

**New Testament—10<sup>th</sup> Bible**

**Unit 6: Revelation**

**Lesson 2: Interpreting the  
Book of Revelation**

# I. Background

A. There is a lot of symbolism and unique terminology connected to the book of Revelation.

B. People speak of

1. the *millennium*,
2. the *rapture*,
3. *tribulation*,
4. *dispensations* and
5. *signs of the times*.

## 6. Note:

- a) the words *rapture* and *dispensation* are not used in the Bible,
- b) the term *millennium* appears only in Revelation 20

C. The book of Revelation is often interpreted according to

1. one's understanding of the historical context of the events in the book, and
2. the character of the thousand-year period described in chapter 20,
  - a) i.e., the millennium.

## II. Political Interpretations

A. Almost all interpretations of Revelation assume it talks about a *political* threat during the end times, the threat of a world empire, which is either Rome or some other political empire.

B. Among those who make this assumption there are four major approaches:

1. the preterist,
2. historicist,
3. futurist and
4. idealist.

# Fulfillment

Single Historical Events

Recurring History

Past

Preterism

Idealism

Present

Historicism

Future

Futurism

Historic

Dispensational

*Rapture*

*Post-Trib*

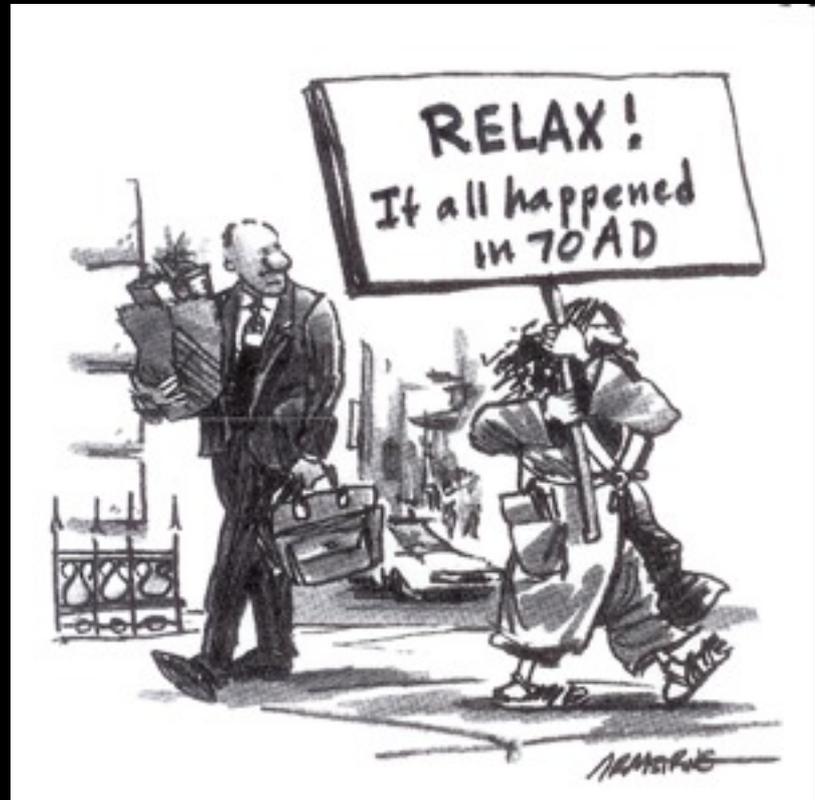
*Mid-Trib*

*Pre-Wrath*

*Pre-Trib*

## C. Preterist View

1. According to this view, all the events in the book were fulfilled during the time of the Roman Empire.



2. Accordingly, the book of Revelation describes

a) The persecution Christians were to endure by the Romans,

b) and what was to happen to vindicate the Christians when Jesus Christ would return.

3. Because the Roman Empire has fallen and Christ has still not returned, the preterist view has become similar to the idealist view.

(Mr. Busch is somewhat in this camp)

I think the letter must have had bearing on the original audience and their cultural setting.

Understanding that cultural setting gives us insight into the book's meaning.

However, I find some of the books claims to obviously points toward future fulfillments

## D. **Historicist View**

(Mr. Busch is also somewhat in this camp)

1. Historicists believe that the book of Revelation narrates all of church history

- a) The time span between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Christ.

2. Interpretation of symbols in this view can vary widely. For example:

- a) Some interpret the breaking of the seals represents the fall of the Roman Empire,
- b) Some interpret the locusts from the bottomless pit represent the Mohammedan invaders and the spread of Islam,
- c) Some interpret the beast as the Catholic papacy, etc.

[Note: I disagree with all of these]

d) However, there is considerable difference among historicists as to the interpretation of the various symbols.

(1) e.g. Mr. Busch interprets them much more generally--not necessarily always linking symbols to specific events.

3. Historicists either hold to the postmillennial view, or the amillennial one.

## 4. Progressive Parallelism

a) The following information is quoted from Anthony Hoekema's website on amillennialism

(1) [http://www.the-highway.com/  
amila\\_Hoekema.html](http://www.the-highway.com/amila_Hoekema.html)

b) *“Progressive Parallelism* is an idea from William Hendriksen in *More Than Conquerors*, his commentary on Revelation.

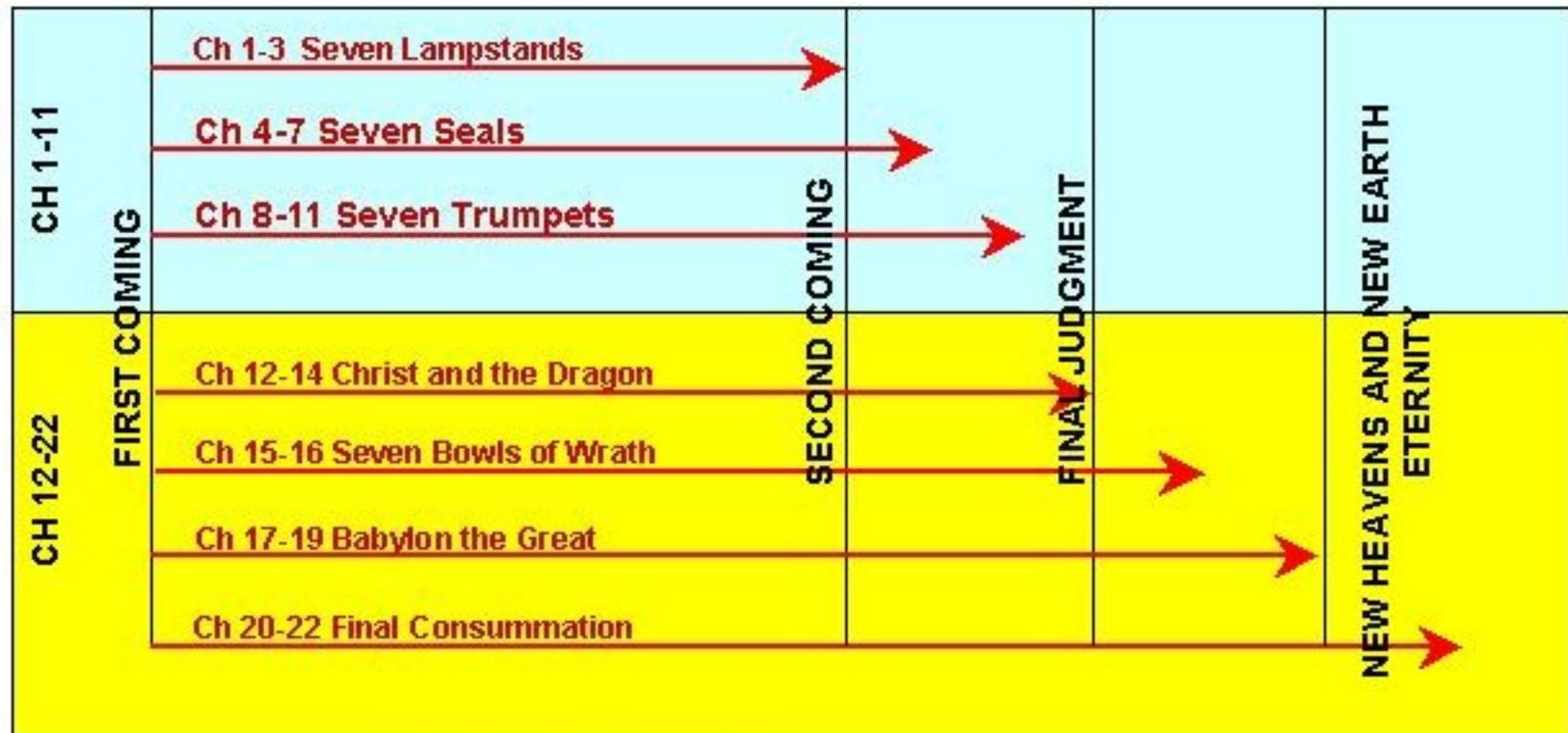
c) The book of Revelation consists of seven sections which run parallel to each other,

(1) each section depicts the church and the world from the time of Christ's first coming to the time of his second coming.

The following chart is taken from: <http://www.catholicfidelity.com/apologetics-topics/eschatology/progressive-parallelism/>

# HENDRIKSEN'S PROGRESSIVE PARALLELISM

*More Than Conquerors, p. 48*



**The Movement is one of Eschatological Progression:**

**A. The Final Judgment is:**

- First Announced
- Then Introduced
- Then Described

**B. The New Heavens and New Earth are:**

- First Announced
- Then Introduced
- Then Described

d) The **first** of these seven sections is found in chapters 1-3.

(1) John sees the risen and glorified Christ walking in the midst of seven golden lampstands.

In obedience to Christ's command John now proceeds to write letters to each of the seven churches of Asia Minor.

(2) The vision of the glorified Christ together with the letters to the seven churches obviously form a unit. As we read these letters we are impressed with two things.

- (a) First, there are references to events, people and places of the time when the book of Revelation was written.
- (b) Second, the principles, commendations and warnings contained in these letters have value for the church of all time.

(3) These two observations, in fact, provide a clue for the interpretation of the entire book.

(a) Since the book of Revelation was addressed to the church of the first century A.D., *its message had reference to events occurring at that time and was therefore meaningful for the Christians of that day.*

(b) But since the book was also intended for the church through the ages, its message is still relevant for us today.

e) skip sections 2 through 6



- f) The **seventh** section, chapters 20-22,
- (1) narrates the doom of the dragon, thus completing the description of the overthrow of the enemies of Christ.
  - (2) In addition, it describes the final judgment, the final triumph of Christ and his church, and the renewed universe, here called the new heaven and the new earth.

g) Note that though these seven sections are parallel to each other, they also reveal a certain amount of eschatological progress.

(1) The last section, for example, takes us further into the future than the other sections.

(2) Although the final judgment has already been announced in 1:7 and has been briefly described in 6:12-17, it is not set forth in full detail until we come to 20:11-15.

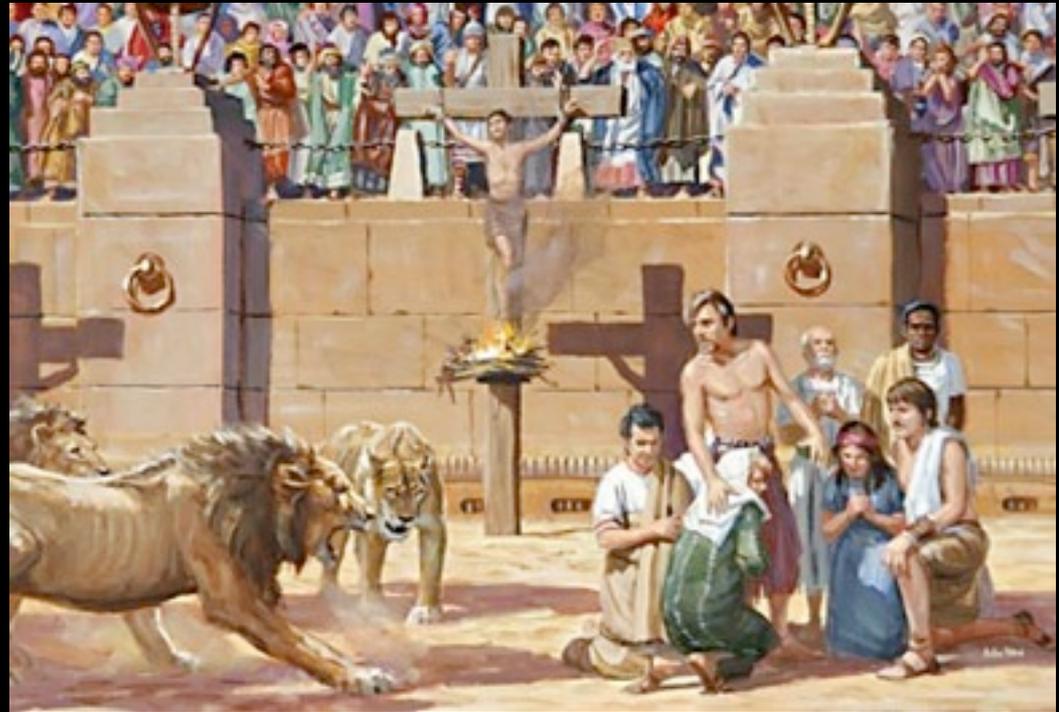
(3) Though the final joy of the redeemed in the life to come has been hinted at in 7:15-17, it is not until we reach chapter 21 that we find a detailed and elaborate description of the blessedness of life on the new earth (21:1-22:5).

(4) Hence this method of interpretation is called *progressive parallelism*.

h) There is eschatological progression in these seven sections, not only regarding the individual sections but also regarding the book as a whole.

i) If we grant that the book of Revelation depicts the struggle between Christ and his church on the one hand and the enemies of Christ and the church on the other, we may say that...

(1) the first half of the book (chapters 1-11) describes the struggle on earth, picturing the church as it is persecuted by the world.



(2) The second half of the book, however (chapters 12-22), gives us the deeper spiritual background of this struggle, describing the persecution of the church by the dragon (Satan) and his helpers.



(3) In the light of this analysis we see how the last section of the book (chapters 20-22) falls into place. This last section describes the judgment which falls on Satan, and his final doom. Since Satan is the supreme opponent of Christ, it stands to reason that his doom should be narrated last.”

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## E. Futurist View

1. According to this view, the book of Revelation describes future events which will accompany and indicate the end of times.
  - a) beginning with Chapter 4

2. This chaotic time, also known as *the tribulation*, will be immediately followed by the return of Christ, the final judgment, and the restoration of the creation.

3. Most Futurists are premillennialists,

4. There is disagreement among the futurists concerning the rapture

a) (we'll talk about this later).

## F. Idealist View

1. Idealists believe that Revelation does not describe any actual events, but is merely a symbolic picture of the continuous struggle between
  - a) good and evil,
  - b) the church and paganism,
  - c) resulting in the final triumph of Christianity.

### III. Theories Concerning the Millennium and the Rapture

A. The millennium, a word meaning "thousand years" refers to the thousand-year reign of Christ (20:1-6).

1. During this time, Satan "is bound," thrown into "the Abyss," "locked and sealed," "to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended."

B. There is considerable disagreement among Christians about the 1000-year reign of Jesus Christ.

1. Some Christians believe this will be an age of blessedness on earth;

a) premillennialism

2. others believe the millennium is the present church age;

a) amillennialism

b) The classic Reformed position is amillennialism

3. still others believe that the millennium is a way of referring to the eternal state.

a) postmillennialism

C. There are significant variations within each of these groups.

## D. Premillennialism

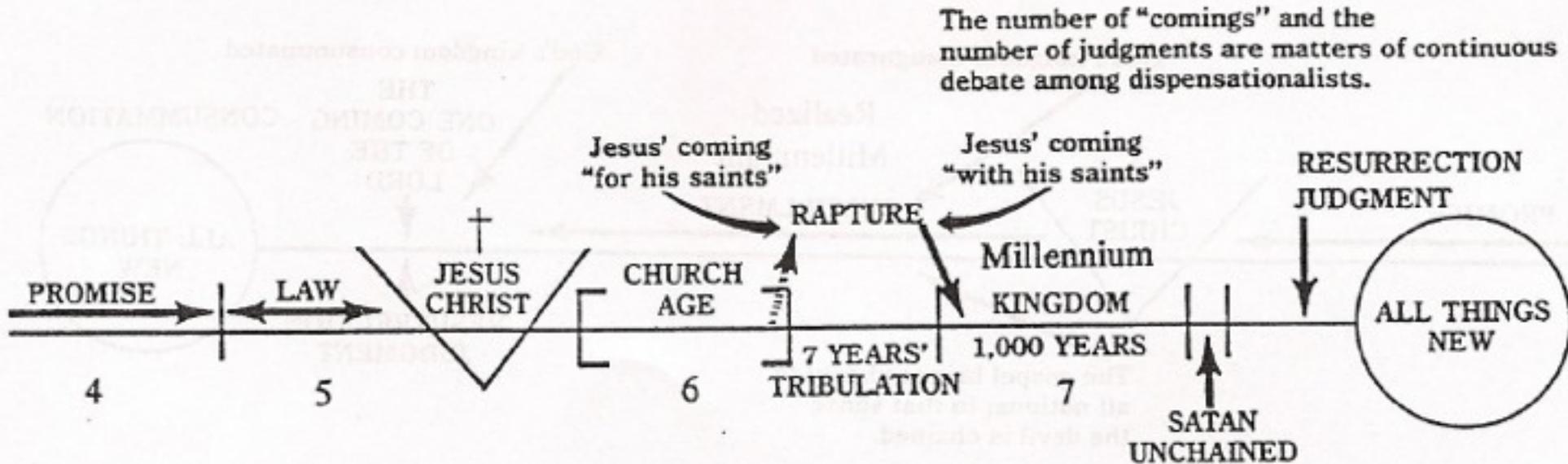
### 1. Basic ideas

- a) Premillennialists believe that Christ will return before ("pre-") the millennium.
- b) At that time, the first resurrection will occur, and either before or after the tribulation the thousand-year reign of peace and righteousness will commence.

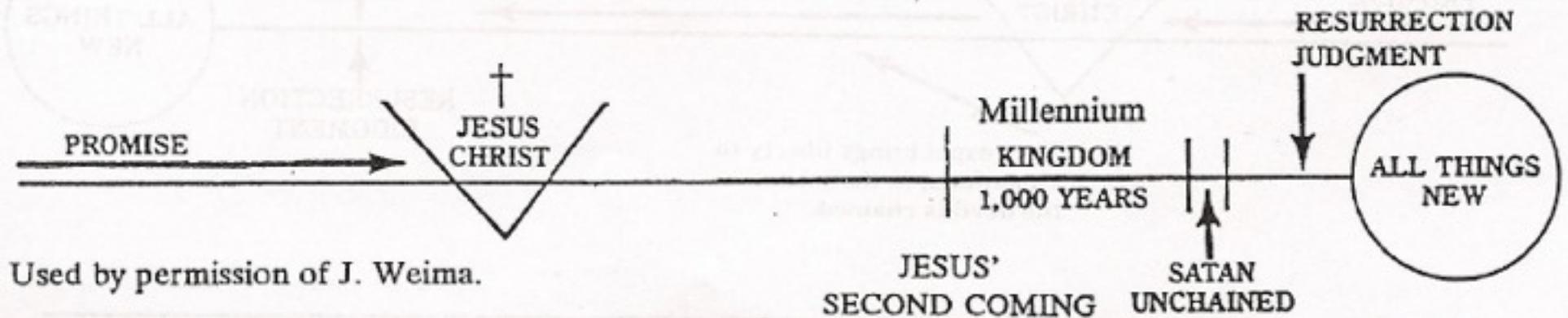
- c) After that, Satan will be unchained and "deceive the nations ... to gather them for battle" (20:8).
- d) But fire from heaven will devour Satan and his followers,
- e) and the believers will be judged according to what they have done,
- f) followed by the eternal reign of God.
- g) Premillennialists usually adopt the Futurist approach to interpreting the book of Revelation.

2. There are two distinct groups, the dispensationalist and historic.

# Dispensational Premillennial Timeline



# Historic Premillennial Timeline



a) Dispensational premillennialism

(1) has captured most of the popular attention with its concepts of the rapture and the tribulation.

(2) The **tribulation** is a period of seven years when believers will be persecuted.

(3) The **rapture** is a belief that all believers will suddenly disappear to meet Jesus and that unbelievers will be left behind.

(a) There are arguments as to whether the rapture will take place before, during, or after the tribulation.

(i) pre-tribulation or post-tribulation

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## b) Rapture

(1) The idea of the rapture comes from 1 Thessalonians 4:17:

(a) "After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."

(2) However, the word rapture comes from the Latin Vulgate translation used for the Greek word '*apantesis*', 'to meet'.

(a) It is a technical term for a custom in New Testament times: when people of a city would hear that an important dignitary was coming to visit, they would go out of the city to welcome him as he arrived.

(b) It is the same word that is used in John 12:13 when the people went out of Jerusalem to meet Jesus, welcoming him and honoring him as the King on Palm Sunday.

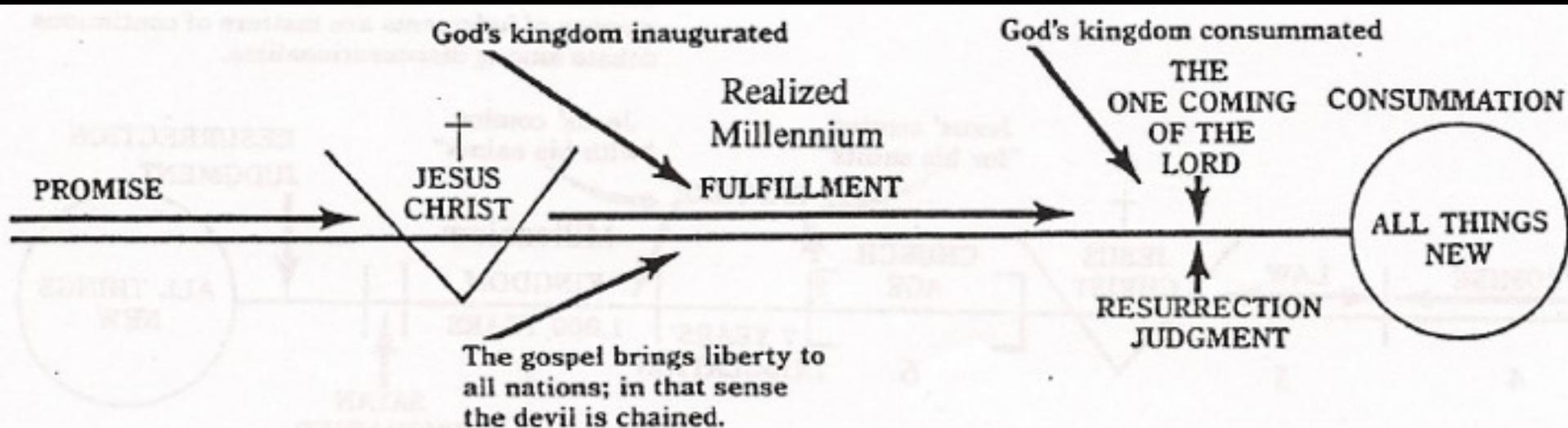
(3) The word describes the meeting of an important dignitary *and the escorting of this important person back to town.*

(4) This strongly suggests that when believers "meet" Jesus in the air at his return (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), they do not leave earth and go with him to heaven for a period of seven years but rather that they escort him back down to earth.

- (5) This return then would mark the beginning of the final eschatological events:
- (a) the bodily resurrection of all people,
  - (b) the final judgment, and
  - (c) the establishing of the new heaven and earth.
- (6) When taken in context, I find it hard to support a Biblical argument for the rapture (whether pre or post tribulation).

## E. Amillennialism

1. This theory states that there will be no *literal* thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, but that this is a spiritual reign which began at the time of Christ's resurrection.



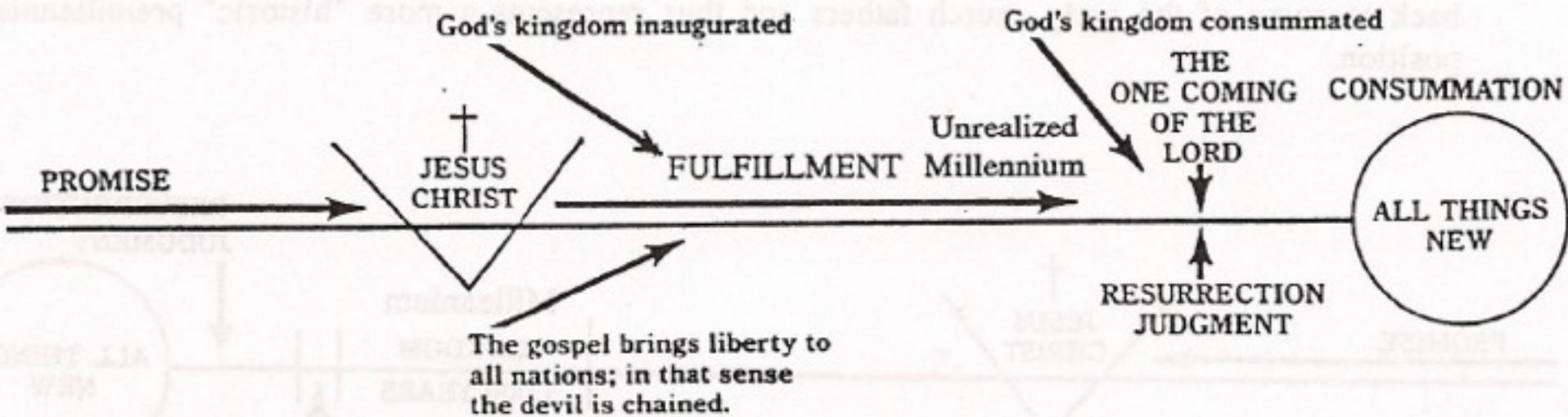
2. Peter's words in Acts 2:33-36, which speak of Christ sitting at the right hand of God and ruling the world, are used to support this theory.

- a) "The present form of God's kingdom will be followed by Christ's return, the general resurrection, the final judgment and Christ's continuing reign over the perfect kingdom on the new earth in the eternal state" (footnote, *The NW Study Bible*, 20:2).
- b) Most people who hold to the Idealist view of interpretation are amillennialists.

## F. Postmillennialism

1. Postmillennialists believe that the millennium is a specific period of peace and prosperity, which "will close with Christ's second coming, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment and the eternal state" (footnote, *The NW Study Bible*, 20:3).
2. Those who adhere to the Historical or Preterist view of Revelation are usually postmillennialists.
3. This position is not held very widely today.

# Postmillennial Timeline



## IV. Symbolism and Biblical References

A. To interpret the various symbols and events, it is important to know the Old Testament context and the New Testament references.



B. Much of the symbolism in Revelation finds its roots in the Old Testament prophecies of Daniel 7-8, 10-12, and Ezekiel 38 & 39.

1. Daniel's visions deal with kingdoms of the world, while the prophecies in Ezekiel concern themselves with the restoration of Israel, or the people of God.



2. For example, the beast in Revelation 13 can be understood in the light of the beasts in Daniel 7.
3. And the reference to Gog and Magog (20:7-10) needs to be read with Ezekiel 38 and 39 as background.



C. There are many references to Old Testament events or things in Revelation.

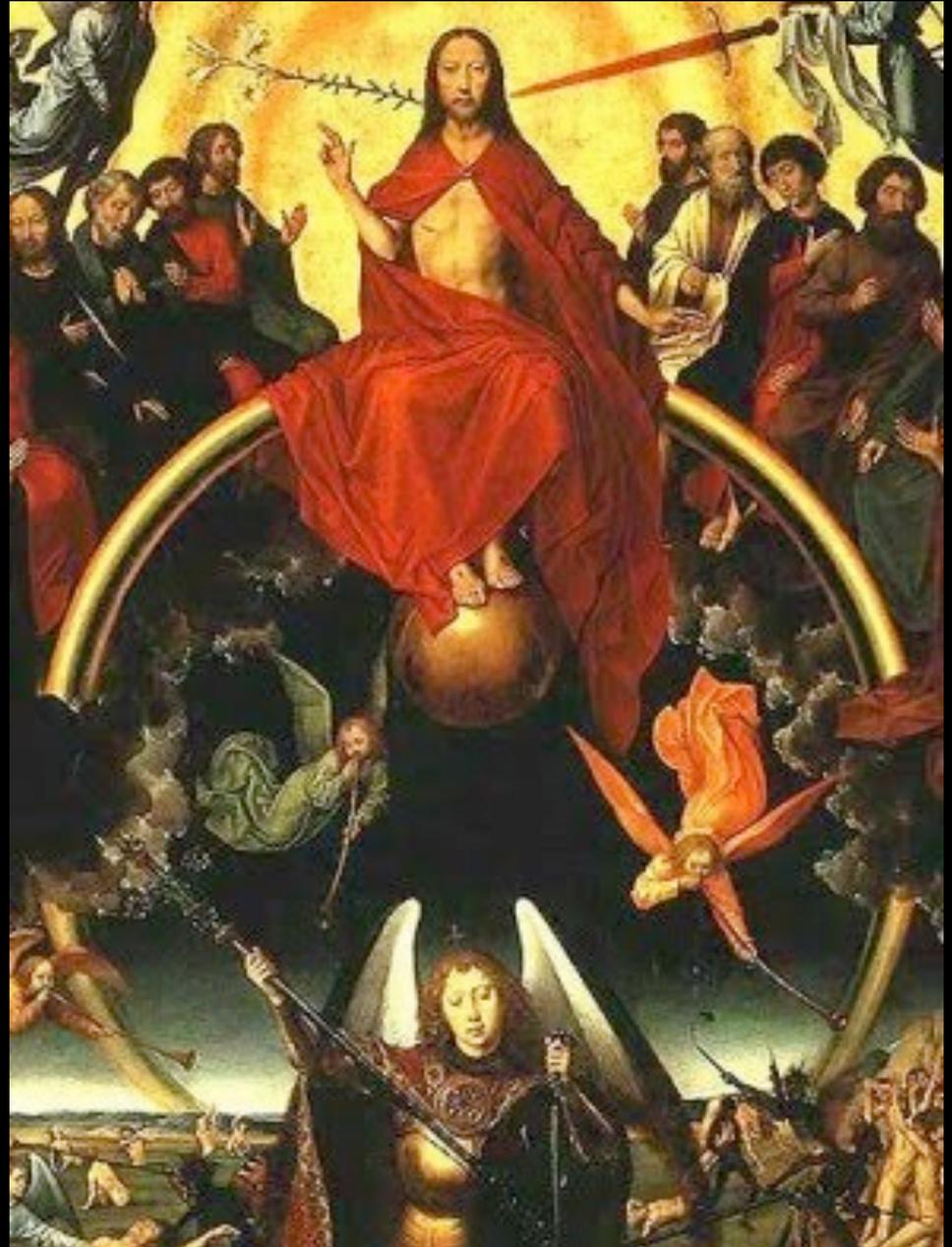
1. These include references to the temple: lampstand (1:20), altar (6:9), altar of incense (8:3), and the ark of the covenant (11:19);
2. and references to the ten plagues and the wilderness years (8:7, 8, 12; 9:3; 12:6, 14).

3. The rider on a white, red or black horse finds his origin in Zechariah 1:8-17; 6:1-8).



4. And in the Old Testament, dragons were usually used to depict enemies of God's people and of Israel (Revelation 12:3, including notes in *The NIV Study Bible*).

D. The Old Testament describes the coming of Jesus as "the day of the Lord" (Joel 2:28-32; Zechariah 14:1; Malachi 4).



1. The return of Christ is a time of judgment and purification.
2. Those who have been and are faithful will be rewarded with everlasting life; the unfaithful and disobedient will be judged by God and dealt with accordingly.
3. Malachi 3 and 4 describe the day of the Lord as a "refiner's fire or a launderer's soap," burning "like a furnace" (3:2; 4:1).

## V. Signs of the Times

A. The New Testament also has important information concerning the return of Jesus Christ.

1. In Matthew 24 and 25, we read a number of events and parables depicting the end of the age. People often use the various world events as signs of the times (cf. Matthew 16:3) to suggest that the end is near.

B. We misunderstand the signs of our times if we think of them:

1. as referring exclusively to the end times;
2. only in terms of abnormal, spectacular, or catastrophic events;
3. as a way of dating the exact time of Christ's return;
4. as a way to construct an exact timetable of future happenings.

C. We can read these signs biblically if we see that they:

1. point first of all not to the future, but to God's work in the past;
2. point forward to the end of history, particularly to the return of Christ;
3. reveal the continuing antithesis in history between the kingdom of God and the powers of evil;
4. call us to a decision;
5. call us to constant watchfulness

D. The use of numbers is also very symbolic.

1. The number seven especially plays an important role in our understanding of the book of Revelation.

2. Mentioned 52 times, it symbolizes fullness, completion or perfection.

a) The Lamb opens seven seals (ch 6-8);



b) seven trumpets are blown by seven angels (chs. 8-9);



c) seven bowls of God's wrath are poured out (ch 16).



d) In addition, there are seven blessings, or beatitudes, describing "the favorable circumstance God has put a person in" (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14).

- e) There are seven churches (1:4, 11),
- f) seven spirits (1:4),
- g) seven golden lamp stands (1:12),
- h) seven stars (1:16),
- i) seven horns and seven eyes (5:6),
- j) seven thunders (10:3),
- k) seven plagues (15:1),

l) seven hills (17:9),

m) seven kings (17:10),

n) and others.

