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Revelation's Presuppositions

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A lot of people are interested in the book of Revelation, and those who are particularly interested tend to really get into the weeds regarding the particular interpretation they prefer. That is not a bad thing. People ought to know as much about the book as possible. It is, after all, a part of the Bible – the Word of God.

But it is also important to have a wider perspective on the book than most people have. What most people don't realize is that **every** interpretive view of Revelation is a theological construct. What that means is, there is no single place in the Bible a person can point to that definitively affirms any of the interpretive methodologies. In order to come to a conclusion as to which one seems right, a person has to accept a particular set of presuppositions about the content and nature of the book. These are the beliefs a person must hold in order to accept any given interpretive approach. In other words, before any given interpretive method can legitimately be accepted, a person must validate that method's presuppositions.

But here is the problem. Not only do very few people understand the five possible interpretive methods, most don't even know the presuppositions of the one they do accept. So in this article, we simply want to lay out the presuppositions of each one for your understanding.

Historic Premillennialism

Since every interpretive view of Revelation is a theological construct, what presuppositions must be true for Historic Premillennialism to be true?

1. **A Literal, Future Millennium** - The most fundamental presupposition for Historic Premillennialism is that Revelation 20:1-6, which speaks of Christ reigning for a thousand years, describes a literal future earthly reign of Jesus Christ. This thousand-year period is understood as occurring after Christ's second coming. Historic Premillennialists believe that during this millennial reign, Christ will physically rule on Earth, fulfilling specific promises made throughout Scripture.

2. **Post-Tribulation Second Coming and Rapture** - Historic Premillennialism generally presupposes a post-tribulational rapture. This means that the Church will endure a future period of intense tribulation, often referred to as the Great Tribulation, before Christ's return. At the end of this tribulation, Jesus will visibly return, and believers (both living and resurrected) will be "caught up ... to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:17, NASB) and then immediately return with Him to Earth to participate in His millennial reign.
3. **Unity of God's People (Israel and the Church)** - Historic Premillennialism typically does not make a sharp distinction between Israel and the Church, as Dispensational Premillennialism does. Instead, it views believers of all ages – Old Testament saints and New Testament believers – as part of one unified people of God, now revealed as the body of Christ. This presupposes that many Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel's future prosperity, peace, and righteousness find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ and through the Church, especially during the millennial reign.
4. **A Balanced Hermeneutic for Prophecy** - While advocating for a literal millennium, Historic Premillennialism does not necessarily require that all apocalyptic prophecies be interpreted strictly literally. It generally employs a balanced hermeneutic, taking Revelation and other prophetic texts seriously while recognizing the symbolic elements inherent in apocalyptic literature. This means that while the "thousand years" is taken literally, some other imagery might be interpreted figuratively.

Dispensational Premillennialism

Since every interpretive view of Revelation is a theological construct, what presuppositions must be true for Dispensational Premillennialism to be true?

1. **A Consistently Literal, Grammatical-Historical Hermeneutic** - Dispensational Premillennialism assumes that all Bible passages, including prophecy, must be inter-

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interpreted in their plain, normal, and natural sense, unless the context explicitly demands a symbolic or figurative understanding. This approach seeks to understand Scripture based on the ordinary meaning of words in their grammatical and historical context. It leads to the understanding of the "thousand years" in Revelation 20:1-6 as a literal 1,000-year period. Additionally, Old Testament prophecies regarding Israel's future (e.g., concerning land, nationhood, and a physical kingdom) are expected to be fulfilled in a literal, earthly sense.

2. **A Fundamental Distinction Between Israel and the Church** - Dispensational Premillennialists hold that God maintains two distinct peoples with separate, yet related, redemptive plans and destinies. One is ethnic/national Israel and the other is the Church. They assume that God's promises and covenants to each group is distinct and not interchangeable. This means that Old Testament promises made specifically to Israel are understood as yet to be fulfilled literally for the nation of Israel, and are not spiritualized or transferred to the Church. The Church is viewed as a unique entity that was chosen for a heavenly destiny, while Israel has an earthly destiny.
3. **A Pretribulational Rapture** - Dispensational Premillennialists assert that the Church will be removed from the earth ("caught up" to meet Christ in the air) before the commencement of a future seven-year period known as the Great Tribulation. This implies that Christ's return for the Church is "imminent" (could happen at any moment) and that the Tribulation is a time of God's wrath – primarily for the unbelieving world and for the specific purpose of dealing with national Israel, not for the Church. It also often implies a two-stage return of Christ: first for the Church in the rapture, then with the Church at the end of the Tribulation.
4. **A Dispensational Framework of History** - Dispensational Premillennialism involves understanding salvation history as divided into distinct administrative periods or "dispensations." Each dispensation represents a particular way in which God tests humanity's obedience to His will and reveals more of His redemptive plan. While salvation has always been by grace through

faith, the specific responsibilities, rules, and revelations God gives to humanity differ in each dispensation. This framework helps to explain the perceived differences in God's dealings with humanity across various biblical eras, culminating in the millennial kingdom and the new heavens and new earth. These four presuppositions form the core framework of Dispensational Premillennialism. They guide its interpretation of Scripture, especially in the areas of eschatology and the nature of God's redemptive plan.

Postmillennialism

Since every interpretive view of Revelation is a theological construct, what presuppositions must be true for Postmillennialism to be true?

1. **The Spiritual Reign of Christ in the Present Age** - Postmillennialism presupposes that Jesus Christ inaugurated His kingdom during His earthly ministry and through His redemptive work on the cross in the first century. This kingdom is primarily spiritual and is being extended through the church and the spread of the Gospel. Christ currently reigns from heaven, exercising His spiritual authority in and through His people.
2. **The Gradual and Victorious Advance of the Gospel** - A core presupposition is an inherent optimism about the power and success of the Gospel to convert the world. Postmillennialism expects that, through evangelism, discipleship, and the work of the Holy Spirit, the nations will increasingly submit to Christ's lordship. This will lead to a time in history where faith, righteousness, peace, and prosperity will prevail in human affairs before Christ's physical return. It implies that good will gradually triumph over evil, leading to the "Christianization" of the world.
3. **The "Millennium" as an Indeterminate, Post-First-Century Period** - Postmillennialists do not interpret the "thousand years" of Revelation 20 as a literal 1,000-year period, but as a long, indeterminate era that began after Christ's first coming. It is during this extended period that the church gradually establishes the spiritual kingdom on earth.
4. **Satan's Substantial Restraint** - For the Gospel to achieve widespread success, and for the world to improve, Postmillen-

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nialism presupposes that Satan is substantially restrained in the present age. This restraint allows for the effective global advance of the Gospel and the increasing influence of Christian ethics.

5. **The Church as the Primary Agent of Kingdom Advancement** - In Post-millennialism, the church is understood to be the primary instrument through which Christ mediates His kingdom on earth. Through the preaching of the Gospel and discipleship, the Church is seen as the agent that will bring about the conversion of the majority of humanity.
6. **Historical Progress and an Earthly Victory for the Church** - Postmillennialism maintains an optimistic view of history, believing that the church will experience a period of historical victory, rather than defeat, prior to Christ's return. This includes the expectation that Christian ethics and principles will become the dominant influence in society, leading to widespread peace, justice, and righteousness.
7. **The Conversion of a Large Number of Jews** - Many Postmillennialists believe in a future large-scale conversion of ethnic Jews. This is seen as a significant event that will signal the beginning of the "golden age" and further accelerate the conversion of Gentile nations.

Amillennialism

Since every interpretive view of Revelation is a theological construct, what presuppositions must be true for Amillennialism to be true?

1. **The Symbolic Interpretation of Revelation** - A foundational amillennial presupposition is that the Book of Revelation, especially the "thousand years" in chapter 20, is highly symbolic and should not be interpreted literally. Amillennialists often view Revelation as a "camera angle" approach, with various sections replaying or depicting the same period from different perspectives rather than a strict chronological progression. This allows for interpreting the "thousand years" as a symbolic period representing the entire present Church Age, from Christ's first coming to His second coming.
2. **Christ's Present, Spiritual Reign in Heaven** - Amillennialism presupposes that Jesus Christ is currently reigning

from heaven, seated at the right hand of God the Father. This spiritual reign is not a future earthly kingdom but is operative now through the Church.

3. **The Millennium as the Current Church Age** - The "thousand years" described in Revelation 20 is understood to be synonymous with the present period (the time between Christ's first and second comings). This means believers are presently living in the millennium.
4. **Satan's Binding as a Restraint on Deception** - Amillennialists interpret the binding of Satan in Revelation 20 as a real, but limited, restraint that occurred during Christ's earthly ministry, and continues throughout the Church Age. This binding prevents Satan from "deceiving the nations" to prevent the spread of the Gospel, allowing the message of salvation to reach the ends of the earth. However, it does not mean Satan is completely inactive or unable to tempt individuals or cause evil. He is merely hindered from universally deceiving nations.
5. **The "First Resurrection" as Spiritual Regeneration or the Intermediate State** - The "first resurrection" mentioned in Revelation 20:4-6 is understood not as a bodily resurrection, but either as the spiritual regeneration (new birth) experienced by believers in this life or as the intermediate state of departed saints reigning with Christ in heaven.
6. **No Future Earthly Millennium** - A core negative presupposition of Amillennialism is the rejection of a future, literal, earthly reign of Christ for a thousand years before the eternal state. Instead, this view posits that Christ's return will be followed immediately by the general resurrection of all people, the final judgment, and the inauguration of the new heavens and new earth.
7. **Overlap of Kingdom and Church** - The Kingdom of God, in Amillennialism, is seen as a present reality that is dynamically active in human history through Jesus Christ and His Church. It is not primarily a future, earthly, Jewish kingdom.
8. **The Unity of Old and New Covenant Promises** - Amillennialism often presupposes a continuity between Old Testament prophecies and their fulfillment in Christ and the Church. That is

contrary to a literal fulfillment in an earthly kingdom for national Israel. Promises made to Abraham, for example, are seen as ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

Preterism

Since every interpretive view of Revelation is a theological construct, what presuppositions must be true for Preterism to be true?

1. **Proximate Fulfillment and a First-Century Context** - The most crucial Preterist presupposition is that Revelation's prophecies are primarily, if not exclusively, concerned with events that were relevant to the original audience in the first century A.D. That means the visions in the book describe events that were either already happening, imminently about to happen, or would happen within the lifetime of that generation.
2. **The Destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 as the Climax** - Full Preterism (which sees nearly all prophecy fulfilled by A.D. 70) and even Partial Preterism (which sees most but not all fulfilled) presuppose that the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. is the central, climactic event prophesied in Revelation. This event is believed to be the "coming of the Son of Man," the "judgment," and the end of the Old Covenant age.
3. **Symbolic Interpretation of Cosmic Language** - Preterism presupposes that the cosmic and apocalyptic language of Revelation – such as the sun being darkened, moon not giving its light, stars falling, and heavens being shaken (e.g., Matthew 24:29-30) – should be understood symbolically, referring to socio-political upheavals, particularly the collapse of the Jewish nation and its religious system, rather than literal celestial or global cataclysms. This is known as "de-literalizing" the cosmic imagery.
4. **The "Coming of Christ" (*Parousia*) as Judgment and Vindication** - The frequent references to Christ's "coming" (*parousia*) in Revelation and other New Testament apocalyptic texts (like Matthew 24) are interpreted as a spiritual or judicial coming of Christ in judgment against Jerusalem and the Roman Empire, rather than a future, literal, bodily return of Christ. For Full Preterism, even the final bodily resurrection is understood as having occurred spiritually by 70 A.D.
5. **The Identification of Babylon as Jerusalem or Rome** - Preterism typically presupposes that "Babylon the Great" (Revelation 17-18) refers either to apostate Jerusalem (due to its persecution of Christians and rejection of Christ) or to the Roman Empire (as the persecuting power). Thus, the destruction of Babylon corresponds to either the fall of Jerusalem or the eventual decline and fall of Rome.
6. **The Identification of the Beast and Antichrist as Historical Figures** - The Beast (Revelation 13) and the "man of lawlessness" (2 Thessalonians 2) are identified with specific historical figures, most commonly Nero Caesar or a succession of Roman emperors. The number 666 is often interpreted as a gematria (assignment of numerical values to the Greek letters) for Nero Caesar's name.
7. **The Time-Text Passages as Literal** - Preterism places significant emphasis on the numerous "time-text" passages in Revelation and other New Testament books that speak of events happening "soon," "shortly," "at hand," or occurring in "this generation" (e.g., Revelation 1:1, 3; 22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20; Matthew 24:34). These are understood literally, indicating that the fulfillment was indeed imminent for the first-century audience.
8. **The "New Heavens and New Earth" as the New Covenant Age** - For Full Preterism, the "new heavens and new earth" (Revelation 21 - 22) are not a future literal renovation of the cosmos, but rather a symbolic description of the spiritual realities of the New Covenant age and the establishment of the Church after the passing of the Old Covenant system.

Conclusion

There is absolutely nothing wrong with people studying the Book of Revelation and coming to a personal conclusion as to which interpretation seems most reasonable. In fact, people ought to study not just Revelation, but the entire Bible that way. But in doing so, there are a couple of important things to keep

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in mind. First, a decision on how to properly interpret the book should be done based on genuine study. It is not legitimate merely to accept a method simply because “that is the one I was first taught,” or “someone I highly respect believes that one.” Second, a person’s view of eschatology should NEVER be a test of fellowship within the body of Christ. Eschatology is an important doctrine, but it does not represent an essential belief in the Christian faith. When we get to heaven and find out the ultimate truth, we will also find that no one was excluded from heaven simply because they had a wrong view of how to interpret the book.

There is no doubt that the Book of Revelation makes for a fascinating study. And it is our hope that articles like this one stimulate your curiosity enough to cause you to dig deeper into its pages. At the same time, we also hope that you are able to keep your study of eschatology in perspective. It is ultimately critical that we always make the main thing the main thing.