

## Revelation Class #2

Last week we looked at Chapter 1 and the who, where and when of Revelation. Today we tackle the different theories of Revelation and decide which approach we will use. Revelation has many different and widely divergent interpretations. Each major theory has several variations. We do not have time to cover them all. I want primarily to focus on the two main theories that have wide acceptance today. [I may also mention a couple of other theories that you are likely to come across.] Then we will look at passages in Revelation itself that will guide us to the best interpretation.

How many folks read Revelation this past week? If you didn't, read it this week to get the big picture of the book. Rev 1-3 and Rev 21-22 are not difficult to understand. The middle of the book is the hard part. The main issues in any theory of Revelation are: (i) the meaning of Chapters 4 through 19; and (ii) the 1,000 year period described in Chapter 20 known as the millennium. [SLIDE 2] How many people have read any books or seen any movies in the *Left Behind* series? *Left Behind* illustrates one of the leading theories about Revelation popular today. A theory accepted by many Bible believing evangelicals. It is sometimes called Futurism or the official theological term: Premillennialism. "Pre" means the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Jesus occurs before the millennium. Who has read *The Late Great Planet Earth*? The theory is that Rev 4-19 describes a 7 year period at the end of history referred to as the "end times." [SLIDE 3] Starts with the Rapture – when all Christians are called into heaven and disappear. Those "left behind" face a 7 year period of great tribulation. Many of the numbers and fantastic things described in Revelation are taken literally as things that will take actually place. The 10 horn beast is the antichrist – a political ruler who takes over the world. The 2 horn beast is a new false religion centered on the antichrist. The prostitute is the new capital city the antichrist will build. The mark of the beast means people are required to have a literal mark on their foreheads or wrists to do business. Rev 19 describes the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Jesus with an army from heaven and he fights a literal battle of Armageddon against the assembled earthly forces of the antichrist. The antichrist is defeated and Satan is imprisoned for 1,000 years. There is a 1<sup>st</sup> resurrection of the saved and Jesus reigns for a literal 1,000 years on earth with the saints. Many OT prophesies about the kingdom apply not to the church, but to this future Millennial Reign of Christ on earth. At the end of the 1,000 years, Satan is released and another confrontation occurs between the forces of the world and those of God, but Satan is defeated again. The 2<sup>nd</sup> resurrection of the lost takes place and the Day of Judgment. Many people believe this theory. My Assistant at work.

[SLIDE 4] The other major widely accepted today is the Historical approach. The theological name is Amillennialism. "A" means the millennium has already started and is still going on now. This theory states that Rev 4-19 primarily describes the struggle in history between the Roman Empire and the Church of Jesus Christ and that most of its prophesies were fulfilled in the years immediately following the writing of Revelation. This theory is generally accepted by the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church and most of mainstream Protestant denominations. [SLIDE 5] The 10 horn beast is the Roman Empire. The 2 horn beast is the cult of Emperor worship. The prostitute is

the city of ancient Rome. The persecution described is the pagan persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire especially during the reigns of Nero and Domitian. Rev 19 does not describe the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming or a literal Armageddon, but rather symbolizes the spiritual victory of Christianity over ancient Rome. The Roman Empire is defeated and falls – but the eternal kingdom/church of Jesus prevails and endures until the end of time. The 1,000 year reign of Christ refers to the church age – the period between the Fall of Rome and the Last Day when the church – the kingdom of God on earth established by Jesus - does his work until he comes again. The binding of Satan refers to the fact that Christianity is generally free to spread without hindrance from direct opposition by a major worldwide power like Rome. At the end of the millennium, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Jesus, a single resurrection of the lost & the saved and the Last Judgment all takes place.

[SLIDE 6] So which view is correct? Premillennialism or amillennialism? The *Left Behind* Futurist view that Revelation is primarily about the end times at least 2,000 years after it was written **OR** the Historical view that Revelation is about the struggle between the Roman Empire and the church going on at the time the book was written. Let's look at some verses and see what you think.

Rev 1:1 (get someone to read on the mike). *Soon*. What do you think that means? Which theory does that suggest is correct? Let's read another verse. 1:3 *the time is near*. What does that mean? Which theory does that point to? Perhaps these verses are only referring to the early part of the Book. Pre-millennialists would say Chapter 4:1 introduces a whole new timeframe. Turn to Chapter 22. Let's try the end of the Book. Rev 22:6 *what must soon take place*. What does that mean? Which theory does that verse support? :10 *the time is near*. What does that mean? Which theory does this verse point to? In Chapter 22 Jesus says he is coming soon several times. I don't think he is talking about the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming. 2,000 years is not soon. I think he is talking about coming to defeat the Roman Empire. Jesus was promising our 1<sup>st</sup> Century brothers that he would come soon to avenge them, to pay back those who were persecuting them. Revelation is about things that happened soon after it was written not 2,000 years later.

Let's look at some other things in Revelation and see if they best describe the Roman Empire or the end times. [SLIDE 7] Turn to Rev 17. In this Chapter, John sees a vision of a prostitute – a woman dressed richly and holding a goblet full of sexual immorality. She is riding a beast with 7 heads and 10 horns. Who is this woman; what does she represent? The angel tells us plainly. v.18 *the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth*. When the angel said this, what did John think of? Rome. When this letter was read to the Ephesian Church, what did our bros and sisters think this meant? Rome. Are there any other clues that suggest Rome? v.6 says the woman is drunk with the blood of the saints. What city is most known for killing Christians? Ancient Rome. v.9 says the seven heads represent 7 mountains or hills on which the woman is seated. What city is know as the city built on 7 hills? There is a city in Ohio with that name. No. This refers to Rome. This was one of its nicknames like we call New York the Big Apple. [SLIDE 8] Here is a coin minted by the Roman Emperor Vespasian in 71AD. On the back it shows a woman seated on 7 hills. What is her name? "Roma" What do you suppose Roma means in Latin? Rome. We all have coins in our pocket minted 15 years ago. When Revelation was read to the 7 churches in Asia in

95AD, guess what? Some of the people at church that day perhaps had this coin in their pocket. They knew who the woman seated on 7 hills symbolized. It was clear to them the prostitute refers to ancient Rome.

[SLIDE 9] So what is the 10 horn beast the woman is riding? v.10-13 identifies the beast with kings and says it will receive royal authority together with these kings. Sounds like a kingdom. Turn back to Rev 13. This same beast – 10 horns and 7 heads – is described here. :1-2. The dragon (Satan) gives this beast his power and throne and authority. :7-8. The beast makes war on the saints and is given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation. Sounds like a kingdom or empire. What empire is most known for making war on Christians? The Roman Empire. Not surprising since it is being ridden by the prostitute – the great city of ancient Rome. Any other clues the beast is the Roman Empire? Turn to Daniel 7. This beast has appeared before in the Bible. Most of us are familiar with N's dream in Dan 2. He dreams of 4 kingdoms. Which kingdoms are they? Babylonia, Persian, Greek and Roman. Dan 7 also describes the 4 kingdoms using 4 beasts. Let's read about the 4<sup>th</sup> beast - the same Roman Empire dreamed about in Dan 2. :19-24. This beast/kingdom has 10 horns like the beast in Revelation, makes war on the saints like the beast in Revelation, and the 10 horns refer to 10 kings like the beast in Revelation. :26-27 predicts this kingdom will fall, but the kingdom of God will be an everlasting kingdom. This is the same message as Revelation. The 4<sup>th</sup> kingdom of Daniel - the Roman Empire when God's kingdom will be established - is the same as the beast in Revelation. This confirms our view that this beast is the Roman Empire.

[SLIDE 10] [Rev 13:11-17 describes a 2<sup>nd</sup> beast with 2 horns. This beast makes people worship the 10 horn beast. It says no one can buy or sell without receiving a mark – the mark of the beast. If the first beast is the Roman Empire, what caused people to worship the Roman Empire? The cult of emperor worship. There were temples and priests whose role was to promote Emperor worship. And in some places, people needed a certificate they had worshiped the Emperor in order to buy and sell. This cult is what our 1<sup>st</sup> Century bros & sisters thought when the 2 horn beast was described. This beast is defeated in Rev 19 at the same time as the 10 horn beast. Clearly it is associated with the Roman Empire.]

[SLIDE 11] [There is a variation of Amillennialism you are likely to see it in older commentaries. It was popular among Protestants at the time of the Reformation. You will see it in older commentaries like Mathew Henry or Albert Barnes. Call it Reformation Amillennialism. According to this theory, Chapter 4-19 describes not just the Roman Empire but all of history between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> comings of Jesus. Instead of the pagan Roman Empire, the 10 horn beast is the Catholic Church, the 2 horn beast is the pope or papacy and the prostitute is the Vatican in Rome. The persecution refers to Catholic oppression of non-Catholic believers. Not many people still hold to this theory today. One major problem with the theory is Revelation predicts the fall of the prostitute and the defeat of the two beasts. However, the Catholic Church has never fallen, but had endured centuries beyond the Protestant Reformation.]

[SLIDE12] [One final theory I want to mention is the Philosophical theory of Revelation. This one is in my Bible (ESV) in the introduction to Revelation. This theory sees Revelation as teaching general principles that apply to all periods in history. The 10 horn beast symbolized any time the world persecutes Christianity. The 2 horn beast symbolizes any false religion. The prostitute symbolizes the allure of worldliness – wealth and sexual immorality – during any age in history. Revelation is seen as a parable for all times and places. I think this theory neglects the historical setting of Revelation and how the 1<sup>st</sup> Century church would have understood Revelation. I do agree that Revelation can teach us lessons for other times and places. Just like any other letter in the Bible, e.g.: 1 Cor – Revelation was written to a specific group of Christians but also teaches us things that apply to our lives too.]

[SLIDE 13] The Historical/Amillennial view is more consistent with the rest of the NT than the Futurist/Premillennial view. Premillennialism says there are 2 resurrections 1,000 years apart. John 5:28-29 teaches there is only one resurrection of the lost and the saved. Premillennialism says the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Jesus occurs 1,000 years before the Day of Judgment, but Mat 25:31-32 teaches the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Jesus is when the Day of Judgment will happen. Premillennialism says the kingdom of God will not be established on earth until the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming, but Col 1:13 teaches we are now in the kingdom of God. Premillennialism emphasizes the sensational. Focuses on news events and politics and end times and less on the vital work of the church here and now. Fascinating but not Biblical. Based on these reasons and others, we believe the Historical view of Revelation is the correct one. Others in our brotherhood of churches also teach this. Douglas Jacoby. Gordon Ferguson. Most mainline Church of Christ scholars.

[SLIDE 14] The Historical approach sees Revelation primarily as encouragement to those facing real persecution at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century from the pagan Roman Empire. It predicts the church – the kingdom of God on earth established by Jesus in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century - will prevail and the mighty Roman Empire will fall. This was a bold prediction in the late 1<sup>st</sup> Century. The young Christian movement of the meek and lowly would outlast mighty imperial Rome. **But this prediction came true.** This is the incredibly encouraging message of Revelation. I hope this message will inspire you as we study Revelation in the weeks ahead.