

A Note on Method

The method stated in the Prologue has consequences, and the book does not hide them. Read literally, the promises to Israel are promises to Israel; the seventy weeks are weeks of years; the thousand years are a thousand years; the church is caught up before the wrath falls. The names for those conclusions are dispensational, premillennial, and pretribulational, and this book wears them. They are where a consistent literal reading leads, and the reader who follows the same method through the same texts can test whether it leads there.

What “Dispensational” Means

The word deserves a plain definition, since the book has claimed it. A dispensation is an administration—a way God has ordered His dealings with man during a particular stretch of history. The English word translates the Greek *oikonomia*, the management of a household (Eph 1:10; 3:2), and the idea is simply that God has run His house differently at different times. Before the fall He dealt with Adam one way; after the flood, with Noah, another; with Abraham by promise; with Israel by the Law; with the church by grace; and in the kingdom to come, by the visible rule of the King. Seven such administrations are usually counted—innocence, conscience, human government, promise, law, grace, and the kingdom—though the number matters far less than the principle. The way of salvation never changes: it has always been by grace through faith, from Abel to the last soul saved in the millennium. What changes is what God has revealed and what He has required.

Two convictions follow from reading Scripture this way, and they shape every chapter that follows. The first is that the promises God made to Israel belong to Israel—a real people, a real land, a real throne—and will be kept to the letter. The second is that the church is not Israel: it is a body that began at Pentecost and will end at the rapture, with its own calling and its own destiny, and the prophecies addressed to the nation are not to be reassigned to it. Charles Ryrie, who did more than anyone to define the system, reduced it to three essentials: a consistent distinction between Israel and the church, a consistently literal reading of Scripture, and the glory of God, rather than salvation alone, as the purpose of history.¹ Hold those convictions and read the text literally, and the outline of this book follows almost by itself. That is what “dispensational” means here, and it is the whole of what it means.

Why Read Prophecy Literally? Six Lines of Evidence

The method stated in the Prologue is not arbitrary, and the reasons for it are gathered here.

1. The first coming was fulfilled literally. Bethlehem was a town (Mic 5:2), the virgin was a virgin (Isa 7:14), the donkey was a donkey (Zech 9:9), the pierced hands were pierced (Ps 22:16), the thirty pieces of silver were counted (Zech 11:12–13). Every prophecy of the first coming that has been fulfilled was fulfilled in its plain sense. The prophecies of the second coming were written by the same prophets in the same way.
2. The unbelievers read it literally, and they were right. When Herod asked where Christ should be born, the scribes answered from Micah, and Herod sent soldiers to Bethlehem—not to a symbol (Matt 2:4–6, 16). The plain sense was so plain that a pagan king could act on it.

3. Jesus and the apostles read the Old Testament literally. They took Adam, Noah, Jonah, and the manna as history (Matt 19:4–5; 24:37; 12:40; Jn 6:31), the land as land, and the throne of David as a throne (Lk 1:32–33; Acts 2:30). When they applied a text in a new way, they said so, and they never denied its first sense.
4. The text tells the reader when it is using a figure. “...The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks... are the seven churches” —Rev 1:20. Scripture explains its own symbols. Where it does not, the burden is on the interpreter to show why the words should not mean what they say.
5. Allegory has no brakes. Once a text can mean something other than what it says, it can mean anything, and the interpreter becomes the authority instead of the text. The history of allegorical interpretation is a history of every reader finding his own theology in every verse. Literal reading is not the safe method because it is easy; it is the safe method because it is checkable.
6. The consistent literal reader arrives at the same place. Read the promises to Abraham, David, and Israel in their plain sense, count Daniel’s weeks as weeks of years, and take Revelation 20’s thousand years as a thousand years, and the outline of this book follows. The method does not produce the system by accident. The system is what the text says when it is allowed to.

The Same Rule at the Front of the Bible

This book holds that creation took place about 4004 B.C., speaks of the flood as history, and counts the age of the earth in thousands of years, and it does so without stopping to argue the point. That is not an oversight; it is the same rule applied at the other end of the Bible. A book that insists Revelation means what it says has no standing to read Genesis 1–11 as something other than what it says. The days of creation are numbered, bounded by evening and morning, and treated as ordinary days by the fourth commandment: “For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day...” —Ex 20:11. The genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 give a father’s age at the birth of his son, generation by generation, from Adam to Abraham, and they exist to be added; Luke adds them, tracing the Lord’s line back to Adam, “...which was the son of God” —Lk 3:38, as history and not as parable. Jesus placed the first couple “...from the beginning of the creation...” —Mk 10:6, not billions of years after it. Paul built the gospel on a real first man through whom “...sin entered into the world, and death by sin...” —Rom 5:12, which leaves no room for death before Adam. And Peter, warning of the last days, made the flood the pattern for the coming judgment and said the scoffers of the last days would be “...willingly...ignorant...” —2 Pet 3:5 of exactly that history.

The other readings should be named, and one of them is in-house. The day-age view, held today most ably by Hugh Ross, takes the six days as six long ages, so that the earth can be as old as the geologists say; the gap theory, printed in the notes of the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909 and taught in many dispensational pulpits since, puts the ages between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, in a ruined earth before the six days; and the framework view takes the days as a literary arrangement rather than a sequence at all.² The book answers all three with the same texts. A day bounded by “...the evening and the morning...” —Gen 1:5 and numbered is a day, and the fourth commandment rests the week on six of them (Ex 20:11); a gap cannot hold the death of ages before Adam when Paul says death came by his sin (Rom 5:12); and a framework cannot be added up, when the genealogies exist to be added. None of this settles every question a curious reader may bring, and the book does not pretend it does. The age of the earth is a large subject with its own literature, and the reader who wants the fuller case, from the text and from

the created world, will find it made carefully at Answers in Genesis (answersingenesis.org), which is listed among the resources at the back. What this appendix means to say is narrower: the young earth in this book is not an extra doctrine bolted on to prophecy. It is what a literal, grammatical, historical reading yields when it is turned toward the first chapters of the Bible, and a reader who applies that reading to Revelation 20 and refuses it to Genesis 1 is using two rules where the book uses one.

Four Ways to Read Revelation

Revelation has been read in four ways, and this book reads it in one of them. Each of the four has been held by believers who love the Lord and honor His Word, and each should be described as its holders would describe it before it is answered. What follows is that description, and then the reasons—from the text, not from tradition—that this book holds the last of them.

The Preterist Reading

Preterism (from the Latin *praeteritus*, “gone by”) holds that most or all of Revelation was fulfilled in the first century—chiefly in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. On this reading the beast is Nero, Babylon is Jerusalem, the tribulation is the Jewish war, and the coming of Christ in the clouds is His coming in judgment on the city through the Roman armies. Its strongest texts are the book’s own time-words: John writes of “things which must shortly come to pass” (Rev 1:1) and “the time is at hand” (Rev 1:3), and Jesus said “this generation shall not pass” (Matt 24:34). Preterists take those words seriously, and they are right to. Its holders include able and godly scholars, and its full form—which says every prophecy is already fulfilled, including the second coming—was condemned as heresy by the church long ago; its partial form, which leaves the second coming and the final judgment still future, is held today by respected Reformed teachers.³

The reading fails at the text in three places. First, the events do not match. No sun went black, no third of mankind died, no beast ruled the whole earth and made every nation take his mark, and no one saw the Son of man coming in the clouds with power and great glory in A.D. 70; the fall of Jerusalem was a catastrophe, but it was a local one, and Revelation is not. Second, the time-words do not mean what preterism needs them to mean. “Shortly” (*en tachei*) describes the manner of the events when they come—suddenly, in rapid succession—not their distance from John; the same word is used of things that are still unfulfilled two thousand years later (Rom 16:20), and Peter warns in so many words that the delay of the promise is not slackness but patience (2 Pet 3:8–9). Third, and decisively, the date. If Revelation was written after A.D. 70, preterism has nothing to be fulfilled in, and the earliest testimony of the church places the book under Domitian, a quarter century after the city fell. That evidence is set out below.

The Historicist Reading

Historicism holds that Revelation is a map of church history from John’s day to the end—the seals, trumpets, and bowls unfolding across the centuries, with the barbarian invasions, the rise of Islam, the papacy, and the Reformation all found in its pages. This was the reading of most of the Reformers and of the great Protestant commentaries down to the nineteenth century, and it explains why the Westminster divines could call the pope “that antichrist”: they read the beast and the harlot as the Roman church across a thousand years.⁴ Its strength is

that it takes the book as real prophecy of real events. Its weakness is that no two historicists have ever agreed on the map. The identifications shift with every century, each generation placing itself at the sixth seal or the fifth trumpet, and a prophecy that means something different to every reader has stopped functioning as prophecy. It also requires the “days” of the book to be years—1,260 days becoming 1,260 years—by a rule Scripture never states, and it has almost no room for the seven-year period that Daniel’s seventieth week requires. Almost no one holds it today, and its collapse is instructive: it fell not because it took Revelation literally, but because it did not.

The Idealist Reading

Idealism holds that Revelation is not a timeline at all but a theology in pictures—the timeless conflict between God and evil, the church and the world, drawn in symbols that apply to every age and predict no particular event. On this reading the beast is every persecuting power, Babylon is worldliness in every century, and the millennium is the reign of Christ in the hearts of His people now. It is held mostly with amillennialism, and its classic statement is William Hendriksen’s, whose reading of Revelation as seven parallel pictures of the whole church age has been the Reformed textbook since 1939; its strength is real: Revelation does speak to every generation, and its pictures of the church under pressure have comforted believers in every century.⁵ But the book does not present itself as a set of timeless pictures. It presents itself as prophecy—“the things which shall be hereafter” (Rev 1:19)—with numbered sequences, measured periods, named places, and a sworn oath from an angel that “there should be time no longer” (Rev 10:6). It counts days. It names the Euphrates and Jerusalem and Megiddo. A vision that measures the New Jerusalem to the furlong and counts the tribes to the thousand is not offering an idea. Idealism keeps the book’s comfort and loses its content, and a reader who takes the seventy weeks as literal weeks has no consistent way to take the thousand years as a metaphor.

The Futurist Reading

Futurism holds that Revelation 1–3 addresses John’s own day and the church age, and that everything from chapter 4 onward describes events still to come: a seven-year tribulation, a personal Antichrist, a literal return of Christ, a thousand-year kingdom, a final judgment, and a new creation. It is the reading of this book, and of the dispensational tradition generally.⁶ It has one strength that the other three lack: it lets the text say what it says. When Revelation counts 1,260 days, futurism counts 1,260 days; when it names Jerusalem, futurism goes to Jerusalem; when it says every eye shall see Him, futurism expects every eye to see Him. Its critics answer that this is naïve, that apocalyptic literature is symbolic by nature and cannot be read like a newspaper. The answer is that Revelation tells the reader when it is using a symbol—the seven stars are the seven angels, the seven candlesticks are the seven churches (Rev 1:20), the waters are peoples (Rev 17:15), the woman is the great city (Rev 17:18)—and where it does not say so, the burden is on the interpreter to show why the plain sense should not stand. Futurism is also the oldest reading, and the clearest witness should be quoted rather than summarized. Irenaeus, writing about A.D. 180, two generations after John and taught by men who had known him, wrote: “But when this Antichrist shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign for three years and six months, and sit in the temple at Jerusalem; and then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending this man and those who follow him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom.”⁷ A personal Antichrist, a literal three and a half years, a temple in Jerusalem, a visible return in the

clouds, a lake of fire, and a kingdom after it. That is the futurist outline, entire, in one sentence, seventeen hundred years before anyone had heard of Darby. Justin Martyr and Hippolytus expected the same things, and the other readings came later, each to solve a problem futurism does not have.⁸

The Objection from Genre

One objection stands behind the other three and deserves its own hearing, because it comes from outside the discussion the chapters have been having. It is not that a particular verse has been misread. It is that the whole method is a category error: apocalyptic is a recognized genre of ancient literature, with its own conventions, and the books in it—Daniel, 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, the Apocalypse of Abraham—traffic in beasts, numbers, cosmic upheaval, and heavenly journeys that no ancient reader took as reportage. On that view, asking whether the locusts of Revelation 9 are helicopters is like asking what a parable's characters ate for breakfast: a question the form does not answer, because the form was never making that kind of claim.

The objection has real force and should not be waved away with the word liberal. Four things answer it.

First, Revelation does not present itself as apocalyptic in that sense. It calls itself a prophecy and pronounces a blessing on the man who keeps "...the sayings of the prophecy of this book" —Rev 22:7. The other works in the genre are pseudonymous, written under a borrowed ancient name; John signs his own, writes to seven congregations that could have written back, and tells them what is coming upon them. That is a prophet writing to a church, not an apocalypticist writing under a dead man's name.

Second, the genre argument proves too much. Daniel is in the same category, and Daniel's prophecies of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome came to pass in the plain sense of the words, as Chapter 4 shows. So did the prophecies of the first coming, which no one today calls a genre error. If apocalyptic language never refers to real events in the order given, then a virgin did not conceive, Bethlehem was a symbol, and the thirty pieces of silver were a literary flourish. Nobody holds that.

Third, the book supplies its own key, which the other works in the genre do not. It says the seven stars are the angels of the churches and the seven candlesticks the churches themselves (Rev 1:20), the waters are peoples (Rev 17:15), and the great dragon is "...that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan..." —Rev 12:9. A book that stops to explain its symbols is telling the reader that the rest is not in that class, and where it does not stop, the burden lies on the interpreter to show why the plain sense should not stand.

Fourth, and this is the practical point, the genre objection has no stopping place. Once symbolic-by-nature is granted as the default, no principle halts it before the resurrection of the body, the return of Christ, or the judgment, and in the history of interpretation it has not halted there. The method that keeps 1,260 days as 1,260 days is the same method that keeps the empty tomb empty. That is not naïveté. It is consistency, and it is the only protection a reader has against a text that can be made to mean whatever his age requires of it.

When Revelation Was Written

The date of the book settles the first of these debates by itself, so the evidence should be laid out. The preterist reading requires Revelation to have been written before A.D. 70, usually under Nero (A.D. 54–68); its case rests on Revelation 11:1–2, where John is told to measure a temple that seems to be standing, and on Revelation

17:10, where “five are fallen, and one is”—which, counted from Julius Caesar or Augustus, can be made to land on Nero or Galba. Those are real arguments and deserve a real answer. The temple John measures is the tribulation temple, which the same passage says the Gentiles will tread down for forty-two months—a period that does not fit the Jewish war, which lasted four years and ended in the temple’s destruction, not its measurement. And the seven kings of Revelation 17:10, as Chapter 13 shows, are seven kingdoms, not seven Caesars; the count of emperors has never produced agreement even among those who use it, since no two lists start at the same man or decide the same way about the three emperors of A.D. 69.

Against that stands the testimony of the men who were closest to John. Irenaeus, who was taught by Polycarp, who was taught by John, wrote that the vision “was seen not very long ago, but almost in our own generation, toward the end of the reign of Domitian.”⁹ Domitian reigned from A.D. 81 to 96; the book therefore belongs to about A.D. 95. Eusebius records that John was banished to Patmos under Domitian and released on the emperor’s death, which is exactly the situation Revelation 1:9 describes.¹⁰ Clement of Alexandria and Origen speak of John’s exile under “the tyrant” and his return after the tyrant’s death, which fits Domitian, and Victorinus names Domitian outright; no writer of the first four centuries places the book under Nero. The internal evidence agrees. The seven churches of chapters 2 and 3 are settled, established, and in some cases declining—Ephesus has lost its first love, Sardis has a name that it lives and is dead, Laodicea is rich and lukewarm—which describes congregations decades old, not the young churches of the sixties. Laodicea in particular was destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 60 and rebuilt at its own expense; a letter calling it rich, increased with goods, and in need of nothing (Rev 3:17) fits the proud rebuilt city of the nineties, not the rubble of the sixties. And the persecution John writes from is the pressure to worship the emperor that grew under Domitian, who took the title “Lord and God,” and that Nero never organized. The late date is the date of the evidence, and it leaves preterism with a fulfillment that happened twenty-five years before the prophecy was given.

Where This Book Differs from Its Own Tradition

A reader who knows the dispensational literature will notice that this book departs from its mainstream in a few places, and honesty requires listing them in one place. On each, the book has given its reasons in the chapter where the question arises; on each, the mainstream view is held by men whose work this book relies on; and on each, a reader who keeps the mainstream view loses nothing else in the book.

1. The bride of the Lamb. This book: the redeemed of all ages, with Israel’s saints and the tribulation martyrs joined to the church. Mainstream: the church alone, with Israel as the wife of Jehovah and the guest of the supper (Chapters 8 and 17).
2. The resurrection of the Old Testament saints. This book: at the rapture. Mainstream: at the second coming, with the tribulation martyrs (Chapter 3).
3. The fifth seal. This book: weeks or months into the great tribulation, its martyrs the first victims of the mark. Many: the midpoint, or the first half (Chapter 8).

4. The two witnesses. This book: two men of this present age, either kept back when the church is caught up or saved just after, anointed with the spirit and power of Moses and Elijah, offered as a theory. Mainstream: Moses and Elijah, or Enoch and Elijah (Chapter 10).
5. Gog and Magog. This book: after the rapture and before the covenant, offered as a judgment. The tradition: divided among several placements (Chapter 9).
6. The Day of the Lord. This book: used without qualification, the term means the seven years, beginning when the man of sin is revealed by the covenant he confirms; in its widest sense it runs on through the kingdom to the passing of the heavens. The tradition: divided on where the day begins, many starting it at the rapture itself (Chapter 5).

Notes

1. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), the chapter on the essentials of dispensationalism, revised as *Dispensationalism* (1995, 2007). The three are summarized here rather than quoted.
2. Hugh Ross, *A Matter of Days* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004); C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), notes on Genesis 1:1–2. The reader should know that the gap theory was the common view of the book's own tradition for much of the twentieth century, and that this book departs from it.
3. For partial preterism, see R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), and Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989). Full preterism, which denies a future return of Christ, is rejected in Scripture itself (2 Tim 2:17–18) and was rejected by the church after it.
4. The classic historicist commentary is E. B. Elliott, *Horae Apocalypticæ*, 4 vols. (London: Seeley, 1844); for the Westminster divines, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), 25.6.
5. The standard idealist treatment is William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1940); see also Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, which combines idealist and futurist elements.
6. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*; Pentecost, *Things to Come*; Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah*.
7. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.30.4, trans. Roberts and Donaldson (Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1). Irenaeus was a hearer of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John. For the same expectation in his contemporaries see Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 80–81, and Hippolytus, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*. It should be said plainly that none of these men taught a pretribulational rapture; what they show is that a literal, future reading of prophecy is the oldest one, not that the early church held every position this book holds.
8. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.25–36; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 80–81; Hippolytus, *On Christ and Antichrist*. Papias, a hearer of John, is reported by Irenaeus (5.33.3–4) to have taught a literal earthly kingdom.
9. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.30.3.
10. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.18–20, 23.