have tried to interpret Revelation this way have not been able to agree with each other. Where in the book do we read about the bubonic plague, AIDS, the Mongols, Napoleon, the First and Second World War etcetera? It depends on whom you ask. This view is not common today.



PRETERISM

Then there is preterism, a term based on the Latin word referring to the past. Preterism believes that the book of Revelation was fulfilled in the past, at least for the most part. In most cases, that past is the Roman Empire. In this view, the book is about a conflict between the church and that empire.

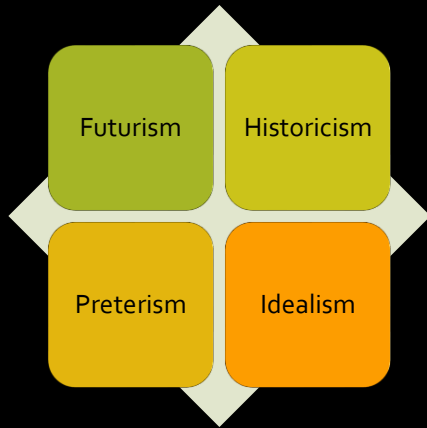
Preterism has the great advantage that it leaves the book relevant to the first readers and the church of the early centuries. It also has the strength that it takes seriously the historical background and the book's setting in the first century. Surely any good interpretation of the book of Revelation must start there, in the past, with the first readers, those churches who first received this book as a prophetic word.



IDEALISM

The final option is idealism. Idealism is the belief that the book of Revelation contains more general truths, principles, and ideas. It is not about things that happen once, whether still in the future or now in the past, in the Roman Empire, but it is about patterns that repeat themselves in history. It speaks of principles and forces and powers that are at work in any age. As such, idealism has the great advantage that it makes the book relevant to all generations of believers, from the very beginning down to the end.

Approaches to Revelation



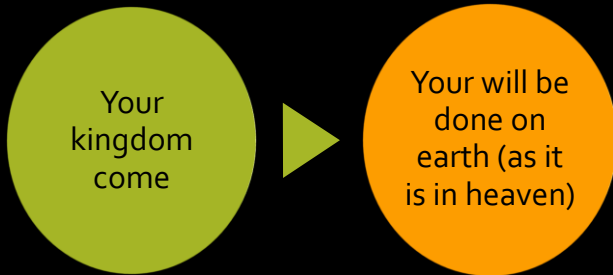
In summary, then, there are these four approaches: futurism, historicism, preterism, and idealism. Many interpreters today would agree that, apart from historicism, it needs some combination of the other three to do justice to the book. We cannot follow one approach all the way through.

We certainly need a large dose of preterism to take seriously the setting of this book in the first century in the Roman Empire. But then, some parts at least of the book are still in the future: the new Jerusalem, for instance. And the pattern of the conflict between the church and the Roman Empire is something that repeats itself in history at different times and in different places, with variation but still recognizable as a pattern. There are forces at work that also can be recognized at other times and in other places, so idealism needs to be in there as well.



At this point, I often get asked what the early church believed and how the early church fathers interpreted the book of Revelation. Unfortunately, this does not help us because, for them, these four views of four approaches were still identical. There was only one option, the Roman Empire, and this was still around. There was no discussion about futurism or historicism or idealism. It is only after the Roman empire collapsed and history continued that the problem arose: what approach to the book of Revelation should we take? Was that the fulfilment, in the past? Is it something still future? Or how are we going to understand and interpret the book? So, unfortunately, the early church cannot help us very much with our approach to the book of Revelation.

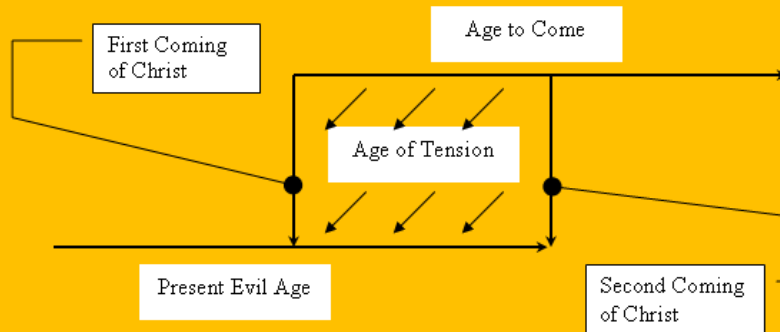
A Different Paradigm



Since we are on the topic of different approaches or paradigms to the book of Revelation, here is another way to look at the book. We all know these lines: your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. This is not in the book of Revelation, it is from the Lord's prayer, but it perfectly sums up what the book of Revelation is about. The book answers the question: how will his kingdom come, and how will we get to the point where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven?

A Different Paradigm

Fig. 5: The end time according to the New Testament



This diagram sums up the message of the New Testament about the coming of the kingdom, that is, God's rule, and the age to come. In the Old Testament, the expectation had been this would be a one-step process: the day of the Lord. God would deal with his opponents, put an end to evil, overcome the nations, deal with sin, and so forth. Afterwards, it would be a whole new world order, a new creation, a new age.

When Jesus appeared, he began to talk about it as something that would take longer. There would be a second major step involved, his return, and many small steps in between. He talked about the breaking in of the kingdom in and through his ministry. The rule of God became visible; the signs were there. People were healed, the dead were raised, and many other signs pointed to the presence of the kingdom. Yet evil continued; it wasn't brought to an end yet. This awaits the second coming, and so there are two steps instead of one. In between is a time of overlap, in which both kingdoms, good and evil, are present and therefore in conflict. The new is breaking in but the old is still there. This leads to an age of tension. The New Testament calls it the last days.

John stood very much at the beginning of this period, only a few decades after Christ. In his vision, he was able to look ahead. I doubt John had any idea as to how much time would be involved. I guess he would be surprised to find out it has been many centuries. But that is not so important. He stood at this early point of the process and he was able to look ahead and see what kind of age this would be, what would mark it: the conflict that would rage, with the pattern established at the beginning repeating itself in different places and in different ways, and the eventual victory of God and his people, the church, in this age of tension. In the end, it leads to a new earth and new heavens, beyond the second coming of Christ. So John in the Revelation gets to look ahead and see how we get from that first arrow to the second arrow and beyond, where his kingdom has come, where his will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

A second exodus

A second pharaoh

A second set of plagues

A second promised land (new earth,
new Jerusalem)

A Different Paradigm

So the book of Revelation is the story of the coming of the kingdom. It is also, and this is yet another way to look at the book, another paradigm, the story of another exodus. This exodus is not out of one country, Egypt, but from all the earth, a greater exodus. There are many parallels between the book of Revelation and the account we have in the book of Exodus. For instance, there is another Pharaoh here. He is called the Beast. And there are sets of plagues, looking much like the plagues we know from the land of Egypt, and there is a second promised land, except that it's not just one land or one country but a whole new earth and a new Jerusalem.

And so in closing, coming to the end of this unit, this too is part of a paradigm for the book of Revelation. What we have here, in this book, is a second exodus.

I hope that all of this together will enable you to start reading the book of Revelation with new eyes.

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