



Research Article

Interpretation Approaches For Biblical Apocalyptic Literature: An Evaluation

ABSTRACT

Apocalyptic literature is one of the literature that has been subjected to numerous exegetical approaches due to the difficulty of understanding its content. This has resulted in misinterpretation among Christians. After discussing the available models for apocalyptic literature in this study, it was understood that the eclectic approach remains a preferable alternative for interpreting apocalyptic literature. Its steps must be utilized as a whole to yield intended results for a sound interpretation of apocalyptic literature for both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Keywords: Apocalyptic literature, Preterist Approach, Idealist Approach, Futuristic Approach, Historicist Approach, Propheticist Approach, Eclectic Approach, Revelation.

EMMANUEL FOSTER ASAMOAH¹

¹ Emmanuel Foster Asamoah, MPhil, Research Associate, Department of Religious Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana and District Pastor, The Church of Pentecost, Antoakrom, Kumasi, Ghana.
Email: emafosasamoah@aol.com

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INTRODUCTION

Ernst Käsemann opines that apocalyptic literature is “the mother of all Christian theology.”² However, this literature has suffered over the years due to the difficulty of understanding its content which has led overzealous and misguided interpreters to use it to support their erroneous viewpoints.³ While some understand the content of the writings on their face value i.e. literally, others approach it from other angles—all not giving a better interpretation of the book, leading to doctrinal conflict. There are those who pay less or no attention to the writings due to the nature of apocalyptic literature—its use of strange signs and symbols. This makes people shy away from pursuing apocalyptic studies.⁴ The writings of Daniel in the Old Testament, and Mark 13 with parallel writings in Matthew 24, Luke 17:22-37, and Luke 21 in the New Testament are some of the apocalyptic writings. Others are 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, 2 Corinthians 5:1-3, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, and the book of Revelation. However, in Revelation, the author tells us that “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy...” (Revelation 1:3). This emphasizes the importance of reading, hearing, and understanding the content of the book of Revelation, and by extension, apocalyptic writings. How can believers read and understand the book of Revelation? How can ministers of the gospel understand and preach from the book in order to receive the blessings thereof? It is in view of this that this paper is presented to help users of the Bible to approach apocalyptic literature in a preferable way.

APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

The term *apocalyptic* is derived from the Greek title ἀποκάλυψις (*apokalupsis*), which is used to mean “reveal,” “uncover,” “strip naked” or “unveil” something that has been hidden.⁵ Taylor defines apocalyptic literature as “a type of writing that adopts to a significant degree the outlook of *apocalypticism* and portrays those themes through vivid use of

² Käsemann, quoted in John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* Third Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 1.

³ Mitchell G. Reddish (ed.), *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 33-4.

⁴ Charles T. Fritsch, “The Message of Apocalypse for Today,” *Theology Today* (10) (1953): 357-66.

⁵ John W. Carter, *An Introduction to the Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature* (2007), accessed on July 11, 2018 from <https://www.biblicaltheology.com/Research/CarterJ08.pdf>.

symbolic language.”⁶ Thus, it includes all apocalyptic writings accepted as such and other related literature that have not been, as it were, accepted as such, but share some common features of the same genre.⁷ In effect, apocalyptic literature refers to writings that are accepted as such, which portray apocalypse, apocalypticism, and apocalyptic eschatology, through the use of languages that are in symbols and images, as well as other related literature that may not have been accepted as such but show common features of the same genre. M. G. Reddish quoting J. J. Collins also defines Apocalyptic literature as “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”⁸ That is to say, it is a form of revelatory literature in the form of a genre which is mediated by superhuman to human recipient, bringing out the truth in visions that are weird symbols and images shrouded in secrets and coded language foretelling disaster and destruction, which are temporal and spatial.

Apocalyptic literature involves descriptions of the end of the world and typically depicts grandiose, cataclysmic events. Though strange in their outlook when compared with other books of the Bible, they often speak of end-time events and the present situation to its hearers.

The apocalyptic literature emphasizes those ideas/themes that concern particularly the relation between Heaven and Earth, the rule of God over both, and his ultimate victory over evil.⁹ These ideas are not found in apocalyptic only, but are themes of the whole biblical testimony in different ways. The mere appearance of these themes, therefore, cannot provide readers of the Bible with an adequate definition of apocalyptic. It is their appearance in this distinctive literary form, arising from this distinctive prophetic movement, which makes apocalyptic what it is.¹⁰

Distinctive Feature of Apocalyptic Literature

The writers of the literature often claim a pseudonymous name of a past great and special hero as the author of their book, to possibly push forward for their acceptability.¹¹ The hero is often accompanied by a heavenly guide—say, an angel—who makes them become aware of things of interest and gives remarks on them.¹² The mode of communication is frequently in visions.¹³ Weird symbols and images shrouded in secrets and coded language are the content of these visions. They (visions) mostly carry uncertainties concerning the likelihood that the interference of humankind will improve the current condition.¹⁴ At the end of the vision is God who is seen to convey a disastrous end and beginning a restored situation.¹⁵ The concept of dualism; forces of evil against the forces of good, children of God against the forces of Satan, and righteous against unrighteous are realized in this literature. The focus of apocalyptic writings is to reassure and comfort the readers who are righteous minority.¹⁶ The anticipation of divine intervention in human history as a way to bring the present sufferings to an end is strongly felt in the literature. As a crisis document, apocalyptic is also used to demand protest.¹⁷ The eschatological style of writing that looks like prophecy is regarded as historical events taken and rewritten.¹⁸

Apocalyptic writings in the Bible

As indicated earlier, various writings in the Bible are apocalyptic in nature. The uniqueness of the writings demands a particular method to approach them for better understanding. Since not all the apocalyptic literature could be used and for consistency sake, the book of Revelation was used to explain the various approaches for apocalyptic writings. This does not make the book of Revelation to be superior to the other apocalyptic writings, but for convenience sake.

⁶ Richard A. Taylor, “Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature: An Exegetical Handbook” in *Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis*, Edited by David M. Howard Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publication, 2016), 34.

⁷ Taylor, “Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature: An Exegetical Handbook” in *Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis*, 34

⁸ Reddish (ed.), *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader*, 20.

⁹ Stephen Motyer, *Notes on Apocalyptic*, in Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology, accessed online from www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/apocalyptic/ on May 05, 2018.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 192; Reddish (ed.), *Apocalyptic Literature*, 192.

¹² Reddish (ed.), *Apocalyptic Literature*, 20-23.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, 192.

¹⁵ Reddish (ed.), *Apocalyptic Literature*, 20-23.

¹⁶ Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdsman Publishing Company, 1972), 34-61.

¹⁷ Reddish (ed.), *Apocalyptic Literature*, 27.

¹⁸ Ibid., 20-23.

INTERPRETATIVE APPROACHES FOR APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

Apocalyptic literature happens to be the most obscure and controversial books in the Bible.¹⁹ It is considered too difficult to understand.²⁰ Granted the original readers understood its message without too much confusion, in successive centuries erratic ideas about the book have led to diverse schools of six major interpretations, which are; Preterist, Historicist, Idealist, Futurist, Propheticist and Eclecticism models of interpretation.

Preterist Approach

The term “preterist” comes from the Latin term *praeter* meaning “past”.²¹ This model of apocalyptic interpretation takes as a fact that the book and its prophecies have been fulfilled in the original historical setting of the writer.²² Thus, it relates the content of the apocalypse to the original author and his hearers. This method places all the events in the locale of the Roman Empire in the first century as it figuratively records the conflict between the Kingdom of God represented by the Church and the World-power represented by Rome.²³ It denies any content of prophecy in the text, assuming that any eschatology it contains has already taken place shortly after the author, John, recorded them.²⁴ Proponents view all the imagery of the seals, trumpets, and vials indicated by the author as something not affecting the future.²⁵ Rather, the author was expressing his moral resentment concerning the abuses of his day when he spoke of future judgment.²⁶

This interpretation model originates from the belief and understanding in postmillennialism—a theological belief that Christ will return after the Millennial and will be witnessed by Christian prosperity and dominance.²⁷ Preterists hold that these prophecies were largely fulfilled towards the destruction of Jerusalem that occurred in 70 CE despite much evidence that the book was written in the era of Emperor Domitian.²⁸ This method sees revelation as a contemporary and imminent historical document.²⁹ Advocates of this position accept chapters 4–22 of the book of Revelation as events that happened in John’s own time. Liberal scholars, such as R. H. Charles and C. C. Torrey hold this view of interpretation.

This method has the advantage of helping interpreters to do a literal interpretation of statements made by the author. Again, the immediate relevance for the original recipients, that is, the seven churches of Asia Minor is easily demonstrated. Once more, this method reveals the parallel prophetic words of Jesus Christ in his Olivet discourse (Matt. 24; Mark 13; and Luke 21) in which the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple were foretold. Also, this method seems to synchronize with other non-Christian historical records of the first century, particularly the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.³⁰

However, it makes no allowance for any element of predictive prophecy—the physical reality of Christ’s second coming and the dreadful nature of the tribulation—and it also hinges entirely on Revelation having been written before 70 CE. Though some external and internal pieces of evidence of dating point to a date earlier than that.³¹

Idealist Approach

This view of interpretation regards the book’s symbolism as carrying certain eternal spiritual values about good and evil, without reference to actual historical events; hence, been also referred to as “Spiritualist” or “Symbolic”.³² Thus, it puts much emphasis on spiritual truths in apocalyptic writings, rather than focusing on either historical or future events. In simple terms, the method sees Revelation as not predictive of any historical events or foretelling of future events, but assymbolic, and spiritual in nature. It identifies the book of Revelation as theatrical engagements between good and evil, with the hope of an ultimate victory for the former. Hence, its interpretation as a symbolic picture of the continuing struggle between good and evil, and between Christianity and paganism.³³ The symbols are seen to be concepts, trends,

¹⁹ Kenneth L. Baker and John R. Kohlenberger III, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Abridged Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishers, 1994), 1125.

²⁰ Reddish (ed.), *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader*, 33.

²¹ Mark L. Hitchcock, “A Critique of the Preterist View of “Soon” And “Near” In Revelation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163 (Oct.–Dec. 2006): 467–78.

²² John Jusu (Ed.), “The Book of Revelation” in *African Study Bible* (Illinois: Oasis International Limited, 2016), 1903–4.

²³ Henry B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), lxxviii.

²⁴ Jusu (ed.), *The Book of Revelation*, 1903.

²⁵ Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, Revised (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 386.

²⁶ Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, 386.

²⁷ C. Marvin Pate, *Interpreting Revelation and Other Apocalyptic Literature: An Exegetical Handbook*, Edited by John D. Harvey (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2016), 142.

²⁸ Jusu (Ed.), *The Book of Revelation*, 1903; Emmanuel Foster Asamoah, *An Assessment of the translation of TO ALFA KAI TO W as Alfa ne Omega no in the Greek New Testament (Revelation 1:8) and Asante-Twi Twere Kronkron (Sacred Writings)*, Unpublished MPhil Thesis, (Kumasi: KNUST, 2019), 43–8.

²⁹ Baker and Kohlenberger III, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 1129.

³⁰ Jusu (ed.), *The Book of Revelation*, 1903.

³¹ Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, 386.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

or ideals.

According to Carter, proponents of this view reveal the ideal of swords and dragons in Revelation to mean God's word and Satan.³⁴ Likewise, the text about rainbows and green fields to mean God's promises and his mercy, and not as literal as written.³⁵ The foundation of this model is based on the belief in "Amillennial,"—the belief that there would not be a literal one-thousand-year reign of Christ on earth.³⁶

A merit of this method is that it takes its readers away from engaging in debatable aspects of its symbolism, and focuses its attention on the ethical and spiritual truth of Revelation.³⁷ It again makes the message of the book applicable to believers of any period of history, as well as making the book of Revelation relevant to its users at all times. This method also brings out the timeless truths regarding the battle between good and evil that continues throughout the church age.³⁸

A weakness for this method of interpretation is the consistent refusal to identify any of the images with specific future events, be it historical or eschatological, as well as the specific historical events that would soon take place (Rev. 1:1; 22:6). It keeps readers away from knowing the contextual and historical connections with the original audience in the first century that are addressed and prevents them from assigning meanings to images with future occurrences.

Futurist Approach

This method of interpreting Revelation envisions all the events recorded to have yet to occur.³⁹ This is possibly as a result of what the author is told to do in the early part of the book: "Write down what you [John, the author] have seen—both the things that are now happening [as at John's generation] and the things that will happen" (Rev. 1:19, NLT). The approach divides the book into two main parts—those that happened during John's time (chapters 1-3) and those that will happen at the end of age (chapters 4-22); but focuses much on the latter. Tenny believes that the first part that mentions the seven churches in Asia represent seven eras of church history that seek to bridge the gap from the apostolic age to the return of Christ.⁴⁰ Stamps *et. al.* consider chapters 4—22 as a prophecy concerning events in history that will occur only at the end of this age.⁴¹ The origin of this method is on the belief in "Premillennialism"—which holds that Christ's second coming and the subsequent establishment of the one-thousand rule on earth, will be preceded by a 7-year of intense hardship known as "Great Tribulation"^{42, 43} Thereafter, God's wrath will be poured on humankind.

On how to interpret the symbols and images used by the author to convey his thoughts, adherers believe that it could be done literally or symbolically, or a combination of both.⁴⁴ The method argues the author's usage of symbols as a description of images and events that are indescribable in known vocabulary.⁴⁵ Chapters 13 and 17 which talk about the beasts are identified with the future Antichrist who is believed to surface at the last moment of the world's history and will be defeated by Jesus Christ in His second coming to set his judgment rule and to begin his earthly millennial kingdom. This view was held by some earlier church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus, and expositors like J. A. Seiss, C. I. Scofield, A. C. Gaebelein, and H. A. Ironside.⁴⁶

By taking the book literally, this approach seems appealing to interpreters. It looks natural in some way, for the book identifies itself as "prophecy" (Rev. 1:3). However, giving a futuristic interpretation to the book of Revelation melts down the whole book as not applicable to any Christian of any time. This defeats God's word which speaks into all times and generations.

Historicist Approach

As the name points towards, this method of interpretation views the book as a prophetic prediction of the entire sweep of church history and its continuity from John's day to the end of the age.⁴⁷ In other words, this method holds that events referred to in the book are directly related to world events that can range from the time of the writer to the end of the age. It is a foretelling of all history from Jesus Christ's first appearance on earth until the end of the church age. But

³⁴ Carter, *An Introduction to the Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature*, 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Pate, *Interpreting Revelation and Other Apocalyptic Literature*, 144.

³⁷ Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, 386.

³⁸ Baker and Kohlenberger III, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 1130.

³⁹ Carter, *An Introduction to the Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature*, 5.

⁴⁰ Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, 387.

⁴¹ Stamps and Adams, *Life in the Spirit Study Bible*, 2038.

⁴² This is an estimated period from three and half years to seven years in length earmarked for intense suffering before the second coming of Jesus Christ.

⁴³ Pate, *Interpreting Revelation and Other Apocalyptic Literature: An Exegetical Handbook*, 146.

⁴⁴ Carter, *An Introduction to the Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature*, 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Baker and Kohlenberger III, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 1128.

⁴⁷ Donald C. Stamps and John Wesley Adams, *Life in the Spirit Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003), 2037.

according to Baker *et. al.*, this method began with Joachim of Floris when he allotted a day-year value to the 1,260 days of the Apocalypse as a prophecy of the events of Western history from the times of the apostles (in some varieties, from the Creation) until his own time.⁴⁸ This method seems to be predominantly used by many Bible believers down through history.

An advantage of this method is the apparent evidence of its legitimacy; as history has seemed to parallel some of the descriptions of events found within John's vision.⁴⁹

Yet, seeing the book as relating to future events would mean that the book had no meaning, if not little, to the original recipients—the seven churches of Asia Minor. Also, the lack of consensus as to the historical identification it entails makes it a challenge; hence enjoying less favor in today's world.

Propheticist Approach

This method of interpretation follows the interpretive standard used for Old Testament prophecy where the prophetic word often has both a shorter-term partial and long-range future fulfillments.⁵⁰ While the shorter-term partial fulfillment happens for the prophet's generation, the long-range future fulfillment is at the time of the Messiah's coming.⁵¹ Since the author is regarded as a prophet (Rev. 22:9), this approach sees the book of Revelation as containing "prophecy" (Rev. 1:3; 22:10, 18-19); having both prophetic meaning—both shorter-term partial and complete future fulfillment of events. In this regard, events that happened in the Roman Empire, in John's generation that have a relationship with the prophecies in the book are considered as the short-term partial fulfillment of the prophecy, with the complete fulfillment yet to occur at the end of the age.

The shortfall of this model is that it fails to recognize the activeness (or living [Hebrews 4:11, NKJV]) nature of God's word which is intended to revive and strengthen the believer at all times, including the present struggling, for it did not relate the content to the current situation of the believer who is struggling with evil.

Eclectic Approach

This method of interpretation is a mixed view of the preterist, idealist, and futurist models, in which some events may point to past, immediate, and future fulfillment.⁵² It draws from the strengths of the preterist, idealist, and futurist models of interpretation. While seeing that the book of Revelation and its prophecies have been fulfilled in the original historical setting of the writer, this method also holds that the symbolism of the book carries certain eternal spiritual values about good and evil, and have significance to the present life of the believer. In addition, all the events recorded in the book have future occurrences. The model interprets the book of Revelation by taking into consideration the background of the text which deals with past events, taking lessons from these past events to give strength and encouragement to the present-day Christians who are in struggle, and the giving of the futuristic happenings of these past events at the end of time. Some events that point to incidents in the first century are considered to have a present and future fulfillment.⁵³

This model overlooks on making no allowance for any element of predictive prophecy, the consistent refusal to identify any of the images with specific future events, and keeping readers away from knowing the context and historical connections with the original audience in the first century that are addressed. Also, it does not meltdown the whole book as not applicable to any Christian of any time, for it helps Bible users to interpret the symbols and images literally or symbolically, or a combination of both. Several scholars including Marvin Pate hold on to this view.

Evaluation of the Eclectic Approach

Eclectic model of interpretation happens to be better off when compared to the other interpretation approaches to the book of Revelation and by extension all apocalyptic literature due to its nature. While accepting that part of the Revelation is fulfilled in the first century, especially the early church's battle with Caesar's worship, the idealist part enables the student of the Bible to know the struggle between the good (themselves) and bad (the devil together with his allied forces) throughout history, and the victory assured them, which will be followed with God's wrath on the wicked. The preterist part of it takes into consideration past events and interpret them in the author's time, for all the events are seen to have happened at the author's era. This interpretation makes it easy for the book to speak into the current issues of the believer who is struggling with evil.

This model makes it possible for every portion of the book to be interpreted in three ways—preterist, idealist, and futuristic; referring to the past, present, and the future. This enables the believer to know the early church's struggle

⁴⁸ Baker and Kohlenberger III, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 1128.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1129.

⁵⁰ Stamps and Adams, *Life in the Spirit Study Bible*, 2037.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Jusu (ed.), *The Book of Revelation*, 1904.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

with authorities in their generation, its relevance for present-day Christians, and the future hope for Christians at the end of time.

It has lesser disadvantages if not none, for it uses all the approaches to explain a particular text. It brings out its relevance to the present and gives future hope of how evil will be dealt with at the end of times.

An example of Eclectic Approach for interpreting “666” in Revelation 13:18

1. Preterist Approach

The author’s hearers could understand what John wrote in those times for them; they used *gematria*, a technique used by Jews in antiquity for working out numerical value. By saying the number is a human number gives more clues to refer to a person than to a beast. The author also identified this person to a beast, clearly describing his wickedness which could be identified by those who are wise. This number refers to no other person than Emperor Nero whose name when transliterated from Greek letters into Hebrew, the Hebrew letters add up to 666. He was described by the author as a beast who meted evil against Christians in John’s days. The number also describes his evil activities. Six being one less than seven is the number of incompleteness and evil; 666 is its intensification.⁵⁴

2. Idealist Approach

This model interprets 666 as a symbol of individuals or groups of persons who rise against God or his children in the attempt of championing evil activities, but not a physical inscription of 666 on their head or hand. It sees persons with this mark as those not on the Lord’s part and are always in league with evil. For example, every generation will have an “antichrist” and a “mark of the beast”—any number of individuals, world leaders, or empires who exalt themselves against God are the “antichrist,” and those who follow those leaders receive his “mark”.⁵⁵

3. Futuristic Approach

666 is interpreted to be a mark that acts as a seal for the followers of the Antichrist whose activities will come during the Tribulation period. By then, Christians would have been raptured. The mark is placed in the hand or forehead to enable one to buy or sell anything.

The Eclectic model for interpreting “666” makes us know that John the author had someone in mind of whom he referred to. His way of describing Nero in that manner was to probably hide his identity from the “unwise” which would have landed him in trouble. Understanding the symbol in the present helps Christians know those against God and the manner to walk in order not to fall in their prey. It also gives the picture of how the end time will be, the releasing of the Antichrist, who will give marks for trading either on the forehead or hand of humankind.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to evaluate interpretation approaches for studying apocalyptic literature. Six methods—preterist, idealist, historicist, futuristic, propheticist, and eclecticism—were identified and discussed. After evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches, it became clear that the eclectic approach for interpretation has a greater advantage over the others due to minimal disadvantages it seems to possess. The Eclectic approach takes into consideration the text in the context of the original hearers, taking lessons from past events to give strength and encouragement to the present-day Christians who are in struggle, and giving of future happenings to these past events at the end of time. The model also makes the word of God active and living making Bible readers understand the past, and relating with their present and the future. In light of the different interpretations for apocalyptic literature discussed in this paper, the eclectic model remains a preferable alternative for interpreting apocalyptic literature. This approach must be utilized as a whole to yield intended results for a sound interpretation of apocalyptic literature for both the Old Testament and New Testament that uphold biblical text as authority above all else.

⁵⁴ Edward Champlin, “Nero Reconsidered,” *New England Review* (1990), (19)2 (1998): 97-108.

⁵⁵ Got Questions, *What is the idealist interpretation of the book of Revelation*, Accessed on May 1, 2020 from <https://www.gotquestions.org/idealist-Revelation.html>.

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