

I've been talking about how the book of Revelation has been interpreted by modern conservative Christians. Isn't it telling us what will happen in our own near future?? Here is how I will address the issue, in short, in my book on Revelation, assuming that I go ahead with the project and Armageddon doesn't happen first.

In Contrast: Scholars and the Book of Revelation

Not only are these futuristic readings of Revelation contrary to the history of Christian interpretation, they stand radically at odds with how critical scholars read the book of Revelation, and insist it ought to be read.

As often pointed out, every single interpreter who has argued that the "signs of the times" reveal the end is coming soon - probably next month - have been shown demonstrably and incontrovertibly to be wrong. But just as significantly, the specific interpretations of these modern manifestations of these signs are almost always demonstrably flawed. I give just one example from the book of Revelation, an interpretation famously pronounced by Hal Lindsey. In Revelation chapter 9 the author describes a horrible disaster involving a plague of "locusts" that emerge from the smoke of the bottomless pit, wreaking havoc and misery among the people of earth.

The seer describes the appearance of these dread creatures as follows:

On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; they had scales like iron breastplates, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. They have tails like scorpions, with stingers, and in their tails is their power to harm people. . . . (Rev 9:7-10)

According to Lindsey's futuristic interpretation, the prophet John could not have understood exactly what he was seeing, since he was a first-century observer who was witnessing a 20th (or now, 21st) century phenomenon. So he did the best he could, explaining his vision in terms he and his readers could understand.

The "locusts" he saw were actually modern attack helicopters flying through the smoke of battle. For the first-century seer ...

If you want to see how he interprets the passage, and how critical scholars have shown he's dead wrong, you will need to belong to the blog. Better join soon. The end is near!

For the first-century seer they looked like flying locusts, shaped like huge scorpions. The rotors on top appeared like crowns; they seemed to have human faces as their pilots peered through their windshields; they were draped with camouflage that from a distance looked like hair; they had fierce teeth painted on their fronts; they were made of steel and so appeared to have iron breastplates; the beating of their rotors sounded like chariots rushing to battle; and they had machine guns attached to their tails, like scorpions' stingers.

What could be more plausible? The prophet had glimpsed into the future and seen what he could not understand. We, however, living in the age in which his predictions will come to pass, understand them full well.

Critical scholars have no problems picking apart such interpretations just from the text itself. Prior to describing the appearance of these locusts the author of Revelation tells us how they create such mayhem on earth, emphatically declaring that when they appear they are not allowed to harm any grass or trees, but only people; moreover, and most significantly, these locusts are given the power to torture people for five months, but not to kill them (9:4-5). Those who are attacked by the locusts will long to die but will not be able to do so (9:6).

That clearly shows these locusts can't be modern instruments of war designed for mass destruction because they are explicitly said to be unable to destroy anything. The same problems occur with virtually every interpretation of the book that takes its visions as literal descriptions of events to transpire in our own imminent future. These approaches simply cannot account for the details of the text, which is to say that they don't take the text itself seriously enough.

Critical scholars insist that it is more reasonable to interpret the text within its own historical context, not as a literal description of the future of the earth, but as a metaphorical statement of the ultimate sovereignty of God over a world that is plagued by evil.

It is true that to modern readers, Revelation is incredibly bizarre and mind-boggling, with its rich symbolism and strange beasts and heavenly visions coming one after the other in a tumble that is almost impossible to grasp, let alone explain. It seems unlike any other book we have ever read. But that is because most readers are not accustomed to reading "apocalypses.". We do in fact have a wide range of Jewish and Christian books like Revelation, written from about the same time (roughly 200 BCE - 200 CE). These are all first-person narratives of visionary experiences. The visions are almost always explained to the author (who, like the reader, tends to be clueless about what he is seeing) by an accompanying angel who interprets them. The visions are highly symbolic in ways meant to mystify, but the author often provides hints (as well as angelic explanations) that provide the critical reader with clues to unpack their meaning.

Apocalypses are always intent on explaining the heavenly secrets that can make sense of earthly realities. Sometimes the visions do appear to describe the course of future events. That is true, for example, of the one Apocalypse of the Old Testament, the book of Daniel - where the pseudonymous author, allegedly living in the 6th century BCE - uses a vision of bizarre beasts arising up out of the sea to describe a sequence of future kingdoms that will appear and persecute the faithful people of Israel. The actual author pretending to be Daniel, however, was living four hundred years later, long after these kingdoms had appeared. He therefore had no trouble "predicting" them. Other apocalypses describe the prophet's visions of heaven as an indication of why the realities on earth are what they are. What seems unfathomable to us down here makes sense if once we see these divine realities.

The ultimate point of all these apocalypses is that as bad as things may seem here on earth -with economic disasters, oppressive governments, religious persecutors, unimaginable natural disasters - everything in fact is going according to plan. In the end, God will make right all that is wrong. He will intervene in history, destroy the cosmic forces that are wreaking havoc on earth, and bring in a new utopian age where all will be right, all will be happy, all will prosper for all eternity.

These books were written to help people in their present lives. Not the people living hundreds or thousands of years later, but the people the authors were addressing, members of their own communities. The authors were trying to provide hope in the midst of suffering. The deep and puzzling symbolism of the books were necessary to show that reality is far more complicated than one would expect. God's sovereignty is hidden and mysterious. But it is the ultimate truth.

As an apocalypse, Revelation is also to be read this way. Critical scholars have had no difficulty showing that the symbols of the book have to do with what the author and his readers knew about their own context, the world of the Roman Empire, an empire that massively exploited its world through economic, social, and military power, an Empire that persecuted Christians to the death, an Empire that was aligned (for the author) with the forces of evil, but which God would soon - very soon for the author - overthrow.

This understanding of the book applies not only to the macro-level, to explain its overarching message, but its detailed symbolism. And so critical scholars have long recognized that the Beast whose number is 666 actually refers to the Emperor Nero (I will be demonstrating this in the book); the Great Whore of Babylon, who is enthroned on a beast with seven heads and is drunk with the blood of the martyrs," is the first-century city of Rome itself, built on seven hills and engaged in deadly persecutions of Christians. This is a book written for persecuted Christians at the end of the first century. It is not predicting what will happen 2000 years later.

As a result, so much of the religious fervor inspired by the book - whether sparked by evangelists like Billy Graham or authors like Timothy LaHaye - is rooted in a highly problematic approach to interpretation. I am certainly not going to be claiming that fundamentalist interpretations of Revelation are solely responsible for the disaster at Waco, the conservative right's interpretation of the Second Amendment, the move of the American embassy to Jerusalem, and the arms race! But odd as it might seem, they did play a role.

In short: [Expecting Armageddon](#) will show that important slices of American culture are rooted in a problematic reading of the book of Revelation. If one of the goals of critical thinking is to evaluate the world we live in, then understanding these roots and recognizing their problematic character is an important act of cultural critique.



[Christianity's Most Important Convert: Lecture at the Smithsonian](#)