

## Introduction

Tracking the historical trajectory of Christian eschatological ideas and belief systems means misrepresentations of those belief systems become visible. Responsible study of eschatology could include some of the following principles:

1. Matthew 24.36 – recognising that no one knows the day or hour of Jesus' return. This humbles us if we are wise (1 Cor. 13.12).
2. Developing an increase in humility as we understand that our Christian belief systems are a developing process and we are not always right about what we think.
3. A realisation that 'there is nothing new under the sun.' (Eccl. 1.9).

The history of Christian eschatology is here likened to an ebb and flow process. Christian history has shown that a powerful incoming tide of ideas can destroy foundations built over years. Conversely, a quickly-retreating tide can be a sign of future ideological waves. The ultimate impact of an interpretation often depends on timing (when), influence (who), interpretation (what) and conditions (where) as well as means (how). Some interpretations are buried in Christian thought for hundreds of years; or made inroads and then retreated or didn't make headway at all; or became dominant only to be overtaken by another. The lead-up to our own time is no exception with the rise of interpretations that have led, not just to division, but genuine societal danger.

We (the church) are often reluctant to perceive that our personal belief-systems are flawed, incomplete or deceived; not based in scripture; manipulated (by us or to us) or need radical adjustment. Such adjustment can lead to uncomfortable feelings and thoughts, causing 'dissonance.'<sup>1</sup> Such dissonance can be on different levels at once and can be painful, challenging or even damaging.

Relational breakdown is often a consequence of dissonance and eschatology has historically, often been divisive. The intent of Christian eschatological writings was always to reveal God's purpose, bringing hope to mankind, not creating doubt or division. But we have disagreed over how to interpret the Apocalypse, and 'leant on our own understanding' (Pr.3.5-6). We have been ill-informed, closed to change or immature. We must learn to mature spiritually (1 Cor. 3.1-3 & 1 Cor. 14.20).

As you read this, ask yourself this: what are the roots of my eschatology? (Pr. 3.5-6 & Rom. 12.2) When and where did I learn it? Who from? Why do I believe it? Where did the ideas come from? What is my test for accuracy and truth? How did I learn it? What were the consequences? (Gal. 5.22-23 & Phil. 4.2-3 & Phil. 4.8). Christian eschatology has been obscure to the most able, as John Wesley himself confessed. Where does the responsibility for this obscurity lie?

Eschatology is defined as follows:

In traditional theology, the study of 'last things', that is, heaven, hell, purgatory and judgment. In millennial belief, the concern with the specific events supposed to happen at the literal 'end of time' (Howard-Brook & Gwyther, 2005 p5)<sup>2</sup>

Eschatology means "a study of the end times". The word apocalyptic literally means 'unveiling' and is the opposite of the mysterious approach to Revelation often used. It also does not mean catastrophe or disaster, which is how we often use it today.

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<sup>1</sup> When people's deeply held beliefs are challenged or when their behavior is not aligned with their beliefs, this can create a disturbance within them called cognitive dissonance. Feelings caused by dissonance might manifest as emotional stress, anxiety, regret, shame or feelings of negative self-worth, leading to frustration, anger or even violence in some cases. Mindsets about what we believe can also be challenged but being open to trusting Holy Spirit within us will not only lead us to Jesus as The Truth but allow our thinking to be changed where He feels it necessary.

<sup>2</sup> My underlining is to highlight two different perspectives on 'end times': traditional theology and millennial belief.

The word 'unveiling' could mean an increase of general revelation from the unseen realm of God or it could directly mean specific events at the end of the age. In either case a Holy Spirit-led understanding of what the Lord has said about the unveiling of the final destiny of mankind is vital for the Christian believer. Active engagement with Holy Spirit through a renewed mind and a disciplined and informed approach will draw us closer to a true understanding.

Firstly, let's remember that Jesus says that no one knows the hour except the Father. (Mark 13.32; Mt 24.36).

Secondly, Revelation is given to us to bless us: 'Blessed is the one who read the words of this prophecy and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it because the time is near.' (Rev. 1.3)

Thirdly, Revelation unveils. It unveils what the Lord wanted us to see. Nothing in it is too much for us to perceive or understand.

Fourthly, the apocalypse has to be consistent with the Father's loving heart for us or he would not have unveiled it to us. The apocalypse is an unveiling of Jesus Christ (Rev 1.1). And if we have seen Jesus, we have seen the Father (John 14.9b).

Lastly - and here we need to recognise our own responsibility - if we become separated from other believers because of our belief systems, we would do well to examine our own heart for our part in that separation. Additionally, if our apocalyptic understanding releases fear- within our own family or to others- we must ask ourselves if this is consistent with the heart of the Father which Jesus expresses in John 14? The Lord is always more interested in our heart attitude than in our outward appearance (including our intellect) (1 Sam. 16.7).

### Eschatological Perspectives

The first part here gives a brief overview of the chronological history of significant eschatological influencers. Therefore, of necessity, it is truncated as it would be impossible to achieve the level of detail required for a proper theological study. Nor do I have the qualifications for that.

In this part I explore our different Christian belief-systems and how they have affected our interpretations and conclusions regarding the apocalypse. Therefore, some eschatological terms may need to be explained. But first, some literary and descriptive caveats.

1. How we read Revelation is crucial. L. Michael White states:

- (i) Revelation contains intricate and unusual symbolic language. Today, we are not used to this kind of literature.
- (ii) Revelation was written for people who already knew something of the situation (context) and of the symbols that were used to portray it.
- (iii) For the original audience, the strange scenes would have been immediately intelligible.
- (iv) In each of the Visions, literary devices are used to propel the viewer (and the reader) to the next vision.

- (v) Revelation has been likened to a Chinese box puzzle where upon opening, we find another box inside. With Revelation, things are always expectant, always propelling forward into something important.
  - (vi) Revelation 11 is a central 'literary device' within the whole book, containing an explanation of the reasons why suffering has come upon the earth. According to White, Chapter 11 is a retrospection on the war of AD66-70 and a lead-in to the third Vision which reveals the cosmic war that's been going on for so long thereby explaining the suffering of the faithful.
2. The timeline of the Revelation story is cyclical in fashion so that we keep coming back to the 'present day' as it was for its ancient readers. It is only in Chapters 18-21 that the text starts to look forward towards the near future.<sup>3</sup>
  3. A good theologian, like a good doctor, has academic training, honed throughout their working life. Peer review saves them from religious extremes. This is not so for the untrained person.
  4. It has been argued that the author of the apocalypse (John) is unknown (Aune, 1997). However, I am persuaded by the view of Father John Behr<sup>4</sup> that the apostle John wrote the book in AD60. Some bible translations have not been clear there is disagreement over the book's authorship.<sup>5</sup> The authorship is important in order to support the date of its creation over which there is some debate (Gorman, 2011).<sup>6</sup> I take the view that it was written by John the apostle earlier, rather than later, in the first century.
  5. Eschatological studies are often written to favour or dismiss one theological view over another, and a reader's real interest may be to see if books or ideas affirm or reinforce their own belief system.

I propose that John of Patmos, well soaked in Hebrew apocalyptic history and literature, was both looking along and looking at the beam<sup>7</sup> of Jesus' revelation – he described his own experience but also how he perceived it. We can look along the beam of history to discover that experience through his words. And besides the power of intuitive insight, there are other tools to help our understanding today. For example, from ancient Hebrew writing and language, we can observe that their thought process was differently constructed to ours. It has been described as using block logic (Mastrogiovanni, 2018).<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, in what historic context was the apocalypse written? It has been argued that the oft-reported persecution of believers under Nero, Domitian<sup>9</sup> and Trajan<sup>10</sup> was not the reason for the writing of the book (Howard-Brook & Gwyther, 2000, p. xxi-xxii). They and Michael L. White suggest that seduction by the Roman Empire from within a context of relative comfort more accurately describes the experience of the

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/revelation/white.html> accessed 10/1/2021.

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Behr](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Behr) This view also reflects my own – there has been an ebb and flow throughout Christian history, not just millennially but regarding other aspects, such as the authorship of the book, among writers.

<sup>5</sup> Oxford NIV Scofield Study Bible, 1967, p1314 explicitly calls the author John the Apostle.

<sup>6</sup> Gorman dates the Revelation from the end of the reign of the Emperor Domitian (81-96AD). Some date it later (98-117) and some, including Father John Behr, have argued that it originated during the reign of the Emperor Nero (54-68AD). It should also be noted that Rome was only nicknamed 'Babylon' by Jews and Christians after the fall of Jerusalem in AD70.

<sup>7</sup> <http://kosterinterim2011.blogspot.com/2011/01/meditation-in-toolshed.html> Accessed 20.1.2020.

<sup>8</sup> 'Block logic' was a Hebrew thinking tool. For a simple explanation of this see <https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/>

<sup>9</sup> There is significant debate over whether Domitian persecuted Christians at all. See <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/post-biblical-period/domitian-persecution-of-christians/#note02>

<sup>10</sup> Not before the persecutions of the **mid-third century** were there imperial laws directing that Christians be condemned because of their religious beliefs; the important rescripts of Trajan and Hadrian, while mentioning Christians explicitly, were not against Christianity as a religion and were not intended by those Emperors as encouragement for legal attacks on Christians. They suggest, in fact, that Christianity was not in itself a basis for persecution. The real basis was the popular suspicion, contempt, and hatred for the early Christians. Without this motivating force it is inconceivable that the persecutions could have occurred. <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/causes-early-persecutions> Accessed 18.11.2020.

original audience of the book of Revelation.<sup>11</sup> Why is this important? Because the assumption of persecution has influenced how the book has been received and interpreted by generations of readers. How? Assuming a context of persecution may cause readers to believe the apocalypse is about 'helping believers maintain their faith amid distress, with the promise that the imminence of the End would bring a close to their great tribulation.' A context of persecution could have led to negative conclusions about the book's meaning and a historic misrepresentation of what it truly promises – the return of Jesus and the inauguration of a 'new heaven and a new earth...' With that hopeful imagery comes a positive, rather than negative, expectation.

So can we understand why believers have reached such different conclusions?

#### What we now describe:

There are five main descriptions of end-time 'belief systems': Preterist, partial Preterist, Pre-millennial, Post-millennial and A-millennial. These are explored below.

#### How we now interpret:

There are different methods of interpreting scripture. Interpretation is a tool used by biblical<sup>12</sup> scholars to explore the theological meaning of biblical writing. Although not prescriptive, the main methods have been described (Brueggemann 1998, p4) as:

- (a) Pre-critical or traditional understanding, usually by conservative scholarship. The traditional understanding, in a Christendom context, was rarely challenged due to severe penalties and threat of excommunication.
- (b) A critical understanding, reflective of the intellectual world of the west in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, that focuses on historical issues.
- (c) A canonical approach seeking to understand the final form of a text as an integral statement offered by the shapers of a text for theological reasons.

#### How we now respond:

As we read, our personal understanding and emotions will influence our response. Reading a scripture and using a respected commentary is helpful and wise but studying word meanings, context and language offer a greater help. Word meanings and context provide access to the original intent of the writer. However, 'it's by the fruit you'll know if it's Godly' (Matt 7.17-20, Gal 5.22) and so an important question as we read is 'what is the fruit of what I read?'

A second influencing process is 'first occasion information'. First impressions are often significant. A first impression imprints on our brain's neural pathways, particularly if we resonate with it. Any challenge to our response at a later date can cause us to experience cognitive dissonance, causing mental, emotional and spiritual discomfort.

Let's look now at some key words and give them a brief description.

#### Christian Millennialist (millenarian) meanings

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<sup>11</sup> Unveiling Empire and L. Michael White, Understanding the Book of Revelation <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/bookofrevelation.html> Accessed 21.11.2020.

<sup>12</sup> And historical scholars in interpreting history.

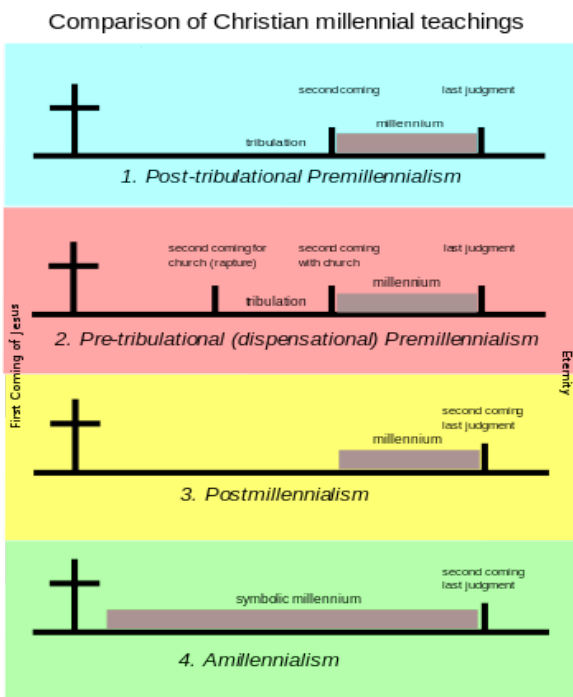
The 'End Times': The English words 'End Times' were created to describe the length, position and type of a thousand-year period, mentioned first in Revelation 20.1-2. The relevant verses say:

"...He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years."

(Some people refer to the 'End Times' as 'after Christ' whether a millennium has begun or not.)

The idea of a 'millennium' is based on Christ returning to earth for a literal one-thousand-year delight-filled peaceful reign, accompanied by true believers operating in Christ's image.<sup>13</sup> It is immensely powerful. But as has been asked before, 'What do we believe?'<sup>14</sup>

Let's start with a simple list of some basic millennial perspectives.



When you study this diagram, you can see that it's all about when people believe Jesus' Second Coming is positioned in history.

When do the birth pains (sometimes called 'tribulation') to which Jesus referred in Matt 24.8 happen?

How are these birth pains linked to the one thousand years (millennium) and the Last Judgment?

The basic aspects of Christian eschatology have been complicated by an idea of a secret pre-tribulation rapture teaching from c.1830 (see 2 on this diagram - not a biblical perspective).

How has the church managed these different belief-systems? Perhaps not very well.

(From: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millennialism>)

When considering the phrase 'end times', confusion has been caused by different translations of the Greek word 'aion' appearing in Matthew 24.3, Matthew 28.20 and elsewhere. The different English translations of

<sup>13</sup> Unveiling Empire, p5

<sup>14</sup> Martin Scott on <https://www.3generations.eu/eschatology-podcasts> and The Eschatology of the New Church Movement (UK) 1970-1996 on [www.3generations.eu](http://www.3generations.eu) Accessed 21.11.2020.

'aion' do not solely mean the 'end of the world' - although the word 'world' is part of its original Hebrew meaning. For example, the NIV, RSV (Revised Standard) and NASV (New American Standard) and The Passion Translation correctly translate aion as 'age'. When we read, "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what supernatural sign should we expect to signal your coming and the completion of this age?" (TPT Matt 24.3), aion (Gr. 172) is being translated into 'age' not 'world'. The KJAV (King James Authorised, with and without Apocrypha) and The Living Bible both translate the word aion as 'end of the world'.

In Matt 28.20, Jesus says, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age", when translated in these versions: TPT, NIV, NASV and Revised Standard. Again, the AKJV and The Living Bible and a number of others use 'end of the world'. The word 'end' (synteleo (5334) Gr.) means "culmination or completion, the bringing together of an intended purpose'. The expressions 'the end of the age' (aion) and 'of the ages' (ton aionon) signify not the 'end (or destruction) of our (created) world' but 'the consummation or accomplishment of the purposes pertaining to a particular period of time'. This common mistranslation and what the word synteleo actually means<sup>15</sup> should give thoughtful people pause when considering the phrase 'end times'.

This has meant that people who only read one bible using the translation 'world' may assume it means 'the end of the world we live in today'. This is a big leap but an understandable one. If the phrase 'end times' is interpreted negatively in either populist context or translation, it has sometimes left readers anticipating the immediate arrival of Christ's millennium rule or world destruction. There are multiple historical examples of how the millennial belief-system has affected people negatively (Cohn, N. (1957)) and fictional eschatological literature and other material<sup>16</sup> has capitalised on negativity to suggest a modern end-time disaster-based scenario (LaHaye, T. (1995)).

Millennialism (also called millenarianism or chiliasm) meaning a 'one-thousand-year period', is a belief that Christ will return and establish a 1,000-year reign of delight, joy and hope where he rules with the saints on earth at some point before the Last Judgment.<sup>17</sup> Those who believe in the millennium are known as millennialists. In the first century after the apocalypse was written and read, the millennium was seen 'as a principle of hope, where people are liberated from the deceit of the devil; freed to take innocent pleasure during a thousand years of joy; a collective reign of believers with Jesus; where the heavenly truth is that the wedding supper of the Lamb would be realised on earth as in heaven.' (Chilton, B. (2013)) The millennium has been defined as 'a Golden Age or Paradise that will occur on Earth prior to the final judgment and future eternal state of the World to Come.'<sup>18</sup>

rapture (Rapture): The word 'rapture' in Greek is 'harpazo' which translated into Latin becomes 'rapturo'. In colloquial English, the word 'Rapture' (often without explanation but with considerable assumption) is

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<sup>15</sup> Consummation of purpose.

<sup>16</sup> Such as modern disaster films based around surviving catastrophic world events.

<sup>17</sup> Rev.20.4-7 excerpt: 'They lived and reigned with the Christ for **one thousand years**. This is the first resurrection. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) Wonderfully blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection! The second death holds no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of the Christ. And **they will reign as kings with him for a thousand years!**' <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=REv+20.4-7&version=TPT>

<sup>18</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millennialism> Accessed 18.11.2020. Christianity and Judaism have both produced messianic movements which featured millennialist teachings—such as the notion that an earthly kingdom of God was at hand. Cohn has shown that Christian millennialist movements have often led to considerable and repeated historical social unrest. (In Pursuit of the Millennium by Norman Cohn).

understood to mean ‘the Rapture of the saints before/middle of/after the Tribulation.’ This is due to the propagation of the ‘populist, evangelical, dispensationalist, pre-millennial’ interpretation. Dispensationalism originated in Brethren circles and was propagated through the teaching, first of Edward Irving, then John Nelson Darby and Cyrus Scofield. In this belief-system, the capitalised word ‘Rapture’ was used in a specific way from 1830. In the Brethren belief-system, Rapture is derived from words in 2 Thessalonians 2.7 that refer to a ‘catching up’<sup>19</sup> of the elect before, during or after what is identified as a ‘Great Tribulation’. Two different methods for this Rapturing have been proposed:

- (a) a secret Rapture of the saints when those with revelation knowledge will be caught up by Christ earlier than everyone else;
- (b) a partial Rapture of the saints meaning those born-again and with revelation knowledge will be caught up before other saints, this event occurring before the ‘tribulation’ that Jesus

referred to in Matthew 24 and before the tribulation of Rev 7.14 and before the ‘whole world’ sees him coming on the clouds. It is in effect, also a secret ‘catching up’ without including all.

Both these references are derived from the words of a young woman called Margaret Macdonald who was influenced by Edward Irving’s radical interpretations of the apocalypse in the early 1820s.

Within Dispensationalism’s differing belief-system, the rapturing happens at different times:

1. Pre-Tribulation Rapture: The church is taken out of the world before the Tribulation begins. This is believed by some to be a prior event but not secret (as in the Left Behind series where it is visible to everyone).
2. Secret (or Prior) Rapture: In this catching up, only believers who faithfully watch for the Lord’s return will be taken out of the world before the Tribulation. This taking will not be visible to everyone else in the world, whether believer or unbeliever. Subsequently, this view argues, there will be a second rapture for non-watchful believers.
3. Mid-Tribulation Rapture: The believing church is taken out of the world in the middle of the Tribulation.
4. Pre-Wrath Rapture: The church is taken out of the world before God’s wrath is greatest (implying just before the final judgment) and just before Christ returns in the Second Coming to establish His earthly kingdom.
5. Post-Tribulation Rapture: The church is caught up as Christ is returning to earth at His Second Coming.<sup>20</sup>

However, when we read Matthew 24 on its own, the process Jesus describes seems fairly clear and simple: those believers who have already died in Christ and who are already buried are awaiting his return like we

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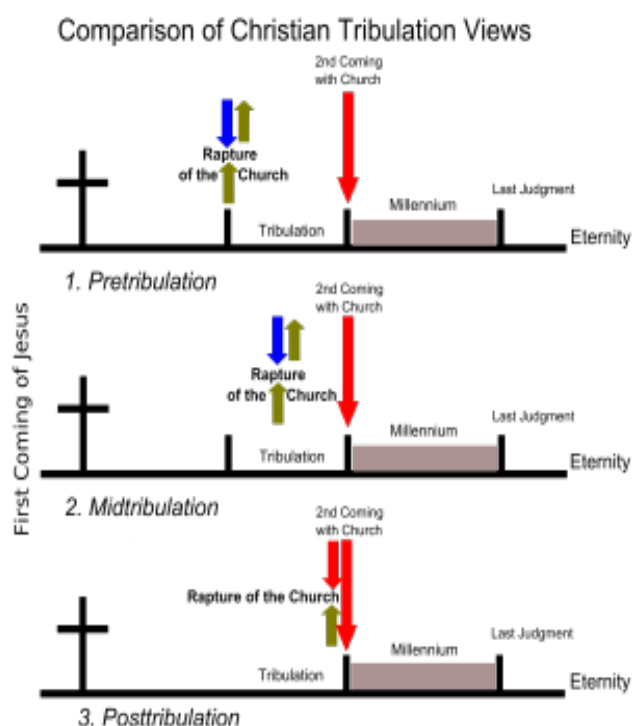
<sup>19</sup> This may well have been a misinterpretation of scripture by the young woman Margaret MacDonald. MacDonald appears to have reversed events in Genesis 7.3-23 to make them fit her understanding of Matthew 24.41 and 2 Thessalonians 2.7. Her insights are described in detail in The Rapture Plot by Dave MacPherson, p3 and in Appendix B where Margaret’s full vision is recorded verbatim by her doctor. MacPherson says, ‘Margaret noticed that something happens after Matthew 24.40’s ‘taken’ as well as after 2 Thess.2.7’s ‘taken’. Apparently, she reasoned that after the taking away of the elect, the wicked would be left on earth. Her whole idea was based on the passage in Matthew 40.41 where Jesus says that ‘one will be taken away **in judgement**, one will be left - as in the days of Noah.’ It’s important to note that Jesus says the one taken away was ‘in judgement’, not the one who was left. Additionally, the Passion bible translation features a note referring to the Shem-Tob Hebrew manuscript which includes additional text explaining that “this is because the angels at the end of the age will first remove the stumbling blocks (the wicked) from the world and will separate the good from the evil.” Unlike in MacDonald’s misreading, in the days of Noah, (Gen 7.23) the evil were ‘taken’ and the righteous were the only ones ‘left’. This mistake was later repeated by ‘Fidus’ a writer in the Brethren prophetic journal The Morning Watch, September 1830; one of the earliest pretribulationist teachings (MacPherson p6). It was later preached by Edward Irving, John Nelson Darby and Cyrus Scofield, later becoming part of the powerful Brethren doctrine, dispensationalism. If Margaret’s words had been shared and appropriately weighed by the wider church, as prophecy should be, it’s possible this mistake would not have entered into Brethren doctrine.

<sup>20</sup> <https://thinkingonscripture.com/2020/10/03/the-rapture-of-the-church/> Accessed 21.11.2020.

are; Jesus returns; everyone in the world sees him ‘coming on the clouds’; the trumpet calls; angels gather those already-died ‘born again believers’ and they are raised (resurrected) at the same time as the still-living believers’ bodies are ‘changed’ and then all believers are caught up in the air to be with him. (This is not the case for unbelievers.) For believers, there is no mention of a secret rapture (taking away) for a few elected ‘chosen ones’ before other believers, out of the mainstream Body of Christ.

The Tribulation: Some interpreters identify a Great Tribulation (Matt 24.8 and Rev 7.14). This ‘tribulation’ is perceived as ‘the anticipated seven-year reign of antichrist’ (Dan 11.35, 12.1 and Rev 13.5) and begins with a period of apparent peace and then ‘turns hellish’.

Below is a chart comparison of Christian tribulation beliefs. As we’ve already seen, the main eschatological belief-systems today are labelled as Preterism, Partial Preterism, Pre-millennial, Post-millennial and A-millennial. Within these belief-systems are different concepts such as Historicism, Futurism and Idealism. An explanation of these concepts is also below.



A majority of traditional Christian churches do not accept a pre-millennial framework as biblical. Nor is it accepted by all non-conformist churches.

1. A Pre-Trib. secret Rapture is thought by some to happen before the tribulation.
2. Mid-Trib. believers think the Rapture will happen in the middle of the tribulation.
3. Post-Trib. believers think the Rapture will happen after the tribulation and is synonymous with the resurrection.

You can see here that within the millennial belief-system, a Millennium is seen as happening after Christ’s second coming in every case and that disagreement occurs regarding the secrecy (or not) and timing of the ‘Rapture’ of the Elect and who those Elect might be.

For information on different belief systems, see <https://>

### Explanations of Historicism, Futurism and Idealism and other belief-systems

Historicism is an approach to scriptural interpretation that literally ties the symbols of Revelation with/to actual historical persons, nations or events.<sup>21</sup> The term historicism refers to a Protestant form of ‘prophetic’ predictive interpretation. (In fact, Historicism is similar to Futurism – but with one significant difference, discussed later.) In Historicism, the fulfilment of the book of Revelation is past, present and future. Several drawbacks are identified with this interpretive approach:

- a) Historicism can lead to ‘forcing scripture to fit current events’ creating fallacious beliefs and dogmas. This is an especially pertinent point during the 2020 pandemic. We as human beings seek to fit natural or man-made disasters into our worldview and biblical language enables and expresses how we cope

<sup>21</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historicism>. Accessed 21.11.2020.



with catastrophes. In his book *Doom: the Politics of Catastrophe* (Ferguson N, 2021), historian Niall Ferguson lists 'disasters, catastrophes both natural and manmade'. He says, 'Since human beings began recording their thoughts in art and literature, the possibility of an extinction event or 'end time' has loomed large...the prospect of the Apocalypse - of a final, spectacular Day of Judgment - has been central to Christian theology since Jesus himself prophesied it...' and 'There is something familiar about the vehemence with which the most radical prophets of disastrous climate change demand drastic economic penance to avert the end of the world.'<sup>22</sup> Ferguson also makes the point that, in every case, the scale of a disaster is judged on the basis of the number of human beings who were affected. When we call an event 'apocalyptic', we are referring back to religious doctrines of all kinds to express our feelings about it.

- b) Historicism has also led to forcing scripture to fit historic events too. This is true throughout history, not just current events. For example, it has been argued that Stalin, Hitler, Napoleon and Genghis Khan (and many others) were all THE Antichrist. But although evil, they were clearly not a single antichrist. Another example is how Celtic Christians wrote that the Vikings were 'bringing the end of the world'. It has been described like this 'To these Christians it seemed like an End Time event. It sent shock waves across Britain and Western Europe. As established Christian centres suffered escalating destruction, the faith itself seemed under threat, and Vikings were identified as manifestations of Antichrist and their actions were read as apocalyptic signposts.'<sup>23</sup> In each case, however, along with plague and geological disasters, mankind survived. These were not extinction-level events.
- c) Individual historicists often don't agree with each other's correlation of history and scripture.
- d) There are two types of historicist – cyclical and linear:
  - (i) Linear historicism: the central part of Revelation goes in a straight line.
  - (ii) Cyclical historicism: church history recapitulates itself; that is, it repeats its main points, (some believe seven times).

Covenantal Premillennialism is an approach to pre-millennialism that slightly differs from the norm for that belief system. This is because it is distinctively non-dispensational.<sup>24</sup> Although covenantal premillennialists hold a premillennial view, its adherents often prefer to be referred to as 'historic pre-millennialists'. This is because some of their belief-system was held by many of the church fathers, such as Irenaeus, during the first several centuries of the church.<sup>25</sup> This belief-system is based only on Revelation 20.1-6 and not on any Old Testament scriptures (as with dispensationalist pre-millennialism). George Eldon Ladd was a covenantal pre-millennialist who did not accept a millennial kingdom in which Israel has a predominant role because he (like other Covenantal Pre-millennial theologians) applied Old Testament prophecies to the church. Ladd said this: 'Dispensationalism forms its eschatology by a literal interpretation of the Old Testament and then fits the New Testament into it. A non-dispensational eschatology forms its theology from the explicit teaching of the New Testament. It confesses that it cannot be sure how the Old Testament prophecies are to be fulfilled.'<sup>26</sup> The non-dispensational eschatology sees no radical theological distinction between Israel and the Church and is often post-tribulational. Historic premillennialism maintains a millennial belief because of its view that the church will be caught up to meet Christ in the air (rapture) after the tribulation and then escort him to the earth in order to share in his literal thousand-year rule. There is no secret rapture ahead of the tribulation

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<sup>22</sup> Ferguson, N., *Doom*, ps5-6

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/26-october/features/features/vikings-when-the-hammer-met-the-cross>

<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, this is also known as Historic or Classic dispensationalism which causes confusion. This approach is not Historicism as defined earlier.

<sup>25</sup> <https://paulbenware.com/prophecy/the-coming-kingdom/just-what-is-covenant-historic-premillennialism/> Accessed 21.11.2020.

<sup>26</sup> <https://paulbenware.com/prophecy/the-coming-kingdom/just-what-is-covenant-historic-premillennialism/> On this page, Benware also explains the weaknesses of this view from his pre-millennial perspective. I do not have space to outline them here. Accessed 21.11.2020.

posited. Later proponents of historic premillennialism included Rev. Thomas Brightman (1562–1607); Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727) and Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658).<sup>27</sup>

Futurism: This interpretation of Revelation's prophetic aspects originated with Francisco Ribera.<sup>28</sup> It was intended to head off the Protestant Reformers' charge that the papacy manifested the Antichrist. Futurism today sees most apocalyptic descriptions in the book of Revelation as 'future' events placed before the Second Coming of Jesus. Futurism holds that the central block of Revelation's predictions applies to the last few years before the Second Coming. In some ways, this view is similar to the proto-historicism<sup>29</sup> of Papias, Irenaeus and Joachim of Fiore but is more fully developed. The descriptions in the apocalypse are interpreted alongside Daniel 7.13-14, Isaiah 2,<sup>30</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4.16-17 and similar biblical writings.

As everything is future, Futurism is a predictive interpretation of the symbols in Revelation and cannot speak with any certainty. However, futurists argue that the predictions are revealed by Holy Spirit to 'Spirit-filled' people, (such as Margaret MacDonald). Predictions are often regarded as 'prophetic', but the Old Testament shows that some prophetic predictions were fully fulfilled, some partially or not at all and many were conditional, such as in Jer.18.8-10<sup>31</sup> and Jonah 3.10. And there is a difference between human predictive insights and God's promises.<sup>32</sup> Despite this, one of the most influential views in Futurism is today known as Dispensationalism which contains a strong 'predictive' dimension.

The Futurist Dispensationalist interpretation predicts:

- a) A secret Rapture through Jesus' invisible coming FOR the elect church, followed seven years later by a visible appearing of Jesus WITH the church (the Second Coming).<sup>33</sup> This was specifically advocated by John Nelson Darby (Faupel, D. William, (2009)). Darby presented it as his own idea but it has been shown to originate with Edward Irving (MacPherson, D. (1995)) and before him, in proto- form, Manuel Lacunza.
- b) Darby had three presuppositions in which his position differed from that of mainstream Christianity:
  1. The absolute separation of Israel and the church as distinct peoples of God. He said that Old Testament prophecies only applied to the Jewish people and not to the church. He said the Israelites were God's earthly people and were cut off for a season while the church, God's heavenly people, was called forth from the Gentile nations to be prepared as the Bride.
  2. As many of the Old Testament prophecies about the Jews remained unfulfilled, Darby said that at the end of the church age there would be a period when the Jewish nation would be restored, Judah and Israel would be reunited and the Messiah accepted by them.

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<sup>27</sup> [https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/11/11-4/BETS\\_11\\_4\\_181-193\\_Clouse.pdf](https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/11/11-4/BETS_11_4_181-193_Clouse.pdf) Accessed 18.1.2021.

<sup>28</sup> Francisco Ribera is explained later.

<sup>29</sup> By the term 'proto-', I am referring to early church or foundational views of eschatology that were later developed by theologians to propound a belief-system. For example, early premillennial views later developed into a full eschatological doctrine.

<sup>30</sup> Linking the Mountain of the Lord (Isaiah vs1-5), the cave-hiding verses (vs10-11 & 19-21) and that the proud and lofty will be humbled (vs 12-18)

<sup>31</sup> When we study Jonah, we find that although the Ninevites repented (so Jonah's conditional prophecy was fulfilled) there was an additional fulfilment in Jesus as he described in Matthew 12.13-41. When Jesus said that, it was still conditional as he had not yet gone through the Garden of Gethsemane or the Cross experiences. Only after he rose again was it fully fulfilled.

<sup>32</sup> [https://www.jstor.org/stable/43724420?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3Ab0767e1dbfb55f68df646b144d7f53d7&seq=22#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/43724420?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3Ab0767e1dbfb55f68df646b144d7f53d7&seq=22#page_scan_tab_contents) And I'm grateful to Martin Scott for highlighting this principle to me.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. Faupel, D William p98

3. Darby also maintained that the gifts of the Spirit functioned only to establish the Church and were then withdrawn. This is known today as the Cessationist view. (Faupel, D. William (2009))
- c) A great tribulation (seven years) would occur when there would be worldwide persecution (including martyrdom) of believers.
  - d) A resurrection of the dead.
  - e) Rapture timings differ. The post-tribulation perspective says that the 'elect' will join Christ in the clouds and return to earth with him. Dr Tim LaHaye<sup>34</sup> has said this is the closest of the three tribulation views to early church premillennialism.
  - f) After the tribulation, Christians are believed to return with Christ (except in the post-tribulation view when there will no need for that).
  - g) Israel will sign a peace treaty with the antichrist.
  - h) The antichrist is one person who heads a revived Roman empire.

There is chronological overlap early on between the two belief-systems of Historicism and Futurism. However, in one area there is a different timeline—regarding what is believed about the period following the Fall of Rome in 476AD until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Historicism, the timeline continues past Rome's Fall until 1798AD. Futurism, however, inserts a 1500 year gap between Rome's Fall 476AD and 1976. Futurists then believe in the rise of a 10-nation empire followed by the appearance of the Antichrist.<sup>35</sup>

Full Preterism: This belief-system suggests that what is written in the Book of Revelation covers the first few centuries after Jesus' ascension (Pawson D, (1995)). It holds that predictions made by Jesus in Matthew 24 were fulfilled in and by the events of AD70. Rome is identified as Babylon (Rev 17.9-10) and the 'one is' of v10 identified as Nero, Rome's 6<sup>th</sup> Caesar (AD54-68). In this view, 1 Peter 5.13<sup>36</sup> refers to 'she who is in Babylon' as the church in Rome. This view perceives the bulk of Revelation as 'past'. The strength of this view is that, as Pawson argues: "all bible study should begin with the original context of writer and readers." (Pawson D, (1995)) Pawson also says, however, that "very few of the specific predictions came true in the Roman empire," which is what this view states. When arguing against full preterism, Eberle says "Our pessimism that 'times will grow darker, a great many will fall away, those opposed to Christ will take over etc., has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.' (Eberle, H. & Trench M. (2009))

Partial Preterism: This belief-system has quickly developed into a full interpretation. It sprang from an originally Full Preterist perspective, hence the name, but holds that only some of the prophetic events in Matthew 24, Revelation 1-14 and Daniel were fulfilled on or before 70AD when Jerusalem fell to the Romans. Eusebius and Origen held a proto-interpretation similar to this although this label did not exist in their time. Other suggested proponents of this view include John Wesley. Much has been said about Wesley's view due to his extraordinary influence. His belief-system is described in Faupel where it says 'Wesley did have an eschatology but it was inconsequential in shaping his worldview. His conception is best seen in his New Testament Notes where his commentary relies entirely on Bengel.' (Faupel, D, William (2009))<sup>37</sup> We will look more closely at Wesley's view in the historical section to come in parts two and three.

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<sup>34</sup> See <https://www.pre-trib.org/> Accessed 21.1.2021.

<sup>35</sup> Hence the link by some Pre-millennialists to the formation of the European Union.

<sup>36</sup> 1 Pet 5.13 says: '**She** who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings...'

<sup>37</sup> Johann Albrecht Bengel [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann\\_Albrecht\\_Bengel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Albrecht_Bengel) and [The Wesley Center Online: Notes On The Revelation Of Jesus Christ \(nnu.edu\)](#) Accessed 21.12.2020.

Partial Preterism holds that the Kingdom of God has been growing steadily since the first coming of Christ and will put an end to all other kingdoms. It holds that the 'beast' and 'antichrist' were a Roman emperor and gnostic teachers of the first century respectively.<sup>38</sup> This view argues that Jesus' prophecy of 'birth pains' in Matthew 24.8 was aimed at the Jews and happened to them at the time of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70AD. It also holds that the apostles lived in 'the last days' of their age (aion Gr.); that Christians are called to be world-changers; extend the Kingdom of God to engage with society and influence/transform its institutions and that it will grow in influence. Darkness is seen to lose ground (but remain) until Jesus returns for the second time for his victorious church and decides between the wheat and the tares.<sup>39</sup> This is an interpretation that could be characterised as a call to faithfulness to Jesus in the face of what we experience in this world and as a challenge to develop a Jesus-like character, perseverance and heroic virtue.<sup>40</sup> It is a call to be 'both-and' (Rohr R. (2011)) people in a world that may persecute the church. It holds before believers the hope of not only their salvation but finding identity and maturity<sup>41</sup> as sons and daughters being about their Father's business.

Idealism: Here, the apocalypse is seen as referring to any century after Christ but none in particular. This interpretation removes all specific time references and doesn't correlate the apocalypse with particular historical events. The apocalypse is seen as the spiritual and eternal struggle between good and evil applied to any time period but where an overcoming church can experience Jesus' divine victory at any time (John 1.4). Pawson suggests that the only merit of this interpretation is that Revelation is relevant to any and all believers in any time and space. (Pawson, D. (1995)) He argues that this interpretation treats the apocalypse as a spiritual myth but not historically true and where the events are 'fictional' but there is a greater 'truth' within them. Pawson sees it as an outworking of Greek philosophy, Gnosticism, Platonism and Stoicism where predictions in the book are spiritualised. For example, the New Jerusalem is idealised, becoming a people rather than a place, and the 'church' is represented as an 'ekklesia'.

Perhaps we should be careful not to confuse this with Sons and Daughters of God (Romans 8.19) becoming 'an ekklesial governing body' in a region, which was the apostle Paul's original idea in Ephesians 3.10.<sup>42</sup> It's also possible that Idealism exists in reaction to attempts of pre-millennialists to definitively predict dates, times and events. Idealism is a cyclical approach that cuts out end 'times' as the very idea that time will eventually reach a conclusion or climax is not seen as valid. This belief system argues that 'the last things' – such as Jesus' return and the day of judgement - are happening now and so the eschatology is already realised.

A-millennialism: This belief-system teaches there will be no millennial reign of the righteous on earth. Amillennialists view the millennium mentioned in the apocalypse as not being a literal thousand years, but as symbolic. Christ's kingdom is already present in the church from Pentecost in the first book of Acts. There are two versions of this view, the perfect and imperfect:

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<sup>38</sup> Given that original readers would have had a 'grid' for understanding John, I think it highly likely these were oblique references to those who had put John on Patmos and who might threaten first century Asian believers.

<sup>39</sup> <https://regententrepreneur.org/rceresources/victorious-eschatology-a-partial-preterist-view/> Victorious Eschatology, A Partial Preterist View, Second Edition, 2009, Harold R Eberle & Martin Trench, Worldcast Publishing, Yakima, Washington, US

<sup>40</sup> Heroic Virtue is a description used in the Roman church regarding the performance of extraordinary virtuous actions with readiness and over a period of time. It is where the moral virtues are exercised with ease, while faith, hope, and charity are practiced to an eminent degree. Mother Theresa and Heidi Baker are examples.

<sup>41</sup> Identity and Maturity are encapsulated in the idea that believers become more Jesus-like in their character and personality.

<sup>42</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesia> Accessed 23.1.2021.

- (i) Perfect Amillennialism: Here, the millennium is interpreted only symbolically and does not agree that Jesus will physically reign on the earth for 1,000 years. It regards the millennium as already begun and identical with the current church age. Augustine of Hippo was a partial advocate of this view. Jesus' reign in the millennium is spiritual but at the end of this 1,000 years, Jesus will return in final judgment and reign permanently in the new heaven and new earth.
- (i) Imperfect Amillennialism: Here, the first resurrection will happen simultaneously with the second one.

The common denominator for all amillennialistic views is the denial of the Kingdom of the righteous on earth before the general resurrection.

In this first article, I have attempted to describe some of the basic millennialist views and begin to examine the impact of these belief-systems on Christians throughout history. I believe that in wrestling with these views and deciding what we ourselves believe, we begin to realise the most important point – no one knows the day or hour of Jesus' return other than the Father. No one person has full revelation on these topics, as no one person has full revelation of Jesus Christ. As we continue to grapple with the different views, we are humbled and recognise that although they're shaping of our lives, how we walk our own journey and mature as believers is more important.

Next time, I will explore how different eschatological views have ebbed and flowed through Christian history, naming some names and trying to find ways of tracking the flow of Holy Spirit through the melee of events and beliefs.