

# **The Four Major Schools of Prophetic Interpretation**

If we are to have any success in being free of the inertia of preconceived ideas, if we hope to be aware of our own hidden biases, we must first try to identify them. It is only as we become aware of the broad influences that have shaped our earlier studies that we can begin to recognize the subtle (and not so subtle) gravity they still exert on our thought processes.

Over the centuries since the Revelation was penned, four major schools of thought have developed as to how to interpret its prophecies. Each of these four major perspectives still holds great influence, though not all to the same degree. The brief discussion included here will not make you an expert on these opinions, or explain how these differing interpretive systems handle the various prophecies. If you are interested in that level of detail, there are a number of fine resource materials available.<sup>1</sup> However, a general knowledge of these viewpoints will be helpful to you.

The four major interpretive schools are:

1. Preterist
2. Historicist
3. Idealist (Symbolic)
4. Futurist

## **Preterist**

The Preterist position is that most – if not all – of the prophecies of The Book of Revelation were fulfilled in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. The Preterist believes that the context of the prophecies of Revelation must be determined in accordance to the *stated intent* of the book; and will argue that the intent of the book is given both at the beginning of the book (Rev. 1:1) and at the end of the book (Rev. 22:6), where it is clearly stated that the prophecies in the book “must soon take place.” The Preterist notes the many similarities between the prophecies of Revelation and those given by Jesus in Matthew 24 – events that Jesus said would occur during the lifetime of those present that day (Matthew 24:34). The Preterist believes that any attempt to put the prophecies of Revelation into some far-off, distant future is tantamount to calling Jesus a liar.

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<sup>1</sup> Two such books are:

Stan Campbell and James S. Bell Jr., *The Complete Idiot's Guide to The Book of Revelation* (Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books, 2002)

Steve Gregg, ed., *Revelation – Four Views – A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997)

In the Preterist's view the Great Tribulation is all about (and only about) the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D. The Antichrist is Nero, and the "end of the world" is better understood as the "end of the age."

As to whether or not **any** of the prophecies remain to be fulfilled is the dividing point of contention between the "orthodox" Preterist and the "modified" Preterist. The modified view holds that the Second Coming is literal and is yet to happen, while the purist believes that the coming of Christ has already taken place (figuratively) through the growing Kingdom of Grace as advanced by the Church.

A number of years ago I had the privilege of attending a prophecy conference in Kirkland, Washington, that was hosted by a group of Preterists. This was the first time I had ever gone to a Preterist seminar, and I was surprised to see how much time was spent lobbing "heretic bombs" at the modified Preterists who were "willfully and deliberately ignorant of God's Word." Strangely, I was comforted by the realization that Adventists aren't the only ones who fight to spiritual death over the meaning of prophecy!

The Preterist must argue for an early date for the writing of Revelation. While most Christian scholars believe it was written around 95 A.D. during the reign of Domitian, the Preterist holds that it was written in Nero's reign, before 70 A.D. This is needed if the "tribulation" prophecies look forward to the destruction of Jerusalem. (It really isn't much of a prophecy if it was written after the events!)

Preterists argue that the earliest Christians were Preterists. It is almost certain that they interpreted the prophecies of Matthew 24 as having a primary focus on their age – and such was Christ's stated intent. Whether they saw in those events the shadowy shapes of greater, distant events is unclear.

It was not, however, until the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (about the same time the King James Bible was published) that Catholic scholars formalized the Preterist view.

## **Historicist**

The traditional Historicist view is that the major storylines of Revelation point to major events in the unfolding story of the Christian Church, from the time of the Apostles until the return of Jesus. This view maintains that the 7 Churches, the 7 Seals, the 7 Trumpets and the 7 Vials (plagues) each cover the same time span, but that each focuses on a different aspect of the Church's experience.

As with the Preterist view, Historicism is an ancient perspective. It was first suggested in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, although it took another 600 years to gain respectability. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century (A.D. 1500) the Historicist method had gained widespread popularity among the Protestant reformers. The Historicist method allowed them to identify the Papacy as the Beast of Revelation 13 and the Harlot of Revelation 17. They saw themselves in the persecuted but faithful followers clinging to the faith of Jesus.

For centuries Historicism was the dominant accepted viewpoint among Protestants. Even Sir Isaac Newton wrote extensively about the Historicist applications of Revelation's prophecies. He was among the first to assign a Historicist meaning to the 7 Churches, although in his thinking they only spanned the time up to the fall of the Roman Empire.

And here lies one of the great difficulties of the Historicist view – that while the method of Historicism has been rigidly applied by thousands of adherents over the centuries, it has failed to produce a broad consensus as to what the prophecies mean.

The Seventh-day Adventist teaching departs from classic Historicism in assigning a future meaning to the 7 Plagues, and argues that these are literal events (even if expressed symbolically) that will occur shortly before the return of Christ.

While once the dominant viewpoint among Protestants, the Historicist view has largely been abandoned in favor of the Futurist view discussed below.

### **Idealist (or Symbolic)**

The Idealist school of thought is known by a number of different names and is built around one central concept: that the prophecies of Revelation do not point to any specific thing! Rather, they are to be seen as highly symbolic stories from which we can draw the spiritual lessons needed for our own Christian experience. The Idealist believes that we should stop trying to tie the prophecies of Revelation to specific events in either the past or the future, and notes that such efforts have always generated more heat than light.

Since the prophecies are merely seen as spiritual parables, any two people can come away from the same story with two completely different spiritual lessons.

### **Futurist**

The Futurist view places the major events of Revelation – the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues – in the future. These events comprise the 7-year Tribulation, which is also seen in the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel 9. Most Futurists believe these horrific events will befall the impenitent sinners remaining on the earth after the saints have been taken to heaven in a secret “rapture”.

Most Futurists anticipate the arrival of the Antichrist, a charismatic world leader (probably of European ancestry) who will bring peace to the Middle East and restore the Jewish sacrificial services in a rebuilt temple. They expect a literal return of Christ, who will come to earth just as the nations of the world are about to stage an attack of annihilation against Jerusalem. He will defeat the assembled armies and establish the millennial kingdom here on earth.

Just as with the other viewpoints, there are various factions within the Futurist school of thought. For example, not all believe the Rapture will come at the beginning of the Tribulation – some place it at the end, whereas others place it at the midpoint.

Among the four major schools of thought, this view is the new-comer, rising out of the work of John Darby and the Plymouth Brethren in the 1830's. In spite of being the newest perspective it is also the most widely held, having been popularized in the 1970's by Hal Lindsey's work *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, and more recently in the overwhelmingly popular *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.<sup>2</sup>

## **Strengths & Weaknesses**

We have just briefly looked at four main ways that the prophecies of Revelation are interpreted. Each of these positions have been rigorously studied, endlessly expanded and vigorously attacked. Each of these positions is the *only* correct view according to its adherents, and each is the mark of deliberate heresy according to its detractors.

It is not our role to try to tear down any of these views. In fact, we can see that each of these views was developed and fostered by serious students of scripture, each trying his best to bring meaning out of the riddles of Revelation. Each person brought his own background and experiences to this study, and each was convinced of the legitimacy of the conclusions they produced.

To be fair, each of these viewpoints has its strong points.

The **Preterist** is correct in stating that the early Christians thought that all of Matthew 24, all of Luke 21, and all of Revelation were to be fulfilled in their time. Even Peter and Paul<sup>3</sup> had this expectation and wrote of it. Jesus obviously intended for them to understand the prophecies that pointed to the destruction of Jerusalem in their lifetimes.

The **Historicist** looks at the same passages and sees the sovereign control of God over the affairs of men and nations. And God is indeed sovereign.

The **Idealist** sees spiritual lessons and encouragement in the language of Revelation. Those lessons are surely there, and we are made poorer if we refuse to see them.

The **Futurist** sees the final drama of man's days as God brings sin and sinners to an end. And most of us cannot doubt that Revelation is intended to illuminate the path ahead of us.

But each of these viewpoints leaves unanswered questions.

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<sup>2</sup> As of this writing, the *Left Behind* series has sold over 65 million copies!

<sup>3</sup> In 1 Peter 4:7 Peter confidently declared that "the end of all things is at hand." In 1 Thes. 4:17 Paul included himself in those who would be alive and awaiting Christ's return.

I would ask the **Preterist**, “Isn’t it possible that God has designed these prophecies to point to more than one event? Is it conceivable that God used the destruction of Jerusalem as a template to talk about the far greater destruction that awaits the entire planet?”

I would ask the **Historicist**, “Why has the Historicist method never produced a sure consensus as to the meanings of specific elements of prophecy? Why are we unsure about so many elements of the ‘sure word’ of prophecy?”

I would ask the **Idealist**, “How are we to know when a prophecy is fulfilled if it points to nothing at all?”

I would ask the **Futurist**, “How can you build a future model based on suppositions about the nation Israel when the New Testament describes the Christian Church as Israel? How can you give God’s people a “rapture pass” when Revelation shows God’s people enduring the trials of the tribulation?”

## **Deeper Concerns**

On a different level than the practical questions listed above, I have four deeper concerns about these “schools” of thought.

1. I am concerned that these viewpoints are not just viewpoints. A “viewpoint” implies a way of looking at something *with the understanding that you can also look at it from other viewpoints*. A person can easily move to various points on the rim of the Grand Canyon in order to broaden his view of the canyon. This is not so with these interpretive schools of teaching. Instead of viewpoints, they produce **paradigms** – mental filters through which all subsequent study is processed. The more a person studies from any of these perspectives, the more locked-in he is to seeing things in only that way.
2. I am concerned that these prophetic positions have given Christians yet another way to differentiate themselves from other Christians. Each group – convinced of their understanding of God’s Word – has felt free to ridicule the other, and in some cases even denounce the others as heretics and fools. The Book of Revelation has become a club freely wielded to crush those who disagree about its meaning.
3. I am concerned that each group sees itself as understanding the totality of God’s truth. A story is told in which Satan is taking a walk with one of his cohorts. They watch as the person ahead of them on the path stops to pick up something shiny and bright. The friend asks the devil, “Aren’t you worried? That man just discovered a piece of the Truth?” Satan replied, “No, I’ll just get him to think that he discovered the whole Truth.” While we may laugh at such a story, this is exactly the position in which we place ourselves when we think that we understand everything and fail to consider that God may have something more to teach us.

4. Most of all, I am concerned that each of these four schools of thought teaches that much of Revelation does not apply directly to today's Christian. The Preterist and the Historicist each teaches that much (or even all) of the book was fulfilled in centuries past – it's merely history to us. The Idealist says that the prophecies can mean anything at all – and can be ignored insofar as speaking to upcoming events. The Futurist says that most of the book is yet ahead of us but that the Christian need not worry about it because he won't be here. These events will happen to someone else.

While their teachings differ, each of the major interpretive systems minimizes the importance of this book to today's Christian. It is our view that the events depicted in the Book of Revelation are about to unfold before us in stark detail and that knowledge of this book is critically important to today's Christian.

### **Thoughts on changing paradigms**

When you encourage people to look at things from a new perspective, you'd better expect some resistance. You will encounter people who have had a long-term interest in Revelation and who have firmly established views about its meanings. What you say may conflict with what they already believe to be true. In essence, you are asking them to reevaluate an entire mental framework that they trust and replace it with a new one. So you can expect that there will be some *intellectual* resistance. But that is just the tip of the iceberg!

I found this out on my own journey of discovery. I held very traditional Seventh-day Adventist Historicist views because that is what I was taught. I developed a paradigm (a mental filter) through which I viewed Revelation. I also *integrated* that paradigm into my idea of spiritual truth and firmly believed that my walk with God *validated* my entire experience, including my doctrinal views and interpretive methods. (Humans are pretty good at integration and validation!)

You can imagine then the explosion of resistance I felt when someone first suggested other ways of understanding Revelation. When Bible study and prayer drove me to similar conclusions, I recoiled. You see, I found it threatening to question the validity of my deeply held positions because they had been so fully woven into the fabric of my spiritual experience. I feared that to question anything that I had held to be true might lead me to question my entire walk with God. Being a coward by nature, it took me a number of years to gradually move away from *dependence on the correctness of my theology* into a willingness to follow truth as it unfolded.

I share this story with you not to point to the uniqueness of my spiritual journey, but rather to point out that my story isn't unique **at all**. Remember this when someone disagrees with you! We can afford to be gracious to others as they confront the same fear and uncertainty that we have had years to deal with. Remember that you aren't just challenging their mental framework of how they view prophecy; you are putting forth ideas that (in their view) conflict with the very legitimacy of their spiritual experience.

Studies indicate that the average person must hear a new point of view at least six times before he is willing to consider its validity with some level of neutrality. Only the Holy Spirit can change that.

Remember:

- It is not our job to be the Holy Spirit.
- It is not our job to argue or persuade.
- It is not a reflection on us if people reject what we share. (Look how they reacted to Jesus.)
- Our job is merely to sow the seed.