

## WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

### BRIEF SKETCH OF ESCHATOLOGY IN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Eschatology, the study of the end-times, has been in the background of theology until the past three centuries. More recently, however, the study of the last things has become a central concern for many Christians. The progress of ideas through the centuries has been as follows:

#### *Early Christianity*

The earliest Christians embraced premillennialism and the belief that the Book of Revelation was concerned with the struggle between the church and the Roman Empire. References are to be found in the *Didache*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and in the writings of Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Lactantius, and Hippolytus.

#### *Medieval Christianity*

Origen and Augustine laid the groundwork for the medieval approach. Origen allegorized the millennium, and Augustine interpreted it as a symbol of the church age. The expectation of a personal antichrist gradually disappeared, while the Book of Revelation was interpreted historically as the history of the church's struggle with evil and/or the rise of Islam.

#### *The Reformers*

The Reformers adopted the historical eschatology of the Medieval Period but transferred the symbols over to the struggle between Roman and Protestant Christianity. Eschatology was still largely amillennial, which is to say, the millennium was viewed as a symbol of the church age. Proponents of this view were Wycliffe, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Melancthon, Cranmer, Tyndale, and Wesley.

#### *Protestant Scholasticism*

During the post-Reformation period, Protestant theologians began to diverge in eschatological thinking. Some historicists became premillennial (Isaac Newton, William Whiston, J. A. Bengel, Henry Alford). Some developed the ideas of postmillennialism, that is, that the millennium would precede the return of Christ (Daniel Whitby, David Brown, Jonathan Edwards). Others continued to embrace amillennialism.

#### *Modern Period*

In the last two centuries, premillennialism has made a striking comeback. Of particular interest is the rise of a new form of premillennialism called dispensationalism. Developed in England in the 1830s by the Plymouth Brethren minister John Nelson Darby, dispensationalism became widely known in America through the Scofield Reference Bible. Other significant proponents were A. C.

### MILLENNIAL LANGUAGE

*Near the end of the Book of Revelation a period of a thousand years is described (20:2-7). Interpreters of this millennium follow one of three basic approaches:*

#### **Premillennial**

*Here, the thousand years is taken to refer to a literal period of time following the return of Christ when the kingdom of God prevails.*

#### **Amillennial**

*Here, the thousand years is taken as a non-mathematical symbol of the church age which climaxes with the return of Christ.*

#### **Postmillennial**

*Here, the thousand years is taken as a lengthy era after the world has been largely Christianized prior to the return of Christ.*

Gaebelein, H. A. Ironside, and R. A. Torrey, along with educational institutions like Dallas Theological Seminary and Moody Bible Institute.

## **METHODS OF INTERPRETATION**

Although the various details of the Revelation bear many potential interpretations, there are five general approaches that have been employed most of the time, and most interpretive schemes fall under one of them. Of course, if we knew precisely how the seven congregations interpreted the book, it would make matters easier. However, all that is known for certain is that in the post-apostolic church the early Fathers expected that the Christian community would see the whole complex of events described in Revelation, including the appearance of anti-Christ, the tribulation, and the return of Christ Jesus to judge the world. They understood the book to predict the end of the world and the suffering of the church at the hands of anti-Christ before that end. Here, we shall survey the five interpretive approaches that have developed since the post-apostolic period.

### **Idealism**

The idealist leaves the symbolism of Revelation in the most general of terms and largely separates it from any particular historical situation. Idealism sees the book as describing the spiritual conflict between God's people and the powers of evil. The Satanic activities in the book do not refer to any particular outbreak against the church as much as they describe any and every such outbreak. As such, the book is concerned with ideas and principles, not with specific events and historical figures. It is poetic in the most abstract sense of the word. A form of idealism dominated the medieval period when the allegorical method of interpretation was in vogue. Since that time, the idealist approach has had greater or lesser degrees of popularity, though at present, it is less popular than the others. The greatest advantage of idealism is at the same time its greatest liability. Though the rejection of any specific historical content saves the interpreter from quibbling over details, it also prevents him/her from treating seriously the apocalyptic character of the book. Apocalyptic is especially concerned with events that lead to the end of the age, especially the concrete events of contemporary history that threaten to overwhelm God's people.

### **Historicism**

Historicism is the view that the symbols of Revelation refer to major events in the history of Christian Europe and beyond. The historicist generally sees the book as addressing the interval between Christ's first coming and his second coming. The beast of chapter 13, for instance, has been identified, according to the interpreter's own time, with Mohammed, the Pope, Luther, Napoleon, and Hitler. Particularly in the Protestant Reformation, the historicist view became increasingly concerned with identifying the symbolism of the book as describing the anti-papal struggles of the Reformers. The beast was the papacy and the false prophet was the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, this view became so widely held by Protestants that for a long time it was simply called "the Protestant view." Historicists held that the Revelation described the struggle between true and false religion in the western world.

Historicism's first weakness is that it ends up being largely irrelevant to its first readers. It is difficult to see why a group of churches in Asia Minor should be informed of events a thousand years away and in another part of the globe. Second, it seems ignorant of the nature of apocalyptic literature.

Finally, it suffers from subjectivism and major disagreements between those who propound it. Adam Clarke, a historicist commentator and a colleague of John Wesley, said it well in the introduction to his commentary on the Revelation after surveying some of the current theories:

*My readers will naturally expect that I should either give a decided preference to some one of the opinions stated above, or produce one of my own; I can do neither, nor can I pretend to understand this book: I do not understand it; and in the things which concern so sublime and awful a subject, I dare not, as my predecessors, indulge in conjectures.*

Of course, Clarke did precisely what he said he would not do—he indulged in conjecture. Still, he was disarmingly frank.

### Dispensationalism

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, there occurred a revival of futurism or, as it is sometimes called, millenarianism. If allegorical interpretation dominated the Medieval Period and historicism dominated the Reformation and Post-Reformation Periods, futurism came to dominate conservative Protestantism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, a particular kind of futurism, now called dispensationalism, began to develop in the 1830s within the Plymouth Brethren movement in England. Especially through the Scofield Reference Bible, this approach gained ascendancy to the point of domination among conservative Protestants, particularly Baptists and Pentecostals in America. Dispensationalism is characterized by a literal method of interpretation, a radical distinction between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church, and belief in a pretribulation rapture. Though it sometimes sees the letters to the seven churches as a symbolic paradigm for the church's history from ancient times to the present (chap. 1-3), the bulk of the book is understood as describing the trauma of the Jews and those Gentiles left behind after the church has been evacuated from the world by the rapture (chap. 4-18).

The major weakness of dispensationalism is that while it takes seriously the prophetic character of the Revelation, it does not do justice to the apocalyptic character. If the Revelation is primarily about a struggle between the Jews and the anti-Christ in a century far removed from the early church, it is hard to see why such a passage would have been written to seven local congregations in Asia Minor. A not uncommon approach among dispensationalists is to interpret passages from the Revelation quite specifically in terms of current political events or trends, and when this is done, it too often results in subjectivism and the manipulation of Scripture to fit a particular theory.

### Preterism

Preterism is the prevailing interpretation of modern critical scholars. They see the Revelation as especially addressed to the early churches who were facing overwhelming opposition from imperial Rome. The beast in Revelation was one of the Roman Emperors, and the false prophet was the cult of emperor-worship. Revelation, like other apocalyptic writings, was a “tract for bad times.” It was written for a concrete historical situation at the end of the first century, not as a prediction of far-flung history. It assured the church that her present trial would be short, that God was in control, and that he would soon intervene to vindicate his people. The major weakness of the preterist view is that it does not take seriously that Revelation is *both* apocalyptic and prophetic. While preterism recognizes the importance of treating the apocalyptic genre as relevant to the historical situation of

its first readers, it largely ignores the prophetic element about the end of the age or else devalues it as speculation that failed to materialize.

### Historic Premillennialism

For those who wish to retain both the prophetic and apocalyptic character of the Revelation, thus making it relevant to the first congregations who read it as well as to the church at large which awaits Christ's return, there remains a middle ground between preterism and dispensationalism. This position seeks to return to the general position of the post-apostolic church (hence, "historic"), which is to say, premillennial but post-tribulational. It rejects the idea that the church will be evacuated before the end of the age. It sees the Revelation as an extended double entendre, describing the struggle between the church and Roman Imperialism in the early church, but also, the struggle between the church and the powers of evil at the end of the age, the one foreshadowing the other. It agrees with the futuristic position that the Revelation describes the consummation of God's redemptive purpose and the end of history.

SUMMARY OF INTERPRETIVE VIEWS				
IDEALISM	HISTORICISM	DISPENSATIONALISM	PRETERISM	HISTORIC PREMIL.
<i>People of God vs. evil</i>	<i>Protestants vs. Catholics</i>	<i>Left behind &amp; Jews vs. anti-Christ</i>	<i>Early church vs. Rome</i>	<i>Church vs. the world</i>
<i>All Christian History</i>	<i>Middle Ages &amp; Reformation</i>	<i>Final 7 years of the age</i>	<i>Late 1st Century</i>	<i>1st century &amp; end of the age</i>
<i>Many anti-Christ</i>	<i>Roman Catholic papacy</i>	<i>End-time anti-Christ</i>	<i>Imperial Caesars</i>	<i>Imperial Caesars &amp; anti-Christ</i>
REPRESENTATIVE PROPONENTS				
William Milligan	Matthew Henry	Charles Ryrie	R. C. Sproul	George E. Ladd
Michael Wilcox	Adam Clarke	Hal Lindsey	Kenneth Gentry	Millard Erickson
<i>I Saw Heaven Opened</i>	<i>Foxe's Book of Martyrs</i>	<i>The Late Great Planet Earth</i>	<i>The Last Days According to Jesus</i>	<i>Revelation (NCBC)</i>
Michael Wilcox	John Fox	Hal Lindsay	R. C. Sproul	Beasley-Murray