

# *Understanding the Apocalypse of St. John*

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## **I. Four Methods of Interpreting the Apocalypse:**

**1. The Preterist View:** Considers the Apocalypse as written for the Churches of the first century and having already been fulfilled. The events of the Apocalypse and Christ's "coming" have occurred with the destruction of Jerusalem around 70 AD. It was first proposed in the sixteenth century and is still held by many scholars in the Rationalist tradition. Many modern day liberal Catholic Biblical scholars hold this view somewhat in reaction to the Protestant Evangelical over-emphasis on the Futurist approach. The Preterist View sees the book as merely a symbolic description of first-century events.

**2. The Futurist View:** Considers the Apocalypse as solely a book of prophecy addressing a time far distant from its era of composition, predicting actual future events. Very much in vogue in the eighteenth century, Protestant Evangelicals have popularized this view in our day.

**3. The Historicist View:** Considers the Apocalypse as a history of the Church, proclaiming the main events and epochs of the Church, past and future. Seven periods are identified, the last being that of a thousand-year reign which Christ and his followers will establish before the end of the world. This view was widespread in the early centuries of the Church and in the Middle Ages; it is also popular in our own days among certain sects which have made a number of (mistaken) predictions of the date of the end of the world. It must be noted that "Chiliasm" or "Millenarianism" (the teaching that Christ will have an earthly thousand-year reign which will precede his Second and Final Coming) has been formally condemned as heresy by the Church.

**4. The Idealist View:** Considers the Apocalypse as an exposition of the ongoing relationships and conflicts between God and His Kingdom on one side, non-believing humanity and Satan on the other. Revelation is seen as revealing things in the past, present and future. This view incorporates the truthful elements of the above three approaches and considers these views not as contradictory, but to be used in conjunction with one another. The Idealist View teaches that the Apocalypse is as much for those to whom it was originally addressed as it is for Christians of every generation. According to this interpretation (favored by many Fathers of the Church) St. John is describing the situation of the Church in his own time and he is also surveying the panorama of the last times; but for him these last times have already begun. The End Times began with the entry into the world of Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man. Revelation depicts the cosmic struggle between good and evil and Christ's ultimate triumph -not only in the end, but for every generation of Christians, including our own. Both the OSB and the Catholic Navarre Commentary take this approach as the most balanced.

Sources: *Navarre Bible Commentary, Orthodox Study Bible, Catholic Encyclopedia.*

## **II. Important Introductory Thoughts by Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko:**

The Apocalypse is a very peculiar type of revelation. It is a revelation to people capable of understanding the revelation because they live within a certain spiritual, theological, liturgical, traditional world which has its own history and therefore its own language and mystical experience. So that this revelation, which is a revelation of God, a disclosure of insight into His truth –and very particularly a truth that explains what is going on. An apocalypse is a revelation of God’s version, or God’s vision, of what is happening. But it is given to those who have eyes to see, ears to hear and minds willing and capable of understanding. It is written in cryptic language. It is written with images and symbols only initiates can understand. It is not written for the world. It is written for the insiders, for those who belong. For those who are within God’s realm and it is given to them so that they would understand what’s happening to them. Very particularly, what’s happening to them in history, in their time, in their place in their world, in their spiritual life. But the important thing to understand is that the Apocalypse is using this kind of language and this purpose because it is (in this kind of setting) a revelation of what is happening to them... which then has an application larger, wider, deeper and more ultimate than just for them. In other words it becomes what can be called an “archetypal vision” where you have a historic reality being used as a sign and a way of interpreting the totality of reality.

Basically what you have in the Apocalypse of John is a prophetic, mystical, symbolical, mystagogical, typological book where what is happening to the Christians at that time is telling what is happening to Christians all the time until Christ returns in glory. In other words what is happening to them is the insight to what is happening to Christians, to those believe in Jesus who still live on this planet, until the Lord comes in glory. So that when you read this book, and you have to be within the community to understand it, because it is written according to the experience and language of the community. [It’s parabolic in that sense. Many people think that a parable is a story to make things clear. That’s only true if it’s a story to make things clear to those who understand the story. But if you are not in a position to understand the story, the parable is an enigma to you. You don’t understand what it means. This is going on even in the Gospels. For example Jesus will say, “Hear this parable,” and then He tells it and when He finishes it, His disciples say, “What did it mean?” Like Jesus says in the parable of the sower, “To you it has been given to understand... but to those on the outside I speak in parables lest they understand...” So there is a mystery in the parable. Three times Jesus says in this Gospel: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” And this will be said again and again in the Apocalypse, presupposing there are those who have ears to hear and they can hear what the Spirit is speaking to the Churches. What it is saying to those who belong to the Lamb and are marked with His image and are clothed with His robe and so on, who are filled with His Spirit, that then they can understand what is going on. But to those who are outside they cannot understand and it is even written in a way they cannot understand.

**KEY:**

So here I think we can make a very forceful, dogmatic principal for Orthodox: unless you are in the Orthodox-Catholic tradition you will not understand the book of Revelation. You cannot. Even being in the tradition you may not. But if you are outside it you certainly will not. Because you are not in the context in the living tradition in the spiritual liturgical world within which the disclosure is possible. What we will see today is that: Given what we Orthodox do, given how we believe, given how we pray, given how we build our Churches, given how our liturgy is, given how we understand the faith, we are within the best possible condition of understanding this book than anybody. In other words, if we can't understand it, nobody will. Because we still live in that world that it bears witness to. This is our world. The book of the Apocalypse is our world. It should be our world, technically it is our world, and what we will try to do is point out how as a matter of fact, it is our world. How then, from our perspective, since it is our world, we would interpret it.”

**III. Helpful Resources on the Apocalypse and Eschatology:**

1. *The Orthodox Study Bible* - Solid, historical notes and commentary.
2. *The Orthodox Bible Study Commentary* by Lawrence Farley - Excellent commentary.
3. *Orthodox New Testament* - Filled with Patristic commentary.
4. *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible* by Dr. Scott Hahn & Curtis Mitch - A very helpful Roman Catholic commentary.
5. *The Navarre Bible Commentary* -A good traditional Roman Catholic Commentary with an excellent defense of St. John's authorship of Revelation.
6. *The Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation within Orthodox Christian Tradition* by Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko - A four CD lecture which heavily emphasizes the connections of this book with historic Orthodox Christian Liturgy.
7. *The End: A Study of the Book of Revelation* by Dr. Scott Hahn - Twelve lectures on the Apocalypse which are very historically in-depth.
8. *Catholics and the Rapture* by Patrick Madrid & Carl Olson (former Evangelical Christians) - A talk on why Catholics reject Evangelical Christian End-Times teaching (like the "Left Behind" series).