

Four Approaches to The Revelation

There are generally Four main methods of interpreting Revelation, each with its own assumptions of how the book is to be understood:

1. **Method one:** The “Everything-is-a-symbol” or ‘Spiritual’ Method – Dating back to the early church, this view interprets everything ‘spiritually’ (that is, as a description of spiritual realities) – not as a record of human events or history at all. According to this view, everything in Revelation (and, in fact, in the rest of the Bible as well) is to be interpreted symbolically, and only those who are trained in Bible interpretation can be trusted to properly understand the meaning of the symbols. This is why churches that follow this technique (as many Catholic and Orthodox churches do) tell their members not to read the Bible for themselves, but to trust their leaders to reveal the ‘spiritual’ meaning of the texts.
Why this view developed: Many early believers were pagans, and they valued symbolism and secret meanings in a way discouraged by the Hebrew Bible, where symbols, when used, are generally explained. The pagans brought this way of thinking to the Bible.
2. **Method two:** The “Been-there-done-that”, or ‘Preterist’ Method – Developed in 17th Century in response to the Anabaptist and Protestant movements, this view believes that everything in Revelation described events in John’s lifetime, and that the Beast, the Antichrist, and the False Prophet were code words for people alive at the time, such as the Emperors Nero and Domitian. As a result, nothing in the book remained to be fulfilled, making the “enemies of the Church” irrelevant.
Why this view developed: “Preterist” – means “one who favors the past”. At that time, the Protestants viewed the Catholic Church as the False World Religion and the Pope as the Antichrist, while the Anabaptists at first believed that they were the True Kingdom of God and violently tried to establish themselves as such. By eliminating the need to look for fulfillment of the prophecies, this view “tames” Revelation – which otherwise would be a very unsettling book.

3. **Method three:** The “It’s-all-about-us” or Historical view – This view developed in the Middle Ages, like the ‘Preterist’ view, it saw the book as a description of history. However, rather than view it as a history of events in John’s day, it saw the book as a genuine prophecy, describing in symbolic terms the main stages of Church history, but always from the perspective that they, the current readers, were living in the “last days”.
Why this view developed: Events in the Middle Ages, such as The Black Death and the threat from Muslim countries, coupled with the breakup of the Catholic Church due the Protestant and Anabaptist movements caused major upheavals and tremendous fear. The idea that these movements were anticipated by God and given as prophecies to the early Church brought a sense of comfort and stability, reminding believers God was still in control
4. **Why I reject these methods of interpretation:** To me, these views have two flaws – first, they assume God has abandoned Israel and replaced her with the Church, so all prophecies referring to the glorious future of Israel should now be viewed as referring to the Church. I utterly reject this view. Second, they all rely on symbolism and allegory – and this is dangerous as it removes restraints and allows a person to come up with wild ideas in the name of symbolism. I believe in letting the Bible speak for itself, taking it at face value and allowing it alone to define its own terms and symbols.
5. **Method four:** The “It-means-what-it-says” or ‘Futurist’ view – The prevalent view in the Early Church, this view regained popularity after the Reformation as believers began to remember the covenant God made with Israel – that it was, in God’s words, “an everlasting covenant”. It coincided with a recognition of the abuses inherent in the ‘allegorical’ method of interpretation. It views as symbols only what the text says is symbolic and trusts the Bible to interpret those symbols itself. It honors God’s promises to Israel and takes the book for what it is – a ‘revelation’ – a direct communication from God - and not as a creation of John’s imagination.

