

4 Views of Revelation

The four historic approaches to interpreting the book of Revelation may be defined as follows: **(1)** There is the **Preterist** Interpretation of the Revelation, **(2)** the **Historicist** interpretation, **(3)** the **Idealist/Spiritual** interpretation, and last **(4)** the **Futurist** interpretation of the Revelation.

I. The Preterist Interpretation of the Book of Revelation

A. Description of this Approach

- The word "Preterist", if used as a *noun*, describes means one who is chiefly concerned with the past. When the word preterist is used as an *adjective*, it describes something that is focused on the past. A Preterist interpretation of the book of Revelation holds that most of the prophecies of the book have already been fulfilled, that they were fulfilled shortly after the writer, John, first penned them. In a sense, one might say that there is an element of futurism, in that it truly was future to John, but from our perspective, it relates to history. Hence, we might say, in a technical sense that preterism is *futuristic* to John, yet *historical* to us.

B. Examples of Interpretation from a Preterist Approach

- Preterists take literally the words of [Revelation 1:1](#), "*The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants **things which must shortly come to pass**; and he sent and signified [it] by his angel unto his servant John.*" They would say the same of [Revelation 22:10](#), which reads: "*And he said **to me**, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, **for the time is near.**"*"
- Some preterist interpreters believe that the prophecies of the book of Revelation were largely fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem that occurred in AD 70.

C. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Approach

1. Strengths:

- They are able to interpret literally, what seem to be quite clear statements about the soon fulfillment of prophecies as taught by the Lord Himself and His Apostles.
- The interpretation of the Revelation from a Preterist standpoint is able to demonstrate an immediate relevance for the original readers, i.e. the churches of Asia Minor. I cannot overstate this point. I believe that any interpretation of the Revelation has to have made sense to the original readers for whom the book was written.
- The interpretation of the Revelation by Preterists reflects many parallels with non-Christian historic records of the first century. Josephus was a Jewish man who was loyal to Rome. He was an eyewitness of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The book of Revelation can be shown to have foretold details that are strikingly parallel with Josephus' account.

- A Preterist interpretation of the book is able to show that it parallels the prophetic words of our Lord in His Olivet discourse in [Mark 13](#), [Matthew 24](#), and [Luke 21](#), in which He foretold of the soon destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple. Some have suggested that the fact that the Olivet discourse was not included in the Gospel of John because we have an expanded version of it here in the book of Revelation. In addition, as some suggest, the various outpourings of the wrath of God we see in the book are reminiscent of the curses of the covenant found in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. I will be exploring that element in a future work.

2. Weaknesses

- The primary weakness of the position is that it depends completely on Revelation having been written before AD 70.

D. The Current Standing of this Position

- The Preterist approach to interpretation of the Revelation is growing in number and influence.
- Do be aware that there has arisen in recent times a form of preterism, one that many call "heretical". This group believes that all prophetic elements **including the second coming** of Christ and the resurrection occurred with the events of 70 AD. This unorthodox view is also called "full preterism."

E. Proponents of the Early Date of Revelation

- In the 6th century, Andreas, the Greek commentator on Revelation who resided in Cappodocian Caesarea, had to take note of the fact that there was then no lack of interpreters who applied chapters 6 and 7 to the fall of Jerusalem.
- 17th century early date scholars: Alcasar (1614), Grotius (1644), and Hammond (1653), as well as in the meticulous and brilliant thinker who spanned the 17th and 18th centuries, Sir Isaac Newton (posthumously published 1732).
- The early date continued to be favored in important 18th century works by Abauzit (1730), Herder (1799), Herrenschneider (1786), and "the father of modern criticism," Eichhorn (1791).
- The 19th century blossomed with advocates for the early date of Revelation. Milton Terry asserted in 1898: "The preponderance of the best modern criticism is in favour of this view." The respected scholar, Guerike, in his 1843 Introduction to the New Testament, retracted his strenuous arguments for the late date and, based upon analysis of internal evidence in the book, advanced the Neronian date instead. In his 1845 commentary, Moses Stuart observed: "most of the recent commentators and critics have . . . placed the composition of the book at an earlier period, viz. before the destruction of Jerusalem"; according to him the Domitian date "is now out of question." The German scholar, Bleek, wrote in his Introduction to the New Testament (English translation 1874): "most modern scholars . . . place it before the destruction of Jerusalem."
- In 1872, James Glasgow defended the early date. In 1892 F.W. Farrar could say that "the whole force of modern criticism tends to correct the ancient error" of assigning Revelation to Domitian's reign.
- Gene Cook, Jr. verifies the following as early date proponents: John Lightfoot, Westcott, Hort, Philip Schaff, Harenbert, Hartwig, Michaelis, Tholuck, Clarke, Bishop Newton,

James MacDonald, Gieseler, Tilloch, Bause, Zullig, Swegler, De Wett, Lucke, Bohmer, Hilgenfeld, Mommsen, Ewald, Neander, Volkmar, Renan, Credner, Kernkel, B. Weiss, Reuss, Thiersch, Bunsen, Stier, Auberlen, Maurice, Niermeyer, Desprez, Aube, Keim, De Pressence, Cowles, Scholten, Beck, Dusterdiek, Simcox, S. Davidson, Beyschlag, Salmon, Hausrath, Plummer, Selwyn, J.V. Bartlet, C.A. Scott, Erbes, Edmundson, Henderson, and Kenneth Gentry.

II. Historicist Interpretation of the Book of Revelation

A. Description of this Approach

- A Historicist approach to interpretation of the Revelation sees the book prophesying events that transpire over the course of the entire church age. The book of Revelation, they would say, is a foretelling of all history from the time of the first coming of Christ unto the end of the age.

B. Examples of Interpreting Passages with an Historicist Approach

- [Revelation 6 & 7](#), record the Lord Jesus breaking seven seals that are on a scroll in His hand. As each seal is broken and the scroll is unwound, great events of judgment transpire on the earth. It was a common interpretation of the historical approach to view these chapters as predicting the sacking of the Roman Empire by invading barbarians. The fifth seal was viewed as signaling the rise of Mohammedanism and the sixth seal signaled the invasion of Rome by the Turks.
- Of course, the most significant interpretation that was promoted was that of [Revelation 13](#). There the Beast is declared the Roman papacy. The pope was universally held to be the antichrist by the Reformers who used the Historicist approach of interpreting the book of Revelation.

C. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Approach

1. Strengths

- This has been the most predominant approach to interpreting the Book of Revelation by Bible believers down through history. Essentially all of the Reformers and evangelical leaders used this approach until toward the end of the last century. Some notable persons who used this approach would include John Wycliffe, John Knox, William Tyndale, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Isaac Newton, John Hus, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, and Matthew Henry—a virtual who's who of great historical evangelical leaders.
- The apparent evidence of its legitimacy. History has seemed to parallel some of the descriptions of events found within Revelation.

2. Weaknesses

- If the book of Revelation were to be seen in this way, it would mean that the book had little or no meaning to the churches of Asia Minor to whom it was first written and sent.
- The subjective nature of assigning meaning to the symbols is unavoidable. No two, independent Historicists can agree on the meaning of the symbols from the text alone.

- There is the tendency to see the culmination of history in one's own time.
- There was a tendency to see the fulfillment only from Western European church history.

D. The Current Standing of this Position

- It is an approach that is not currently popular, although there has been a resurgence of a newer form of historicism recently that awaits the coronation of a future naming of the 3rd and final antichrist pope.

E. Proponents of the Historicist View

III. Idealist/Spiritual Interpretation of the Book of Revelation

A. Description of this Approach

- This method of interpreting the Revelation does not look for individual or specific fulfillment of the prophecies of the book; rather, the Revelation is perceived to contain spiritual lessons and principles that may find recurrent expression in history. What is being conveyed in the book of Revelation, it is claimed, is the reality of spiritual warfare that is always being waged. Major themes are to be seen in which the Christian may receive assistance and encouragement.

B. Examples of Interpreting Passages from an Idealist/Spiritual Approach

- The *beast rising out of the sea* (Rev. 13:1) signifies satanically-inspired political opposition to the church at any time in history, whether it is Rome toward the churches of Asia Minor, or the Soviet Union toward Christians during its power.
- The *beast from the land* (Rev. 13:1) signifies the opposition of pagan or corrupt religion to true Christianity.
- The *harlot* is representative of all apostate or heretical Christianity.

C. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Approach

1. Strengths

- In this way, the message of the book could be applicable to believers of any period of history.
- It circumvents the problem of having to identify specific fulfillment to individual visions.

2. Weaknesses

- The book of Revelation specifically says that it deals with specific historic events that would soon take place: [Rev 1:1](#), "*The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified [it] by his angel unto his servant John.*" And again, in [Rev 22:6](#), "*And he said unto me, these sayings [are] faithful and true: and the Lord God of the*

holy prophets sent his angel to show unto his servants the things which must shortly be done."

D. The Current Standing of this Position

- Most commentators, even those who use the other three approaches, resort to mixing this method with their own. One would have to use this method if the book of Revelation is to be used legitimately to encourage struggling and persecuted Christians in every historical period and situation.

E. Proponents of the Idealist View

- Kim Riddlebarger
- G. K. Beale
- Dennis Johnson

IV. Futurist Interpretation of the Book of Revelation

A. Description of this Approach

- The Futurist approach to interpretation of the Revelation sees the book prophesying events that are largely future to all but those living just before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The book of Revelation, they would say, is for the most part a foretelling of events that will not begin to transpire until the end of the current age shortly before the Second Coming of Christ.
- Most *futurists* are dispensationalists, but not all of them are. Because most futurists are dispensational, my comments will reflect their position. By the way, this was a position that I held tenaciously for a number of years. It was the official position of Talbot Seminary where I attended, and was one of the 12 Articles of Faith in the Evangelical Free Church where I both pastored and sat on the ministerial licensure board. Ultimately, it is a position of which I am most familiar.
- Futurists divide the book's contents based on their understanding of [Revelation 1:19](#), in which John is told: "*Write the things (1) which thou hast seen, and (2) the things which are, and (3) the things which shall be hereafter.*" They go on to say that [Revelation 1](#) records the things that John had already seen. [Revelation 2 & 3](#), that contain the seven letters to the seven churches, are "*the things that are.*" "*The things which shall be hereafter*" begins with 4:1 and continues to the end of the book. Their view holds that the book was written so that the prophesied events are recorded in chronological order.

B. Examples of Interpreting Passages from a Futurist Approach

- [Revelation 4:1](#) is viewed as a future rapture of the church. The bulk of the Revelation from chapter 4 onwards speaks of a final seven year tribulation period from which Christians have escaped. This time will culminate in the Second Coming of Christ in which He will judge the world, set up an earthly 1,000 year kingdom on earth in which a renewed state of Israel will be pre-eminent.

- Virtually all the details of the book are to be taken literally. There will be hail storms in which hail stones will weigh 100 pounds. One third of the oceans will turn to blood. A third of the fish will die and a third of the ships will sink. There will be literal locusts that sting like literal scorpions. There will be required at sometime in the future a literal mark on every forehead or hand of everyone that desires to buy anything. Now, I will not say that these things will not happen, but this position says that **it must happen in just this way**. There is no possibility that these things may have been symbolic of things that the first readers may have encountered under Roman persecution. These things are all seen to be yet future.

C. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Approach

1. Strengths

- It is currently the most widely held approach of **modern** evangelicals. (Define)
- The position claims to take the book "literally", something that is certainly desirable when interpreting the Bible.

2. Weaknesses

- The futurist interpretation of the Revelation renders the bulk of the book as inapplicable to any Christian of any time. Since apart from chapters 1-3 the book records events after the church is removed, not only do the details of the book have no direct relevance for the churches of Asia Minor at the end of the first century, they have no relevance for us Christians as well, for according to their understanding we will be gone.
- There is the great danger of subjective interpretation. One can never refute even the most bizarre futurist assertions of what the book predicts will happen. Futurists over the past 150 years have been able to give interpretations of the book in the light of their own current events. The book is claimed to have prophesied Huey helicopters, a red Chinese army of 200,000,000 in number, the attack of Israel by Russia, which is made possible, by the way, of Russia recently building a dam at the headwaters of the Euphrates River. The book is said to prophesy the revival of the Roman Empire in the modern European Common Market. In this book, they claim, we can read of the prophecy of the computer chip, satellite technology, television, and a world-wide cashless economy. The Antichrist has been variously identified as Napoleon, Hitler, Mussolini, John Kennedy, Henry Kissinger, and Ronald Reagan.
- There is a refusal to see that any of the details of the Revelation may have already been fulfilled in the lives of the original recipients of the book. Everything is presumed unquestionably to be unfulfilled yet.
- Some reject the futurist approach on the basis of its origin. It was first introduced in 1585 by a Spanish Jesuit, Francisco Ribera. He originated the approach of placing the Antichrist as a future end-time individual who would yet rise to power. He did this in order to refute the Historicist teaching of the Reformers that the Pope was the Antichrist.
- From a theological perspective, there are both Christological and Covenantal issues that are unable to be reconciled.

D. The Current Standing of this Position

- This method is what drives the end-time book selling craze. There are hundreds of Christian books in print that each give their scenario of current events that "were predicted" in the Revelation. This position will remain the most dominant position for a long time to come because it has great popular appeal, it certainly lines the coffers, and it is supported by the majority of the most popular (modern) evangelical speakers and writers.

E. Proponents of the Futurist View

- John MacArthur, Robert Thomas, John Walvoord, Ed Hindson, Thomas Ice, Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye

V. Concluding Remarks; Interpretive Principles

- A.** A legitimate method of interpretation must be one that arrives at conclusions that the original recipients of the letter would have found understandable and applicable.
- B.** There should be an avoidance of subjective assigning of meaning to the symbols when one interprets the Revelation. One should be very cautious and skeptical before embracing someone's teaching about this book.
- C.** No one position is consistently "literal." And by the way, literal does not necessarily mean material. Some say (the Futurists) that they are the only position that interprets this book of the Bible "literally." Although they may take the book more literally than the other positions, they, too, do their spiritualizing (e.g. their teaching that Rev. 4:1 teaches the rapture of the church). In fact, they may be charged with hyper-literalization--taking literal what was intended by God to be understood symbolically.
- D.** Ultimately, however, all of the positions agree that the book of Revelation displays God as the Sovereign over all of His creation and that He has given the task to His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to bring history to its consummation. Through the power of God and the Second Coming of Christ, God's people will one day experience their full redemption. They will be vindicated for their faith and rewarded for their suffering. They will enjoy eternal life in an ideal new heavens and earth. On the other hand, all those who are unbelievers and are opposed to God's rule over them will suffer their fate of eternal punishment and banishment from God and His people. All interpreters agree that this is the teaching of this book.