

FUTURIST

The futurist interpretation of the book of Revelation is one of four approaches to understanding the prophecies of Revelation. The other three systems are the historicist, the preterist, and the spiritual (or idealist).

The basic premise of the futurist viewpoint is that the majority of the prophecies in Revelation still await a future, literal fulfillment. This view of interpreting Revelation is very popular today, particularly among dispensationalists. It is the method used by the authors of the bestselling *Left Behind* series. Those who hold this view generally believe that everything after Revelation 3 will be fulfilled in the future.

The futurist viewpoint often divides Revelation into three sections, which are defined in Revelation 1:19. There, the apostle John is instructed to “write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.” Following this three-part outline, Revelation 1 contains John’s vision of the risen Christ and represents the past (“what you have seen”). Chapters 2 and 3, which contain the letters to the seven churches, describe the present (“what is now”). Finally, chapters 4–22 describe events in the future (“what will take place later”).

Dispensationalists generally believe that the rapture of the church takes place at the time of Revelation 4:1, after which comes the “what will take place later.” Revelation 4:1 marks the beginning of the tribulation, a seven-year period where God finishes His discipline of Israel and begins His judgment of the unbelieving world as described in Revelation 4–19. Some futurists place the rapture of the church at Revelation 19, at the time of Jesus’ second coming.

The futurist approach basically sees John’s vision as a series of chronological events, although some futurists see parallel or cyclical patterns in the visions of Revelation 4–19. The futurist interpretation lends itself to a more literal view than do the other interpretive systems, which tend to allegorize the events of Revelation. For example, Revelation 19:20 says, “The beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. . . . The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur.” The futurist interpretation sees this as a prophecy that two evil individuals will face personal judgment from God. The spiritual interpretation, in contrast, simply sees it as a morality tale expressing an aspect of the age-long struggle between good and evil.

The preterist view holds that this event has already occurred, sometime in the first century.

Critics of the futurist view sometimes accuse futurists of holding to a too literal interpretation and of not recognizing any symbolic meanings. However, futurists do recognize that some aspects of Revelation are symbolic. The description of Jesus returning with a “sharp sword” coming “out of his mouth” is obviously symbolic, yet it is a symbol with a literal interpretation—Jesus will return, and He will win the battle by the power of His word.

An error to avoid in the futurist interpretation of Revelation is that of becoming “newspaper theologians” who try to superimpose current events on the timeline of Revelation. This approach can lead to date-setting, if one is not careful. Sadly, many people have been influenced by such “prophecy experts” whose predictions fail to come true.

There are differing viewpoints concerning the end times among faithful, Bible-believing Christians. We believe that the futurist viewpoint of Revelation is the one that is most consistent with a literal interpretation of the Bible overall and the one that best acknowledges the book’s own claim to be prophecy (Revelation 22:7, 10). Whichever view one takes, all Christians should be preparing themselves to meet Jesus Christ and be waiting for His return (John 14:3).