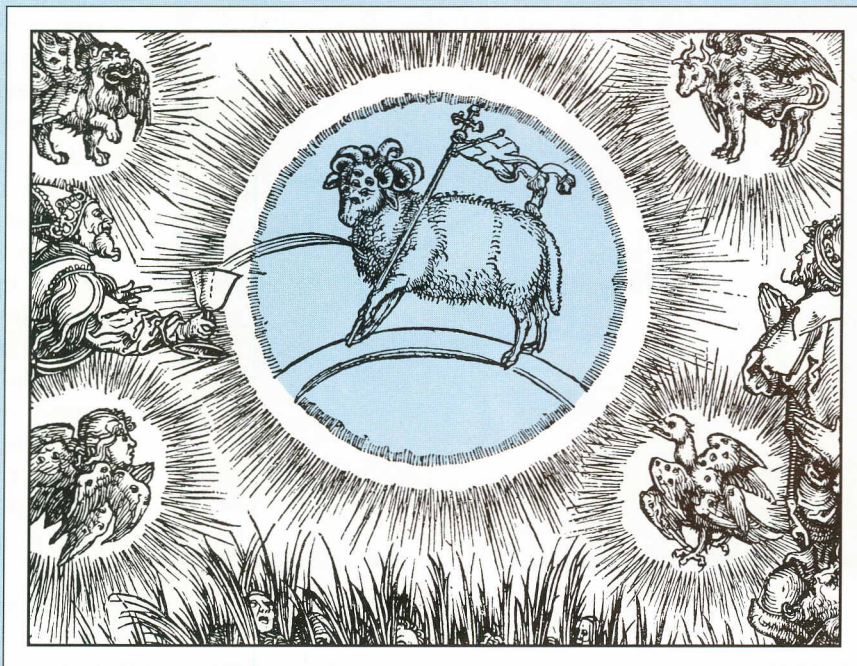


How to Understand the Book of Revelation: Different Schools of Interpretation

by Desmond Ford

Interpreting the Book of Revelation is hard. It is easier to have our thinking done for us by the various schools of interpretation. These schools are Idealism, Preterism, Futurism, and Historicism. However, with all the best tools, interpretation is still a spiritual matter.



Since the publication of Dr. Kai Arasola's book, The End of Historicism, many people are asking how to interpret the Book of Revelation. They ask, "If William Miller, good man that he was,

was so far-off in his historicist approach, what can we hope to do?" The following article gives us some useful tools on how to approach the Book of Revelation.

—Roy Gee

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veryone finds suspense hard to bear. Suspense is usually linked with fear and crippled energies.

This is why the human mind always seeks to avoid suspense. We try to find rest through the process of "pigeonholing."

"Pigeonholing" is mental shorthand. It's a principle of categorization. For most of us, it makes it easier to function. We can avoid the agonizing process of hard thinking.

We can't always guarantee that "pigeonholing" will help us function efficiently, because there are inher-

ent dangers in the practice. It often involves cutting off those protruding parts that don't fit our categories. Pigeonholing demands oversimplification.

The trouble is the simplifiers often become the mystifiers—and do great damage.



ing in the present, and will only be completely fulfilled in the future.

The Idealist school rejects all these three schools. The idealist says these three schools are too specific in interpreting prophetic symbols. The idealist calls for a more spiritual, philosophical, or poetic method of interpretation.

School of Idealism

The Idealism school of interpretation thinks of the Book of Revelation as an unfolding, in pictures, of great principles.

The purpose of the Book of Revelation is not to speak of specific events to come. It is only to teach spiritual truths that can be applied to (or derived from) all situations.

However, it's difficult to see a purpose in the Book of Revelation if it is only a pictorial portrayal of principles found elsewhere. If such principles have already been taught clearly elsewhere, why now present them in such a mysterious fashion?

Erdman asks,

... do not principles become even more impressive when embodied in events which the writer saw, and in still more momentous events which in prophetic visions he beheld on the horizon of a brighter era which was yet to dawn? (Charles R. Erdman, *Revelation*, p. 25)

Idealism's Inconsistencies

Absolute consistency is impossible for Idealism, as for all other schools. Revelation depicts Christ's second coming. If this is an actual historical event, why can't some of Revelation's portrayals of events before that also be historical?

It's impossible to divorce any book from its historical setting. This is doubly true for the Book of Revelation because it is the prime example of apocalyptic literature. This whole genre of writing deals with history. It is not interested in abstractions.

School of Preterism

Preterism is the most popular approach to the Book of Revelation among critical scholars.

This school is also known as the contemporary-historical, or *zeit-*

We Will Interpret

These psychological truths are relevant to how we interpret the Book of Revelation.

We can't rest in this world until we can interpret it. We can't ease our mental stress at interpreting the Book of Revelation unless we have a scheme, or method, of interpretation.

With each scheme, or method, comes built-in dangers. And the more rigid we are in clinging to a preconceived scheme, the more likely our conclusions will be false.

Herder asked,

Was there a key sent with the book Revelation, and has this been lost? Was it thrown into the sea of Patmos, or into the Maeander? Because no such key was sent,

interpreters have been forced to invent several. All operate with a measure of success. But none can unlock every door. Commentaries of all schools of persuasion are filled with evidence of forced locks.

This leaves inquiring minds with that suspense that attends all honest investigation.

Schools and Time

Most of the different schools of interpretation can be understood in the way their method explains **time**.

Preterists affirm that most of Revelation has its main reference to the past. Futurists say that most of the book is still to be fulfilled in the future. Historicists are sure that the book has been fulfilled partly in the past, is still fulfill-

geschichtlich in German. This school includes such brilliant exegetes as Beckwith, Swete, Ramsay, Simcox, Moses Stuart, and F.F. Bruce.

These writers understand the chief prophecies of the Book of Revelation as fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) and the fall of the Roman empire.

The strength of Preterism is that it is based on a considerable amount of truth. John's Book of Revelation **must** have had meaning for his first readers, his contemporaries.

What pastor would write a letter to his flock that had no immediate meaning to the flock?

Protest Against Preterism

The main defect of Preterism is that it seems to leave the church throughout the ages without specific guidance. Milligan writes:

... the book [Revelation] bears distinctly on its face that it is not confined to what the Seer beheld immediately around him. It treats of much that was to happen down to the very end of time, down to the full accomplishment of the Church's struggle, the full winning of her victory, and the full attainment of her rest. The Coming of the Lord so frequently referred to was certainly not exhausted in that destruction of the Jewish polity which we now know was to precede by many centuries the close of the present Dispensation; and the enemies of God described continue their opposition to the truth not merely to a point near at hand, when they are checked, but to the last, when they are overthrown finally and for ever. There is a progress in the book which is only stopped by the final advent of the Judge of the whole earth; and no just system of interpretation will permit us to regard the different plagues of the Seals, Trumpets, and the Bowls as symbolic only of wars which the Seer had beheld in their beginnings, and which he knew would end in the destruction of Jerusalem and Rome. Against the idea that St. John was limited to the events of his own day the tone and spirit of

the book are a continuous protest. Nor can it be pleaded that he combines these with those that were to happen at the last, leaving, for reasons unexplained by him, a long interval of time unnoticed. There is not trace of an interval. The lightnings flash and the thunders roll in close succession from the beginning to the end of the book. Judged even by its general character, the Apocalypse cannot be interpreted upon this modern system. (W. Milligan, *Lectures*, pages 141-142)

Preterism Ignores Future

We leave Preterism with the words of the prophet John echoing in our thoughts: "Come up here, and I will

show you what must take place after this" (Rev 4:1 NIV). Tenney wrote:

The weakness of this view [Preterism] is its terminal limitation. Obviously the judgments predicted have not been fulfilled, and however figuratively one may interpret the conquest of the world by Christ and the picture of a final judgment, neither has appeared yet. The preterist has an interpretation which has a firm pedestal, but which has no finished sculpture to place on it. (M.C. Tenney, *Revelation*, p. 144)

The School of Futurism

Futurism is at the other extreme of interpretation from Preterism.

Futurism believes that the Book of





Revelation, with the possible exception of the first three chapters, applies wholly to the future. Futurism points to the final tribulation of the church and is therefore chiefly for believers in the last few years of history. I say “chiefly” because no futurist denies the present value of the promises and principles found in the prophecy.

Todd says about the Apocalypse:

We are therefore to look for the fulfilment of its predictions neither in the early persecutions and heresies of the Church nor in the long series of centuries from the first preaching of the Gospel until now, but in the events which are immediately to precede, to accompany, and to follow the Second Advent of our Lord and Saviour.

(J.H. Todd, *Six Discourses on the Apocalypse*, quoted in W. Milligan, *Lectures*, p. 135)

Futurism and Literalism

Futurists tend to be literalists. They follow the rule that, “All prophetic statements are to be interpreted literally unless contextual evidence, or common sense, make that course impossible.” Most expositors (other than futurists) say this rule **should be reversed** when interpreting Revelation.

Objections to Futurism are similar to those against Preterism. Futurism makes the Book of Revelation of little value to the majority of Christians throughout most of history. Most Christians throughout history are ignored. Only those living in the last moments

of history are addressed. Futurism narrows Revelation’s perspective far too much.

The Church on Earth

A basic position taken by dispensational futurists is that after Revelation 4:1 the church is never seen on earth. They claim chapters 6 through 19 view only a Jewish remnant.

The answer to this is that the Book of Revelation represents the church in heaven **mystically**. This is because of the church’s union with her ascended Lord.

Other New Testament verses see the church in this mystical way (Eph 2:6; Php 3:20; Col 3:1). The church members who originally read these verses that the church was in heaven did so while physically on earth!

Revelation 7, 11, and 12 all picture the Christian church on earth. Admittedly these chapters do so under the symbolism of God’s ancient covenant people. However, any method of interpretation that takes the Jewish symbolism in Revelation literally makes nonsense of the book. The very stuff of apocalyptic literature is pictorial and emblematic, not literal.

The entire Book of Revelation is addressed to Christ’s servants, that is, to the Christian churches. Those slain for confessing the gospel of Christ are mentioned under the fifth seal. Revelation 8 speaks of the prayers of all saints. (“Saints” in New Testament usage means only Christians or angels.)

The School of Historicism

Historicism is the method of interpreting prophecy that says the Book of Revelation is a prophetic history of the church and the world from John’s time until the second advent.

The predictions given in the Book of Revelation are not just general movements in history, says Historicism. Even specific events are predicted. This includes the pinpointing of actual calendar dates.

Prominent historicists include Bengel, Mede, Newton, Elliott, and Guinness. L.E. Froom’s *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* is a splendid compendium of (and apologetic for) Historicism. It lists the names and expository

positions of hundreds of interpreters.

Today, only a small number of Protestant scholars are known as historicists. These scholars are found only among isolated groups. The best-known of such groups is the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

Three Problems of Historicism

M.C. Tenney has critiqued Historicism:

There are several objections to an interpretation of Revelation by a complete historicist view. First, the exact identification of the events of history with successive symbols have never been finally achieved, even after the events occurred. It is reasonable to suppose that during the lapse of 1900 years at least a portion of the predictions would have been fulfilled. If they were to be of value to the reader of Revelation as an indication of where he belonged in the total historical process, they should be identifiable with certainty. Such, however, seems not to be the case. The points of interpretation on which the majority of the doctrinal interpreters agree can be interpreted as trends quite as intelligibly as events. Since trends may be evident in any period of history, such prophecies do not point to any one era.

Second, historical interpreters have not satisfactorily explained why a general prophecy should be confined to the fortunes of the western Roman empire. The historical interpretation stresses chiefly the development of the church in western Europe; it takes little cognizance of the East. Yet in the first few centuries of the Christian era the church increased tremendously in the East, and spread as far as India and China, though it did not gain a permanent foothold in all sections of those countries. If a continual-historical method is to be followed, it must have a broader scope.

Third, if the continuous-historical method is valid, its predictions would have been sufficiently plain at the outset to give the reader some inkling of what they meant. If the fire and hail of the first trum-

pet (8:7) really did refer to the Gothic invasions, it is hard to see how any first-century Christian could have understood the prediction in such a way as to give it any value for his thinking. (M.C. Tenney, *Revelation*, pp. 138-139)

Historicism Useless for First Christians

Note also Hendriksen's complaint against a left-wing historicist book:

On my desk lies a recently published commentary on the Apocalypse. It is a very "interesting" book. It views the Apocalypse as kind of history-written-before-hand. It discovers in this last book of the Bible copious and detailed references to Napoleon, wars in the Balkans, the great European War of 1914-1918, the German emperor Wilhelm, Hitler, and Mussolini, the N.R.A., etc.,—our verdict? Such and kindred explanations must at once be dismissed.... Tell me, dear reader, what good would the suffering and severely persecuted Christians of John's day have derived from specific and detailed predictions concerning European conditions which would prevail some two thousand years later? (W. Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, p. 14)

This criticism is valid.

Historicism Ignores History's Cycles

Philosophers of the historicist school see that history is cyclical. (The Christian understands these cycles to take place within the straight line of history that reaches from Creation to the Second Coming.)

In all ages, God and Satan follow the principles appropriate to their characters. This is why history "repeats" itself, though in different degrees of development. The struggle between good and evil produces similar situations during different times in history.

If the strict historicist were to recognize this obvious cyclical nature of history, he would cease to be a strict historicist.

Historicism Too Extrabiblical

Another objection to Historicism is that it requires too much extrabiblical

knowledge. The Bible student must be dependent on historians such as Gibbon, D'Aubigne, or Wylie. Are Moses and the prophets, the Gospels and the epistles not sufficient?

Historicism Ignores Imminence

Our last criticism is the strongest. Historicists create careful schemes or charts of longtime calculations. But these schemes deny the plain evidence of the New Testament that it was never God's ideal that many centuries divide the two advents of Christ.

In one way or another the thought that the various events foretold in the book of Revelation were to take place in the not distant future is specifically stated seven times—"things which must shortly come to pass [or, "be done"]" (chs. 1:1; 22:6), "the time is at hand" (ch. 1:3), and "Behold [or, "surely"], I come quickly" (chs. 3:11; 22:7, 12, 29). Indirect references to the same idea appear in chs. 6:11; 12:2; 17:10. John's personal response to these declarations of the soon accomplishment of the divine purpose was, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (ch. 22:20). The concept of the imminence of the return of Jesus is thus both explicit and implicit throughout the book.

... At any one of various critical points in the history of this

world, divine justice could have proclaimed, "It is done!" and Christ might have come to inaugurate His righteous reign. Long ago He might have brought to fruition His plans for the redemption of this world. As God offered Israel the opportunity to prepare the way for His eternal kingdom upon the earth, when they settled the Promised Land and again when they returned from their exile in Babylon, so He gave the church of apostolic times the privilege of completing the gospel commission.

... although the fact of Christ's second coming is not based on any conditions, the repeated statement of Scripture that the coming was imminent were conditional on the response of the church to the challenge of finishing the work of the gospel in their generation. The Word of God, which centuries ago declared that the day of Christ was "at hand" (Rom. 13:12), has not failed. Jesus would have come very quickly if the church had done its appointed work....

Thus the statement of the angel of Revelation to John concerning the imminence of Christ's return to end the reign of sin are to be understood as an expression of divine will and purpose. God has never purposed to delay the consummation of the plan of salvation, but has ever expressed His will that the return of our Lord be not long delayed.

These statements are not to be understood in terms of the foreknowledge of God that there would be so long a delay, nor yet

in the light of the historical perspective of what has actually taken place in the history of the world since that time. (*SDA Bible Commentary*, IV, pp. 728-729)

I agree.

Not that God has been frustrated. Not for a moment. God always offers an ideal that is capable of realization by complete dependence on him. Sadly, this is rarely realized.

Thank God for All Schools!

What shall we conclude about the various schools of interpretation?

We thank God for all of them! But we practice eclecticism ourselves.

All schools have truth, as well as problems. We take the truth from each school.

We should see these various schools and approaches as fragmented reflections of the whole truth. Let's see again the necessity of "Affirming what is affirmed, but denying the denials."

Best Tools of Interpretation

We must always begin our exegesis (or interpreting) of Scripture by looking at the people and times addressed. To understand what was written to them we must understand what it meant to them.

Along with that, let us acknowledge the wisdom of God, whose years have no end and who has promised never to forsake the church. This is the One who declared through Amos:

"Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing
without revealing his plan
to his servants the prophets."
(Amos 3:7 NIV)

Surely such a One can be trusted

to keep his promise.

Because God never changes his righteous ways, he will be the same in all ages. God's works will ever reflect the same stamp, though it be in different stages of development.

The apotelesmatic principle sees successive fulfillments of prophecy. These fulfillments climax in the last days. It is probably the best interpretive tool of all when linked with the accepted grammatical, historical, and contextual principles of hermeneutics.

Spiritual Tool of Interpretation

Finally, it is true that only the pure in heart shall see God (Mt 5:8). It is true that the wicked shall do wickedly and none of the wicked shall understand (Dan 12:10).

Therefore, every exegete, every student of the Bible must ask, "How is it with my soul?"

We must ask, "Have I yet understood the everlasting gospel that changed our world in the first century? That changed it again in the sixteenth century? That it is the only factor that can transform our own sad and sorry time?"

Has this gospel transformed me?"

When it is well with my soul, I shall accept with equanimity whatever the times (in God's providence) shall unfold. I shall continually adjust my thinking with advancing light.

Even our inadequacies as prophetic interpreters will work together for good! They will lay us low in dependence before God, who alone is the Truth.

God alone can enable us to see truth more clearly.

God alone can strengthen us to walk in that truth. ❖