

Derek Radney
College Director
Calvary Baptist Church
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An Introduction to Revelation and Eschatology

Introduction: One of the most popular areas of study in Evangelicalism today is eschatology.

Eschatology is the study of ‘last things’ or the end times. Many Christians today are familiar with or have read books from the Left Behind series that was so popular in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. Those books along with many other books in the twenty years prior popularized a movement labeled the bible prophecy movement which emphasized the rapture, the revival of national Israel in modern day Palestine, and the millennial earthly reign of Jesus Christ. The theology under girding these books and this movement is called dispensationalism. Dispensationalism has enjoyed popular acceptance in America and England over the past 100 years. Most of you hear today are dispensationalists whether you know it or not. And most of you are probably unaware that this is only one of four major views held by the church during its 2000 year history. One question we must ask ourselves when studying the book of revelation is: “Is Dispensationalism the correct theology of the bible and specifically Revelation, or have we been greatly misled?”

- A. Who here has ever studied the book of Revelation?
- B. What is the genre of the book?
- C. What is the message of the book?
- C. What is the purpose of the book?

Revelation: In order to study the book of revelation, we must understand that like with everything else we study, we do not come to the book of Revelation objectively. No one is objective in the sense that we all have ideas that we bring to the text which in large part affect what we are able to see in the text and then which therefore limits how we can interpret the text. For the book of Revelation which includes many mixed metaphors and uses heavily symbolic language, the way we decide to read the text from the outset will in large part determine what we think it is saying.

Organizational Sentence: So, we must start today by covering some introductory matters including: I) hermeneutics (the study of interpretation), II) eschatology (the study of last things or end times) of the Old and New Testaments, III) the 4 major views of end times, and IV) an Introduction to Revelation with the 5 major ways of understanding the book of Revelation.

I. Hermeneutics: The study of Interpretation

A. Our doctrine of the Bible: Infallible and Inerrant¹

- 1. The Bible is God breathed: All Scripture is God breathed, meaning the Scriptures are actually God’s Words spoken through human authors. There is a dual authorship to Scripture so that humans speaking in their own context and through their own language actually speak the very words of God. Therefore, the bible is authoritative. If God has spoken, then we must obey. The bible is authoritative.

2. The Bible is inerrant: All Scripture is true in whatever it affirms. Since God is perfect and since He is not a liar, whatever He says must be true. This means that the bible is not only true in spiritual matters, but in all matters to which it speaks.

B. History of interpretation:

1. Allegorical Method: Within 100 years of the church's founding, many of the leaders of the church began to adopt an allegorical approach to interpreting the bible. This was applied especially to the Old Testament which many found hard to understand with respect to Christ. This approach believed that the true meaning of the stories of the OT was found by discerning the spiritual realities symbolically portrayed in the historical accounts.
2. Literal: Alongside this method, there were those, especially from Antioch, which became the center of the church early on, that argued that the bible must be interpreted in a more literal way. What they meant was that narratives should be read as historical accounts, not to be spiritualized, but as actual accounts of true events that provide the backbone of historical fulfillment of promise in Jesus Christ.
3. For a long time, the allegorical approach was the dominant method of interpretation, but during the Reformation, Luther, Calvin, and others began to return to a more 'literal' reading of the bible.
4. However, during the 1800's, a big dispute developed between what we now call liberals and conservatives. At the beginning of the 1800's, universities in Europe and some in America began adopting scholarship that argued against the truthfulness of the bible. Scholars and many pastors began rejecting the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, like the virgin birth, the resurrection, and the bodily return of Christ. Christians revolted against this scholarship in a movement called fundamentalism. Fundamentalists broke from the seminaries and universities because of their fundamental belief that the Scriptures were true and taught these fundamentals.
5. Fundamentalists asserted the need to interpret the bible literally. In face of liberal scholarship which began pointing out apparent contradictions, historical inconsistencies, and eventually scientific impossibilities, fundamentalists retreated more and more from the intellectual hubs of society into the frontiers of America. The 2nd Great Awakening, which was at its zenith in the 1830's and 1840's, radically altered American Christianity by taking it out of local churches and into camp revivals in the wilderness that were marked by exuberant emotional experiences separated from careful study of Scripture.
6. What people meant by literal interpretation began to change. During this period, bible interpretation began to become woodenly literal. In an attempt to uphold the truth of the bible, people began to argue that everything must be taken at face value.
7. Around this time, a theology developed called Dispensationalism.

C. Dispensationalism: A theology which attempts to explain how Scripture fits together, especially Old and New Testament, through delineating between various dispensations (administrations or economies) found through biblical history.ⁱⁱ

1. Dispensationalism emphasizes the discontinuity of Scripture by pointing out the different ways that God has worked with His people throughout salvation history.
2. Dispensationalism is built on an inerrant view of Scripture while insisting that the bible must be read with a grammatical, historical, plain-sense hermeneutic. This

means that we should always interpret the bible as literally as possible unless the context suggests otherwise.

3. Dispensationalists are known for their conviction that Israel and the Church are distinct groups of people and that Israel in particular has a special place in God's plan to receive geographic and physical blessings in the future.
4. Dispensationalism has argued for a literal interpretation of prophecy and makes up a unique form of Premillennialism.

D. Literal Interpretation?

1. No one interprets the bible literally all the time.
 - a. Psalm 27:9 – "Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger, O you who have been my help. Cast me not off; forsake me not, O God of my salvation!"
 - b. Psalm 18:35 "You have given me the shield of your salvation, and your right hand supported me, and your gentleness made me great."
 - c. Revelation 19:11-16 "11 Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. 12 His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. 13 He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. 14 And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. 15 From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. 16 On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords."
 - d. Psalm 18:2 "The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold."
2. But, this does not mean we don't believe the bible is true like those who deny the fundamentals. It means that we read the bible understanding that context, genre, and salvation history all play a part in understanding how the bible communicates.
3. Personal letters, poems, songs, narratives, news reports, instruction manuals, prophecies, etc. all speak in different ways. You do not read them the same.

E. Christ is the final and definitive revelation of God and of His salvation.ⁱⁱⁱ

1. The bible teaches us that Christ is the final revelation by whom we must understand all of biblical history. This means that we do not fully understand what God promised in the past until we see the fulfillment. Therefore, when God made promises in the Old Testament to Abraham, Moses, David, etc., it was not completely clear how those promises would be fulfilled. Only after Christ was buried and raised and exalted did the meaning of the promises become clear.
2. Thus, literal interpretations of the bible often wrongly assume that the purpose of the promise is to point us to some event in the future that will be easily identifiable if we look for it.
3. Since the past promises cannot be fully understood apart from Christ, we must understand them to be shadows of the things to come (Heb. 10:1). What we find in the Old Testament is the principle of typology. Typology assumes that revelation progresses throughout the bible. This means there is development and expansion in the promises. We glean a bigger and bigger picture as time goes on, and each of these pictures possess a certain pattern. Thus, when the fulfillment comes, we recognize that it fits the pattern even though we could not have guessed from the promise what the fulfillment would look like.
4. Example: Abraham is promised the land of Canaan as an inheritance forever. But over the course of the biblical history, we see that life in the promise land represent

peace, protection, harmony, and God's presence. We find in the New Testament that Canaan is just a picture, a shadow, of the inheritance all saints will receive in the New Heavens and the New Earth. This is what the New Testament talks about the heavenly city Zion (Heb. 3:7-4:10; 12:18-24) and how Abraham and his offspring will be heirs of the world (Rom. 4:13).

- F. Principles to remember when studying revelation and other prophecy in the bible:
1. Prophecy does not equal prediction of events.
 2. Prophecy points to the one who gives the promises, God.
 3. The purpose of prophecy is to orient us toward God in faith.
 4. Prophecy deals with the in-breaking of God's kingdom throughout history.
 5. Prophecy has multiple fulfillments that are expanded and developed over time.
 6. Prophecy paints pictures with mixed metaphors that can't be dissected without losing the meaning.

II. Eschatology: The Study of Last Things (End Times)^{iv}

- A. Before studying the outlook on the future of the New Testament, we should first look to the Old Testament view of the end times.
1. The Old Testament looks to one future period where God's Kingdom would be established and history would enter into the Age of Salvation. The New Testament reveals that this is accomplished in two stages: Christ's first coming and Christ's second coming.
 2. OT Eschatology: Throughout the Old Testament, God revealed 7 realities of the future.
 - a. The coming redeemer
 - b. The Kingdom of God
 - c. The New Covenant
 - d. The Restoration of Israel
 - e. The Outpouring of the Spirit
 - f. The Day of the Lord
 - g. The New Heavens and the New Earth
- B. The New Testament gives us a fuller picture of the Age of Salvation
1. All the promises of God and all the hopes of Israel find their fulfillment in Christ.
 2. The great eschatological event predicted in the New Testament, the Day of Salvation, has happened in Christ.
 3. What the Old Testament described as one event, the New Testament reveals as involving two stages: The present Age of the Messiah and the future consummation of salvation.
 4. The relationship between the two stages is that the blessings of the present age are a pledge and guarantee of the greater blessings of the future.
 5. The New Testament teaches us several important things about history:
 - a. History is the working out of God's purposes, namely, to glorify Himself.
 - b. God is the Lord of History, meaning, He is in final control of all things. (Ps. 103:19)
 - c. Christ is the center of history.
 - d. The Age of Salvation is already present in Christ.

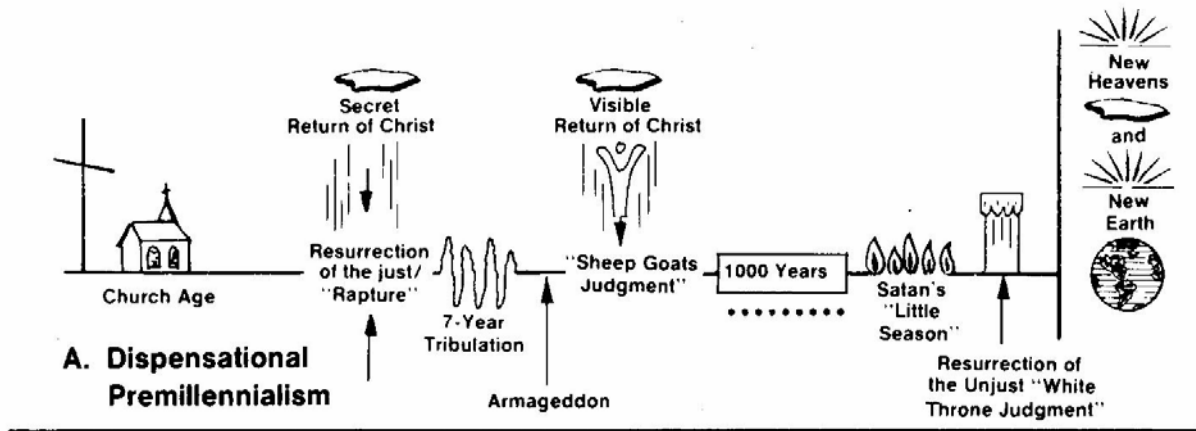
- e. The Age of Salvation is not yet fully present as we wait for the goal of history: the glorification of God in the New Heavens and the New Earth.
 - f. We should therefore be pessimistic about the strength, power, and permanence of the kingdoms of this world.
 - g. We should be optimistic about the goal of history.
- C. The Kingdom of God is already present but not yet fully present.
1. We live in the age of Salvation, but we wait for the full consummation of salvation.
 2. Christ is king, but not all things have been subjected to Him.
 3. We are justified, adopted, and sanctified, but we wait for final justification, adoption, and glorification.
 4. This age is marked by proclaiming the gospel until the elect have all come to repentance.

III. 4 Views on Eschatology^v

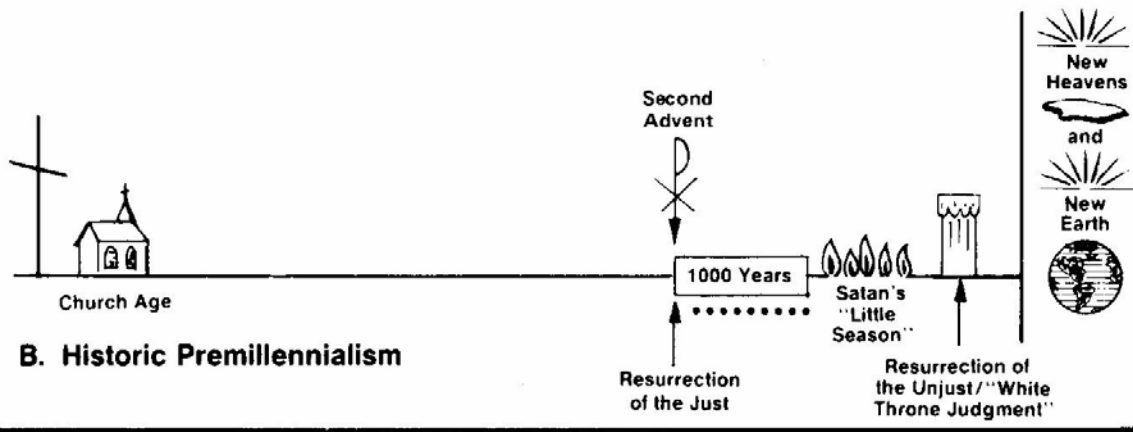
A. Key Terms:

1. Rapture: From the Latin *rapio* (caught up), the belief that the church will be caught up (Greek *harpazo*, I Thess. 4:17) and united with Christ at His second coming. One point of contention among theologians is the time of the rapture, especially in relation to the great tribulation period associated with the end of the age.^{vi}
2. Tribulation: The internal and external suffering of God's people which, according to the NT teaching, followers of Jesus Christ are to expect as a matter of course. The NT references to the "great tribulation" describe an unprecedented period of global suffering that will mark the time just prior to the parousia. Different millennial views place the time of the tribulation at different points in relation to the millennium. Likewise, different views on the time of the rapture place this event at different points in relation to the eschatological tribulation.
3. Millennium: Arising from the Latin word for "thousand," the *millennium* refers to the thousand-year reign of Christ mentioned in Revelation 20:1-8.^{vii}

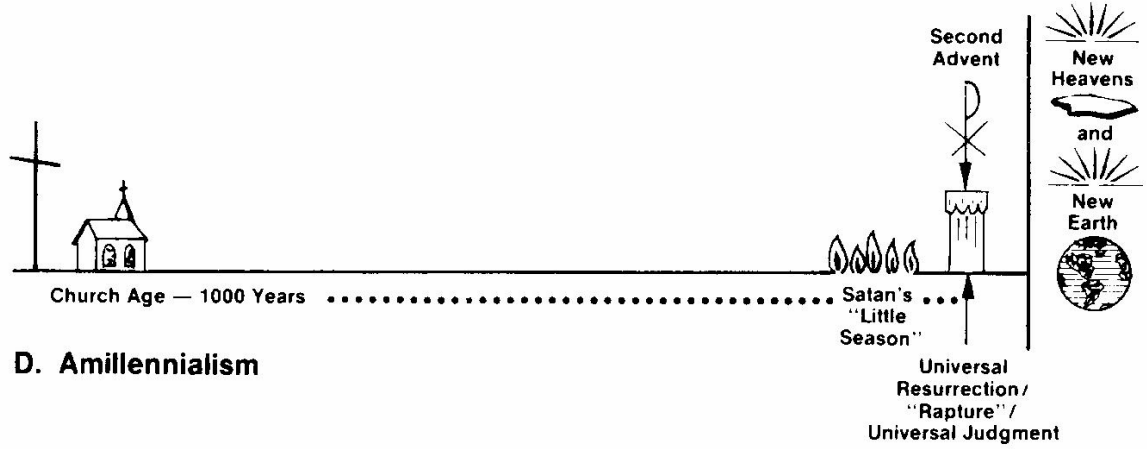
B. Dispensational (Pretribulational) Premillennialism:



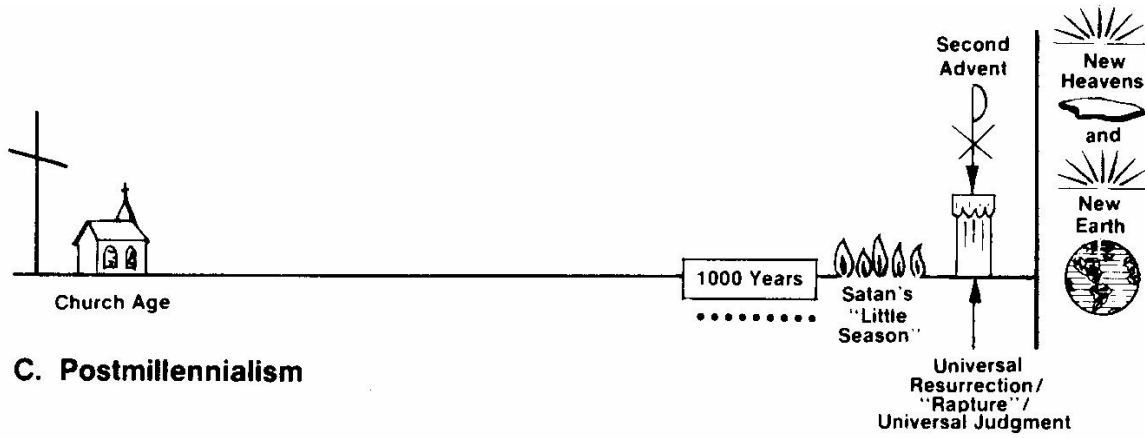
C. Historic/Classic (Posttribulational) Premillennialism:



D. Amillennialism:



E. Postmillennialism:



A. Author: John the Apostle

1. There is debate about authorship even among those who believe in the truthfulness of the bible. Some believe John the Elder, a lesser known disciple who was not part of the 12, wrote Revelation and the Gospel of John. Most bible believing Christians believe John the Apostle is John the Elder and is the author of all the books in the New Testament traditionally attributed to John the Apostle. Many of the Church Fathers attribute the book of Revelation to John the Apostle: Justin Martyr (100-165A.D.), Irenaeus (about 115 or 125 until around 200 A.D.), and Tertullian (160-225 A.D.), Clement of Alexandria (150-211 or 216 A.D.).
2. There is more debate among higher critics (those that believe the bible to be errant and fallible). Many scholars believe the Gospel of John and Revelation were written by communities of faith who added John's name to give them credibility. This higher critical view of Gospel origin and Revelation authorship has come under heavy critic recently and is beginning to wane in influence.^{ix}

B. Audience: The author clearly states that he is writing to the 7 churches in Asia (present day Turkey). Very few challenge this assertion. Chapters two and three make clear which churches are in view: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The author is clearly writing to Christians who are mainly Gentiles but we must assume that there were Jews present in all if not most of the congregations.

C. Date: There are four major dates proposed that correspond to the reigns of different Roman Emperors who are thought to be providing the context of the book. The context of the book assumes that Christians are suffering and struggling with living as Christians in the pagan Roman Empire. Scholars have studied Roman history to see which period best fits the probable setting of the book.

1. Emperor Claudius 41-54 A.D.
2. Emperor Nero 54-68 A.D.
3. Domitian 81-96 A.D.
4. Trajan 98-117 A.D.
5. The earliest church fathers that we have on record put the date of this book toward the end of the reign of Domitian, around 94-96 A.D. This is the view held by most evangelical scholars, though some acknowledge the possibility of an earlier, but not later date. Under Domitian, there was no official persecution of Christians, but there was strong economic pressure to participate in Roman pagan worship.
6. The other popular view is that John wrote this during the reign of Nero.
7. The latest dates proposed, 98-117 A.D., are often adopted by those who deny that John the Apostle wrote it, especially since John would be getting up to around 100 years old at this time.
8. John probably wrote Revelation around 94-96 A.D.

D. Genre: The Revelation to John is a unique piece of literature, not only to the bible but in relation to all contemporary documents. It is a combination of three distinct genres.

1. Letter/Epistle: John is clearly writing personal concerns to Christians just like most of Paul's letters to different churches or people with specific concerns and issues in mind.

2. Prophecy: Prophecy as a genre includes reporting the very words of God to the people of God often as a warning but usually with a positive message of hope and restoration contingent upon repentance.
3. Apocalypse: Apocalyptic is connected to but different from prophecy in that apocalyptic literature includes complex visions that are reported and interpreted by the prophet. The book of Daniel is the only other book that is comparable. Apocalyptic visions include pictures of the inbreaking of the glorious transcendent kingdom of God.

E. Purpose/Message:

1. John writes Revelation because God has given him these visions. But, his message to the Christians in crisis is one of perseverance. John's book paints a picture of a triumphant and glorious Christ who fights and will ultimately triumph over the enemies of the saints. The letter is a call to perseverance, faith, and hope. It is a call to live counter-culturally by avoiding participation in pagan worship even when it is costly.
2. The book also contains warnings to those Christians who are weak and are beginning to compromise their faith by conforming to the Roman culture. God will vindicate them from their suffering if they persevere, but if they do not walk by faith and suffer, they will ultimately join those whom Christ will triumph over in judgment.

F. 5 Approaches:

1. Historicist: This is not a common view anymore, but was common among Franciscan Catholics after the 12th century. Luther and Calvin also favored this method. Essentially, this approach sees the book as describing current events during the church age leading up to the return of Christ. Thus, the symbols of the book were identified with kings, popes, etc. The Anti-Christ was identified with popes, Hitler, and Napoleon. This view fits with almost any of the current eschatological views and is thus the most inconsistent when approaching Revelation.
2. Preterist: This approach argues that the details of the book relate to John's present day situation and not to a future period. Thus, this view assumes the earliest date because this view requires that the events described find their fulfillment in the destruction of the temple and other events that happened within the lifetime of John. Therefore, most of the book was fulfilled in our past. This approach leads one to discover a postmillennial theology.
3. Idealist: This approach is one of the most common, especially among Reformed theologians. It argues that the symbols do not relate to specific historical events but rather to timeless spiritual truths. Therefore, the book is largely explaining the types of things Christians will experience throughout the church age. This approach results in an amillennial theology.
4. Futurist: This is the most common view among average laymen today. This approach sees the book as referring to future events. Essentially, chapters 4-22 are said to refer to what will take place in the future. The symbols are interpreted as

having one referent in the future climactic end. This approach results in a premillennial theology.

5. Eclectic: This approach combines the preterist, idealist, and futurist by gleaning the strengths of all of them. Symbols describe the church age from John's time on into our future. Therefore, there are many things the symbols refer to as types of things Christians will experience throughout the church age. However, John uses events in his lifetime as well as Old Testament language to paint pictures of these events. But, there is a future climactic fulfillment of these symbols so that what the church experiences through the age is a pattern for the 'Great Tribulation.' This approach can lead to a classic/historic premillennial or amillennial theology.

ⁱ Grudem, Wayne. Systematic Theology. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994, chps.4-5.

ⁱⁱ Blaising, Craig and Bock, Darrell. Progressive Dispensationalism. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1993, ch.1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Goldsworthy, Graeme. According to Plan. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991, pg. 59-70.

^{iv} Hoekema, Anthony. The Bible and the Future. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, ch.1-6.

^v See also:

Grenz, Stanley. The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992.

Gundry, Stan and Archer, Gleason. Three Views on the Rapture. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.

^{vi} Grenz, Stanley; Guretzki, David; and Nordling, Cherith. Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999, pg. 99

^{vii} *Ibid.*, pg. 79.

^{viii} See:

Beale, G.K. The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, pg.1-178.

Carson, D.A., and Moo, Doug. An Introduction to the New Testament 2nd Edition. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005, ch. 25.

Johnson, Dennis. Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation. Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, pg.1-24.

Osborne, Grant. Revelation. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002, pg. 1-50.

^{ix} Bauckham, Richard. Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006.