

A Review of four methods of Interpretation of the Apocalypse

31st August 2023

In our studies thus far, we have begun another review of the Revelation with some generic points about the importance of this subject and its relevance for those alive today. God willing, we hope to revert to a section-by-section study of this significant book, if not an actual verse by verse consideration.

There are different approaches which people adopt when looking at trying to understand this divine work. These should not all be regarded as viable alternatives but as competing structures upon which a fuller interpretation could be constructed. All contain visions of future glory which speak of the time when Jesus shall return to the earth to set up the Kingdom of God in the Holy Land. In addition to these details the anticipation of Christ's second coming is dealt with in some measure, and it is the way in these passages should be understood is in question.

The Poetic or Lesson based Interpretation.

In this approach there is no historical consideration but instead the principles and practicalities of the content are applied to various times in history without any specified period of fulfilment by God but more by way of providing a presiding value of lessons suitable to teach and inform every and any age of mankind. There is therefore no specific historical context for this either past present or future.

This is the least more popular view but is adopted perhaps by those most anxious to avoid dispute and the establishing of particular insistence on interpretation. In this respect we may regard it as the compromise interpretation for those who merely wish to avoid controversy and anxious to keep the peace between all as far as possible. Determining Truth does not seem to be high on the agenda of those who embrace this view.

There are various ways to counter such an approach but internally in the Apocalypse, the most striking evidence against this is the way the book is constructed with an unfolding pattern of sevens. The seven Seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven vials are all detailed by the use of ordinal numbers, first second third fourth fifth sixth seventh which by definition require an order of outworking especially when it is remembered that the Spirit says, *“The second woe is past and behold the third woe comes quickly”* Rev 11v14.

Cause and effect are also detailed in the text, *“Neither repented they of their murders, nor of their sorceries nor of their fornication, nor of their theft”* Rev 9v21. The use of this language requires the reader to see that the prophecy instigated a specific response which demonstrates God’s omniscience. This is not possible in an ambiguous setting.

The Futurist Interpretation

The doctrine here is that just before the return of Christ, there is a time of great tribulation which is still future to today, in a similar way to the popular idea of the seven-year tribulation and the rapture. The details are not agreed upon by all those who espouse this approach, but they look for the end-time as the primary period of prophetic consideration.

Unlike the poetic approach it is set in a specific time period. However, because this is still future it is unverifiable until it happens, that means as a prophetic search light it is useless for the vast majority of people during the times of the gentiles. If only future, it is also unhelpful to those who will live through it as they will be unable to look back on it and point out to others the power of God’s word to impress the mind with fulfilled Bible prophecy.

In 2 Peter 1v19 we are told *“We also have a more sure word of prophecy, where unto ye do well to take heed as unto a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawn and the day star arise in*

your hearts". By relegating the Apocalypse to the future, the very purpose of Biblical prophecy is frustrated!

How does a believer in the future fulfilment of the Apocalypse use the Book? It seems to be another frighten tactic to scare people into choosing Christ to avoid the horrors that will otherwise descend upon them, but that is a trick that can only work if people believe Jesus is returning in their lifetime, which for the vast majority of people who have lived through the times of the gentiles is just not relevant.

The futurist view, also side steps the important element of the antichrist. If this adversary, this satan, is not yet revealed then it is wrong to seek to apply it today. However, other passages of the Bible make it clear that this "*mystery of iniquity doth already work*" (in John's Day) 2 Thessalonians 2v7-12. Postponing it until an unknown future distracts from the understanding that the "*man of sin*" is a system that occupies the long period between Christ's advents.

The Praeterist Interpretation

The concept here is that the Book of Revelation covers that period of history dealing with the end of the Jewish commonwealth in AD70 and the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. It has therefore all been fulfilled in the past.

This view is perhaps the most niche as requires a familiarity with prior history in great depth. It is not possible to fit in all the detail of the Apocalypse without being able to apply these to the times under consideration. This elevates not just history in general but a specific history about a particular period above all else.

The usual period centred upon is that of the fall of Jerusalem and the ultimate diaspora of the Jewish people. Whilst no person familiar with the Bible will doubt the importance of the subject being able to apply specific details of what Christ said to a six-year rebellion is a tangent that again has no effect upon people unless they are familiar with that period in great detail.

Applying the interpretation of the vial poured out upon the sea to a limited naval engagement on the Sea of Galilee in AD69 no one has otherwise heard of, is niche and hardly faith affirming for succeeding generations!

It also implants the erroneous idea that the conclusion of the prophecy has something to do with the establishment of the Kingdom, which is dubious to say the least, as it was actually possible for the Kingdom to be set up with the Jews still in the land if their lack of faith had not stopped them from embracing it, but God knew that they were never going to do that. The so-called Jewish war (Josephus) was not the reason the Kingdom was delayed, nor was it the reason why the Kingdom had to come again, it was already ensured as a punishment for their rejection of Christ and was not therefore a separate cause for prophetic truth to be determined, which would be required if this interpretation was correct.

The antichrist under this scheme is Nero, or Vespasian or which ever Roman Emperor that is attributed the responsibility of suppressing the Jews. This avoids the religious element of this evil power relying only on political power and its opposition not to Jews but to the saints themselves, Revelation 13v7.

This idea then is wrong on a whole number of levels.

The Continual Historic Interpretation

The basic idea behind this structure is that between the two missions of the Lord Jesus Christ there is a continual unfolding of the divine plan during the times of the gentiles, covering some two thousand years. Accordingly, every age has a prophetic blanket stretching over it and it is possible to look forward and backward to place the era you love through in a scriptural context.

This is the way that the interpretation of the Apocalypse makes sense. It caters for every generation and gives each a relevance in the divine unfolding of God's plan.

In Daniel 8 there is the expectation of a long period of time in order for the sanctuary to be cleansed, 2300 days. This is not literal days as that would mean that the sanctuary would have been cleansed in the days of Daniel himself as in years that is less than 7 years. Taking the day for a year principle, Num 14v34, this long period of 2,300 years takes the reader well beyond the time of Jesus in the first century. What breakdown of this period is there if there is no continual historic development of the Revelation? It just becomes an uncertain mass of time, which can largely be dismissed except for a period from which people are called out from, an extensive but unremarkable “times of the gentiles”.

In the New Testament Jesus is glorified and ascended to the right hand of the Father, where he rules on God’s behalf, learning the divine craft of governance, with particular emphasis on the maintenance of the Ecclesia. Ephesians 1v19-22 *“What is the exceeding greatness of his power to usward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which He wrought in Christ when He raised him from the dead, and set him at His own right hand in the heavenlies, Far above all principality and power and might and dominion and every name that is named, **not only in this world**, but also in that which is to come: and hath out all things under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the Ecclesia”*. This control is not restricted to the future age and can be seen in the unfolding of history for the benefit and chastening of the disciples. This is only prophetically covered if the interpretation of the Revelation is understood in this way.

The importance of the identity of the antichrist system which began in the Apostolic era and will only be removed *“and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming”* 2 Thessalonians 2v8, only fits this particular interpretation. If the times of the gentiles are to be infected by this corruption for some two thousand years, then it is vital that the true believers are able to clearly and correctly identify this beguiling system that seeks to deceive even

the very elect. When the Apostle saw her (she is depicted as a woman) he wondered with great admiration. Revelation 17v6

Chapter 12 of the Apocalypse is a key litmus test, for those who claim to understand that book. The woman that appeared in heaven is deemed to be Mary and the child born Jesus, even though the vision is not of past events from before when the book was written. The war in heaven again is supposed to be a past rebellion in the place where God dwells, not the political heavens of men, which seed many rebels. The Kingdom which follows the expelling of this satan, is supposed to be the triumph of the church even though Christ has not at that point returned to the earth. The poetic view has no specific understanding by definition of this. The futurist requires a future rebellion in heaven, and how is that supposed to fit in the scheme of things? The Praeterist fails to produce a viable candidate for the man-child who plays such an important role which this chapter necessitates.

The orderly development of the plan of God through the ages can only be understood by accepting the Continual historic view of interpretation.

Setting out the development of sevens we have

7 Seals 240 years God's judgments against Pagan Rome

7 Trumpets

containing 4 wind 300 years judgements against Catholic Rome

And 3 woe trumpets 1180 years against Papal Rome

7 Vials 240 years against failing Rome

7 last plagues 40 years? against the standing image of
Nebuchadnezzar

The years are rounded and not meant to be totally set in stone but indicative of the length of time each epoch covers. The very long woe trumpet period covers the longest in history, and also has the most verses dedicated to its fulfilment.

Until the Anti-reformation of the Catholic Church there was almost universal acceptance that the book of Revelation was to be understood in the continual historical way. There was a specific agenda they adopted in an attempt to avoid the title of antichrist with which the church has been labelled. The futurist and praeterist methods of interpretation were invented by the Jesuit movement to distract from what everyone else was saying about their church at that time. The evidence that either are better systems of understanding is wanting.

It should be noted that these ideas are mutually exclusive, you cannot believe more than one at the same time it just does not work. Each will need to be considered for itself.

A Voice from the Altar

Russel Noonan