

Four Main Approaches to Interpreting the Book of Revelation: Studies in Eschatology

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In considering principles of interpreting the Revelation of Jesus Christ (1:1), there are four major schools of thought: Futurist, Historicist, Idealist, and Preterist.

FUTURIST

It is conceded by this school that the messages to the seven churches had contemporary relevance to them but also represents successive ages of church history up to “the rapture” of the Church. From chapter 4 all is future, being fulfilled in the great “Tribulation” (some say a period of 3^{1/2} years, others 7) immediately prior to the Second Coming of Christ. This view is classically ‘Dispensational’, although not all futurists would ascribe to it, instead, seeing ch. 4:1 signifying, not the “Rapture” but rather a change in John’s perspective to a heavenly vantage point. The seals are then representative of all history. However, the eschatological emphasis remains on the final consummation and is therefore futuristic.^[1] Also held is the view that upon Christ’s return the Davidic kingdom of Israel will be established for a period of 1,000 years – the Millennium – through which He will govern the world, after which follows the final judgement and the eternal state.^[2]

The difficulty of this school of interpretation is found in the fact that virtually every generation has believed that the return of Christ is immanent and that they, therefore, are *the* terminal generation. Hence, Revelation is being fulfilled in their lifetime. This leads to a “newspaper exegesis” that is highly arbitrary, searching for fulfilment in present-day events; in fact, to eisegesis, that is, reading into the text through the lens of current events—the opposite of exegesis which demands drawing out the meaning of the text from the text itself.

HISTORICIST

While the futurist interprets the book in view of a compressed period of time immediately prior to Christ’s return, the historicist interprets it as a forecast of the entire span of history, including his own time, up to the return of Christ and the last judgement. It sketches the history of Western Europe, including the popes, the Reformation, the French Revolution, and leaders, such as Charlemagne and Mussolini.^[3] Tenney comments that “the Historicist view is more literal than the Idealist view, but it’s advocates have never achieved unanimity on what the individual symbols mean.”^[4] In fact it could be said there are as many interpretations as there are commentators. The great divergence within this school would, as a result, tend to discredit it. The different symbols are seen to portray various historical events on which there is much disagreement. The locusts from the bottomless pit can be seen to represent the Mohammedan invasions, the beast representing the papacy, and the breaking of the seals, the fall of the Roman Empire.^[5] Like the futurist school, this school is also highly prone to a “newspaper exegesis” that is arbitrary. Furthermore, it must be asked as to why the Spirit of God would have a concern to provide the apostolic church with a detailed prediction of events lying in the remote future.^[6]

IDEALIST

This school holds “that Revelation is not to be taken in reference to any specific events at all but as an expression of those basic principles on which God acts throughout history.”^[7] Drawing on an allegorical hermeneutic, the idealist interprets Revelation as the endless struggle between good and evil without any consummation of the historical process. As Tenney points out, “its symbols cannot be identified as historical events either in the past or in the future; they are simply trends or ideals.”^[8] This means that the symbols are only illustrating or describing the underlying ethical and spiritual truth of Revelation unassociated with any actual historical occurrence or consummation. Judgement day is therefore, any time a great moral decision is made.^[9] Origen, for example, in the twenty-four elders sees “a symbol of the equality of Jew and Gentile within the Christian Church”; and, “in the many-coloured foundation stones of the City of God, the manifold grace of Apostolic teaching.”^[10] While John, himself, indicates that the book is written in ‘signs’ and symbols (1:1 NKJV), unless they are interpreted within the Bible’s own system of symbolism the interpretation becomes purely arbitrary. The biblical analogy must, then, be discovered. This school is helpful in encouraging the interpretation of symbols for their biblical meaning.

PRETERIST

According to this approach, Revelation was written for John's contemporaries, the first-century church; preterist, from Latin *praeter*, a prefix denoting that something is "past" or "beyond". Thus, the fulfilment of Revelation, including the Olivet Discourse (Mt 24), is already past, fulfilled in the first generation of believers, specifically in the Fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple in AD 70. The Revelation was, thus, a prophetic preparation for these imminent events.

Under intense pressure from both pagan and Jewish persecution, the Christians of John's day stood in great need of a sure hope that the gospel of Jesus Christ would ultimately prevail. This, the Revelation provides. David Chilton comments,

The purpose of the Revelation was to reveal Christ as Lord to a suffering Church. ...St John's primary concern in the writing of the Book of Revelation was just this very thing: to strengthen the Christian community in the faith of Jesus Christ's Lordship, to make them aware that the persecutions they suffered were integrally involved in the great war of history. ... The persecuted Christians were not at all forsaken by God. In reality they were in the front lines of the conflict of the ages, a conflict in which Jesus Christ had already won the decisive battle. Since His resurrection, all of history had been a 'mopping up' operation, wherein the implications of His work are gradually being implemented throughout the world. St John is realistic: the battles will not be easy, nor will Christians emerge unscathed. The war will often be bloody, and much of the blood will be our own. But Jesus is King, Jesus is Lord, and (as Luther says), 'He must win the battle.' The Son of God goes forth to war, conquering and to conquer, until He has put all enemies under His feet. The subject of the Revelation thus was contemporary; that is, it was written to and for Christians who were living at the time it was delivered.[\[11\]](#)

It is argued that a book sent to the churches of Asia Minor unveiling the events of a distant time would not only be unintelligible but also irrelevant to its original readers.[\[12\]](#) What comfort would such a predictive prophecy have for the audience of John's day who were under such duress and suffering, especially in view of the fact that even today there is such disagreement as to the correct interpretation of its historic fulfillment? If, therefore, the apostle is to ameliorate the suffering of their personal predicament, he must deal with the matters of contemporary history. Thus, from our vantage point, much of Revelation is history. The enemy of the early church was an apostate Israel wielding power through the pagan power-state, the Roman Empire. In view, then, of the hostility from these quarters, the greatest thing they needed to understand was the lordship of Christ as "ruler over the kings of the earth" (Rev 1:5). The Christians of the day were confronted by the brazen messianic statism of Rome and the Judaistic religion of backslidden Israel and were in desperate need of seeing the sovereignty of Jesus Christ exercised over the affairs of men. The divine genius of Revelation is that it is demonstrated to the original audience, through their own historical setting, that "the Kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ." (11:15). If the letter can be dated under Nero's reign (who died AD 68), which appears quite probable,[\[13\]](#) much of Revelation is fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem and the temple's destruction climaxing the Roman siege in AD 70; thus, closing the old order finally and decisively, establishing the new covenant church as the city of God, despite the diabolical forces of statism and apostate religion.

John writes that the book concerns "the things which must shortly take place" (1:1) and warns that "the time is near" (1:3). He repeats this again at the close of the book: "The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to his bond servants the things which must shortly take place" (22:6). The words "shortly" and "near" must be taken as they appear, without the misapplication of 2 Peter 3:8 ("one day with the Lord is as a thousand years").[\[14\]](#) In his commentary on Revelation, Swete takes the preterist approach:

Another important landmark for the guidance of the interpreter is to be found in the purpose of the book and the historical surroundings of its origin. The Apocalypse is cast in the form of a letter to certain Christian societies, and it opens with a detailed account of their conditions and circumstances. Only the most perverse ingenuity can treat the messages to the Seven Churches as directly prophetic. ... So far as the Apocalypticist reveals the future, he reveals it not with the view of exercising the ingenuity of remote generations, but for the practical purpose of inculcating those great lessons of trust in God, loyalty to the Christ-King, confidence in the ultimate triumph of righteousness, patience under adversity, and hope in the prospect of death, which were urgently needed by the Asian Churches, and will never be without meaning so long as the world lasts.[\[15\]](#)

To arrive at a biblical approach to this book, the nature of prophecy must also be explored. The burden of all the OT prophets was primarily ethical and moral, calling the people of God back to their roots in Yahweh and his law-word. The preterist, therefore, emphasizes this element of Revelation and refuses to major on the minor futuristic elements of the prophecy. Biblical prophecy is not primarily prognostication. It is a declaration and restatement of the Covenant in its ethical terms.[\[16\]](#)

Finally, it must be added that Hendriksen has developed what he calls the ‘progressive parallel’ method of interpreting Revelation, which is a working model of aspects of all four schools. According to his approach, the book divides into seven harmonious or parallel pictures of the gospel age, presenting in symbolic language the principles of action characteristic of divine, diabolical and human life. These parallel sections are arranged in an ascending and climactic order demonstrating an increasing eschatological intensity, culminating in a detailed description of the final judgement.[\[17\]](#)

In conclusion, it is possible to concede that each school has, to differing degrees, a contribution to the correct interpretation of the Revelation. It is imperative that it be considered, as does the preterist, in its historical context, addressing the issues of why it was written and for what purpose. The author also used a literary genre, coming out of his own culture and religious roots in the OT, with which the interpreter must be adequately acquainted for an accurate and biblical understanding of the book. With the idealist it must be agreed that behind the external events of history are underlying principles by which God operates; however, it is the end – the consummation – that gives meaning to the historical process in fulfilling his purpose. And this end is found in Christ who was revealed in the first-century as the *eschatos*: “the first and the last” (1:17). However, this does not deny the future and final consummation at the Second Coming of Christ, as argued by hyper-preterism. With the historicist, it must be conceded that God is at work in history and the Revelation provides the philosophical ground for this view. With the futurist, we must also agree that the thrust of the book is eschatological. History has and is moving to the climax of a final judgement by which the godly are vindicated and the unrighteous are condemned. Nevertheless, we argue that the eschatological fulfilment of Scripture is found in the incarnation of Christ and his ascension – in the first-century – to the active government of the universe. This is most accurately represented in the preterist approach to the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

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References

[\[1\]](#)R.H. Mounce, “The Book of Revelation”, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 42

[\[2\]](#)R.H. Gundry, “A Survey of the NT”, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Paternoster Press, 1970), p. 367

[\[3\]](#)Mounce, *op. cit.*, p. 42

[\[4\]](#)M.C. Tenney, “NT Survey”, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/IVP, 1953, 1983), p. 389

[\[5\]](#)R.H. Gundry, *op. cit.*, p. 366

[\[6\]](#)Mounce, *op. cit.*, p. 42

[\[7\]](#)Mounce, *op. cit.*, p. 43

[\[8\]](#)Tenney, *op. cit.*, p. 388

[\[9\]](#)*ibid*

[\[10\]](#)H.B. Swete, “Commentary on Revelation”, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977), p. ccviii

[\[11\]](#)D. Chilton, “The Days of Vengeance: an exposition of the Book of Revelation”, (Ft Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), p. 39, 40

[\[12\]](#)*ibid*, p 42; quoted from J. Stuart Russell, “The Parousia: A Critical Commentary into the NT Doctrine of the Lord’s Second Coming”, (Grand Rapids: Baker Bookhouse, 1887, 1983), p. 366

[13] Chilton, *op. cit.*, p. 4; see also Swete, *op. cit.*, p cii

[14] Chilton, *op. cit.*, p. 42

[15] Swete, *op. cit.*, p. ccxvii-ccxviii

[16] Chilton, *op. cit.*, p. 10, 11

[17] W. Hendriksen, "More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation", (Grand Rapids: Baker Bookhouse, 1939, 1967)

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