

Appendix D

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

I. THE POST-APOSTOLIC PERIOD

For at least the first one hundred years after John wrote the *Book of Revelation*, what evidence we have from the post-apostolic period indicates that the church leaders were clearly premillennial in their perspective. They expected the Lord to return soon, accompanied by a resurrection of believers, a rebuilding of Jerusalem, a thousand-year earthly reign, and then a general resurrection and judgment.

A. Justin Martyr (ca. AD 100–165)

One of the earliest references to the Book of Revelation comes from Justin Martyr, a Christian apologist of the second century AD who sought to defend the Christian faith against misrepresentation and ridicule. According to Carey, Justin was born in the region of Shechem (near modern-day Nablus), and was converted to Christianity about AD 132.¹

His reference to Revelation occurs in his work entitled *Dialogue with Trypho* (an apologetic work to a Jew by the name of Trypho). According to Chadwick, this was written sometime near the middle of the second century: “The *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* was written after the first *Apology*, probably about 160, but is presented as an account of a discussion which Justin had with Trypho about 135.”²

Since Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed in AD 70, Justin asked Trypho if he believed the city would be rebuilt. He then went on to explain that it would be rebuilt during the 1000 year millennium:

But I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged, [as] the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare.³

Then, Justin connects this belief to John’s writing in Revelation:

And further, there was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied, by a revelation that was made to him, that those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem; and that thereafter the general, and, in short, the eternal resurrection and judgment of all men would likewise take place.

Justin had not been the first post-apostolic father to espouse a premillennial belief. This was clearly attested by Papias (ca. AD 60-130), but Justin makes a clear reference to the Book of Revelation (see notes on the *Historical Background* for Papias).

¹ J. D. Douglas, ed. *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1978), s.v. “Justin Martyr,” by G. L. Carey.

² Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Cox & Wyman Ltd, 1967), 75.

³ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, A Jew* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh, 1867; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1981), 239.

B. Irenaeus (ca. AD 120–202)

Irenaeus made numerous references to the Book of Revelation, though apparently did not write a commentary on it. In his work *Against Heresies*, he clearly articulated an earthly millennial kingdom of 1000 years that would come about after the rule of the Antichrist. Furthermore, this kingdom would be set up in a renewed Jerusalem.

He equates the *beast* of Rev 13 with the “little horn” of Daniel 7, both referring to the Antichrist that will rule in the end times (V.28.2).⁴ Furthermore, he understood the “time, times and half a time” as a 3 ½ year period: “and [everything] shall be given into his hand until a time of times and a half time,’ that is, for three years and six months, during which time, when he comes, he shall reign over the earth” (V.25.3). He held that the present kingdom [i.e., Rome] would eventually be divided into ten kings, according to the prophecies of Dan 2 and 7 (V.26.1). He also stated that the number 666 was the correct reading according to the better copies of Revelation then circulating:

Such, then, being the state of the case, and this number being found in all the most approved and ancient copies [of the Apocalypse], and those men who saw John face to face bearing their testimony [to it].⁵

According to Irenaeus, the rule of the Antichrist would be terminated by the Lord’s return, following which there would be the kingdom:

But when this Antichrist shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign for three years and six months, and sit in the temple at Jerusalem; and then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending this man and those who follow him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom, that is, the rest, the hallowed seventh day; and restoring to Abraham the promised inheritance, in which kingdom the Lord declared, that ‘many coming from the east and from the west should sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’⁶

Furthermore, Irenaeus contended vigorously that the kingdom should be in the same earthly sphere in which the people of God had experienced their earthly life. He argues that heretics are

. . . ignorant of God’s dispensations, and of the mystery of the resurrection of the just, and of the [earthly] kingdom which is the commencement of incorruption, by means of which kingdom those who shall be worthy are accustomed gradually to partake of the divine nature; and it is necessary to tell them respecting these things, that it behooves the righteous first to receive the promise of the inheritance which God promised to the fathers, and to reign in it, when they rise again to behold God in this creation which is renovated, and that the judgment should take place afterwards. For it is just that in that very creation in which they toiled or were afflicted, being proved in every way by suffering, they should receive the reward of their suffering; and that in the creation in which they were slain because of their love to God, in that they should be revived again; and that in the creation in which they endured servitude, in that they should reign.⁷

Irenaeus not only claims that the kingdom will follow the Second Coming and consist of a rejuvenated earth, but he claims that this was the tradition that had been passed down from John himself:

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, 554.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 558 [from V.30.1].

⁶ *Ibid.*, 560 [from V.30.4].

⁷ *Ibid.*, 561 [from V.32.1].

The predicted blessing, therefore, belongs unquestionably to the times of the kingdom, when the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead; when also the creation, having been renovated and set free, shall fructify with an abundance of all kinds of food, from the dew of heaven, and from the fertility of the earth; as the elders who saw John, the disciple of the Lord, related that they had heard from him how the Lord used to teach in regard to these things.⁸

In support of this contention, Irenaeus refers to the teachings of Papias to the same effect: “And these things are borne witness to in writing by Papias, the hearer of John, and a companion of Polycarp, in his fourth book; for there were five books compiled . . . by him.”⁹

For Irenaeus, the expression “resurrection of the just” refers to this earthly kingdom period when God’s people will be resurrected to enjoy the time of blessing. He does not state clearly when this resurrection itself occurs. Of quite some interest, however, are his comments to the effect that those who survived the Tribulation would go into the kingdom in their natural physical bodies. This seems to suggest that he did not hold to a post-tribulational view of the rapture:

For all these and other words were unquestionably spoken in reference to the resurrection of the just, which takes place after the coming of Antichrist, and the destruction of all nations under his rule; in [the times of] which [resurrection] the righteous shall reign in the earth, waxing stronger by the sight of the Lord; and through Him they shall become accustomed to partake in the glory of God the Father, and shall enjoy in the kingdom intercourse and communion with the holy angels, and union with spiritual beings; and [with respect to] those whom the Lord shall find in the flesh, awaiting Him from heaven, and who have suffered tribulation, as well as escaped the hands of the Wicked one. For it is in reference to them that the prophet says: ‘And those that are left shall multiply upon the earth.’ And Jeremiah the prophet has pointed out, that as many believers as God has prepared for this purpose, to multiply those left upon the earth, should both be under the rule of the saints to minister to this Jerusalem, and that [His] kingdom shall be in it¹⁰

Finally, Irenaeus discusses the New Jerusalem and the relation of the millennial kingdom to the new creation. He held that the millennial kingdom was something of a *training period* in preparation for the “new heavens and new earth.” He states,

When these things, therefore, pass away above the earth, John, the Lord’s disciple, says that the new Jerusalem above shall [then] descend, as a bride adorned for her husband; . . . Of this Jerusalem the former one is an image—that Jerusalem of the former earth in which the righteous are disciplined beforehand for incorruption and prepared for salvation And as he rises actually, so also shall he be actually disciplined beforehand for incorruption, and shall go forwards and flourish in the times of the kingdom, in order that he may be capable of receiving the glory of the Father. Then, when all things are made new, he shall truly dwell in the city of God.¹¹

⁸ Ibid., 562-63 [from V.33.3].

⁹ Ibid., 563 [from V.33.4].

¹⁰ Ibid., 565 [from V.35.1]. The latter reference to Jeremiah is actually to the book of Baruch (the scribe of Jeremiah). Irenaeus goes on to quote from Baruch 4:36–5:9.

¹¹ Ibid., 566 [from V.35.2].

C. Hippolytus (d. ca. AD 236)

Hippolytus served as a presbyter and teacher in the church at Rome. He wrote a commentary on Daniel, and was also a premillennialist. However, he anticipated the millennium in the year AD 500. He identified the beast of Rev 13 as arising from the fourth beast of Dan 7 (i.e., the Roman Empire). The Antichrist would rule for 3 ½ years, but the number 666 would not be understood until the future. He seems to have understood the great harlot and Babylon as Rome.

D. Victorinus (d. ca. AD 303)

Victorinus was a bishop of Pettau, near Vienne. He is noteworthy, in that his commentary on Revelation is one of the earliest extant commentaries to survive. Being influenced by Papias, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus, he understood Revelation in a literal, chiliastic sense (premillennial).¹² He held that the Antichrist would persecute the church, and hence the woman fleeing into the wilderness symbolizes believers fleeing from the hosts of Antichrist. The second beast in Rev 13 would set up an image of the Antichrist in the temple at Jerusalem. Victorinus's work is noteworthy for its record of two significant interpretative features:

1. His commentary is the first (at least that we have record of) to espouse the *Nero redivivus* theory, i.e., that Nero would return from the dead as the 8th king and the Antichrist (thought to be near at hand).
2. He articulated a recapitulation view of the trumpet and bowl judgments, i.e., that the bowls do not follow the trumpets in a continuous series, but are parallel with them and recapitulate them in another form.

Victorinus thought that the persecutions of his own day belonged to the *sixth seal*, and that the seventh seal would usher in the *End*.

II. THE INFLUENCE OF THE SCHOOL OF ALEXANDRIA

Despite some continuing witness to the literal millennial kingdom view beyond the second century AD, the rise of the school of Alexandria towards the end of the second century was beginning to influence the interpretation of Scripture, including the prophetic portions (see notes in Appendix B on *Eschatological Systems*). The key factor was a shift from a basically literal hermeneutic to an allegorizing method. The most influential person connected with the school of Alexandria was Origen (who had been influenced by Clement of Alexandria).¹³

A. Origen (ca. 185 – ca. 254)

Prior to Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215), the post-apostolic fathers (in general) expected the soon return of the Lord to establish an earthly messianic kingdom. The delay of the *parousia* combined with the influence of Greek thought and the earlier writings of Philo led to non-literal views of the prophecies. Origen was vehemently

¹² Apparently, there is some discrepancy concerning Victorinus, although he does appear to have been premillennial. Gregg states, "Victorinus' commentary followed the allegorizing approach. It appears that Augustinian editors may have altered it, however, because in its present form it champions *amillennialism*, whereas Jerome (c. 345-420) listed Victorinus with Tertullian and Lactantius as a *chiliast* (that is, a premillennialist) [*Revelation: Four Views*, 30].

¹³ Concerning Clement's spiritualizing views of Revelation, Swete states, "Thus Clement sees in the four and twenty Elders a symbol of the equality of Jew and Gentile within the Christian Church; in the tails of the locusts of the Abyss, the mischievous influence of immoral teachers; in the many-coloured foundation stones of the City of God, the manifold grace of Apostolic teaching" (Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation*, 3rd ed. [London: Macmillan, 1911; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Pub., 1977], ccviii).

opposed to the literal millennial views of the second century fathers. Although Origen did not write a commentary on Revelation, his views on it can be gleaned from his many writings. According to Origen, the mysteries of Revelation can only be understood by looking to the *spiritual sense*. Beckwith summarizes his views:

At a definite period the Lord will come, not visibly, but in spirit, and establish his perfected kingdom on earth. The time of his advent will coincide with the coming culmination of evil in the person of Antichrist, a future world-ruler, a child of Satan. The imagery of the visions is to be taken allegorically; for example, the seven heads of the dragon are seven deadly sins, the ten horns are serpent-like powers of sin which assail the inner life, the roll with seven seals is the Scriptures, whose meaning Christ alone can unseal;¹⁴

B. Methodius (d. ca. AD 311)

Methodius (a bishop in Lycia), despite his attacks on Origen on certain doctrinal issues, followed the spiritualizing procedure of Origen. In general, the visions were to be taken allegorically. For example, the woman with child is the Church bearing children into spiritual life, and she is removed from the assaults of the devil (since the true life of these is with the Spirit in heaven).¹⁵ The beast is a symbol of *fleshly lust*.

C. Tyconius (fl. ca. AD 370–390)

Tyconius is known to have written his *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (which only survives in citations from the works of others). His views, however, are partially influenced by the struggles of his day. Tyconius was himself aligned with the Donatists who were regarded as heretics by the Catholic Church. Thus, Tyconius (as other Donatists) regarded themselves as the true church which was being persecuted by the Satanic powers foretold in Revelation (for them, the Catholic hierarchy supported by the world-power). His method is thoroughly spiritualizing. For him, the millennial reign is realized in the Church, between the first coming of Christ and the second. Jerusalem symbolizes the Church, whereas Babylon symbolizes the antichristian world. He also adopted the recapitulation theory.

D. Augustine (AD 354–430)

Augustine was significantly influenced by Tyconius, despite his own efforts to avoid the “heresies” of the Donatists. This influence stemmed not just from Tyconius’s *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, but from another work by Tyconius entitled *Book of Rules*. The latter was the first Latin essay in hermeneutics, in which Tyconius presented seven keys to spiritual exegesis. In fact, Augustine’s elaboration of this in his own work (*On Christian Instruction*, 3:30:42-37:56) helped to ensure that Tyconius had a wide influence. As a result, Augustine adopted Tyconius’s spiritualizing method as well as his preference for the recapitulation theory (the latter includes the idea that Rev 20 is a recapitulation of the period leading up to the 2nd Advent, not a chronologically successive period). Like Tyconius, Augustine held the view that the millennial reign was represented by the period between the two comings of Christ. What is noteworthy here is not so much Augustine’s originality of these views, but the fact that he was the more influential writer (and hence, did more to propagate these views). Augustine did not write a commentary on Revelation, but his interpretations on parts of it are reflected in his writings (especially *The City of God*, 20, 7 ff.).

¹⁴ Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (London: The MacMillan Company, 1919; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 323.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Follow-up note: The expectation of a future millennial kingdom was still affirmed as late as the Council of Nicea in AD 325. At the Council of Ephesus in AD 431, however, the belief in the millennium was declared to be superstitious.

III. FROM 500 TO 1000 AD

Most of this period is characterized by the influence of Tyconius and Augustine in favor of the spiritualizing method (with an occasional follower after the literal method of Victorinus). With the approach of the year 1000, chiliastic expectations did resurface. Tyconius's views were perpetrated in the east through the commentary of Andreas, and in the west through that of Primasius.

A. Andreas (6th cent. AD)

Andreas (bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia) is best known for his Greek commentary which relied on the spiritualizing method of interpretation for the most part. Beckwith highlights his views:

The kingdom of 1000 years, as with Ticonius and Augustine, begins with Christ's earthly life and will continue till the knowledge of him is everywhere extended, the number of years being symbolical of completeness and multitude. The first resurrection is the believer's rising from spiritual death; Babylon represents, not Rome, but the sum of the world-powers; the temple is the Christian Church.¹⁶

Nevertheless, he did hold that an Antichrist would arise, though he rejected the association with the wounded head of Nero. He held that the first five seals were already past, though the remainder of judgments pertained to the future. He held that the seven kings (17:10) were seven embodiments of the world power, the sixth being Rome and the seventh Constantinople.

B. Primasius (6th cent. AD)

Primasius was bishop at Hadrumetum in N. Africa, and wrote a commentary on Revelation prior to AD 543-44. If for no other reason, his commentary is important for preserving almost completely the African Latin text of Revelation. He was strongly influenced and reliant upon the views of Tyconius and Augustine (which he acknowledges in his preface). There are, however, a few points when he departs from the spiritualizing method to adopt a realistic interpretation (e.g., the Antichrist will be a person who comes out of the tribe of Dan).

C. Berengaudus (9th cent. AD)

His main contribution was to see the judgment series as extending over broad sweeps of time. Beckwith (p 326) writes,

He interprets the first six seals as covering the time from Adam to the rejection of the Jews in the fall of Jerusalem; the first six trumpets are the preachers sent by God from the beginning of biblical history down to the latest defenders of the Church, the seventh trumpet represents the preachers who will come in the time of Antichrist; the horns of the beast are the barbarian tribes who destroyed the Roman empire.

¹⁶ Ibid., 325.

Perhaps his approach paved the way for the later methodology that saw in Revelation a broad sweep of church history and the world.

IV. FROM AD 1000 TO THE REFORMATION

The approach of the year AD 1000 brought with it a heightened sense of expectation. Though Augustine had taken the “1000 years” as symbolic of an *indefinite period*, there were many who held that though the millennium represented the period between the two comings of Christ, it was a thousand year interval. Beckwith (p 327) explains the significance in relation to the approach and passing of AD 1000:

From the time of Ticonius and Augustine it had been a belief, nearly universal, that the kingdom of the thousand years began with the earthly appearance of Christ, or with his resurrection and ascension; Satan had been ‘bound,’ that is, his power had been in part restrained, but he was not destroyed, Antichrist and antichristian powers were still at work constantly in the world; at the end of the millennial period a final manifestation of evil in personal form would take place, with all its enmity toward the Church. Therefore as the ten centuries neared their end, a general unrest and fear seized society. Satan was about to be loosed for the last great conflict, the time of dread persecution was at hand, after which would come the judgment and the end of the world. The critical period however passed by, neither Antichrist nor the Lord appeared, nothing occurred in the experience of the Church or the world in which Christians could see their expectations and fears realized. This undisturbed passage of the time of expected crisis produced first of all a change of view in regard to the meaning of the thousand years. Augustine centuries before had taken it as symbolical of an indefinite period, and this understanding of it now became general.

A. Joachim of Fiore (ca. 1135–1202)

Joachim was a Cistercian monk in Italy. Clouse introduces him this way:

He recorded two mystical experiences which gave him the gift of spiritual intelligence enabling him to understand the inner meaning of history. At times he prophesied on contemporary events and the advent of Antichrist. He also meditated deeply on the two great menaces to Christianity, the infidel and the heretic.¹⁷

One of his published works was entitled *Exposition of the Apocalypse*. Joachim, as with others, vainly attempted to read prophetic expectations into his own time era. Believing that the New Testament period of grace would last for 42 generations of thirty years each, he was looking for a new age of the Spirit to begin in the year AD 1260 which would see a rise in new religious orders that would convert the world. Thus, for Joachim, the millennium was conceived of as future, but not of a literal thousand years.¹⁸ Joachim saw this near-approaching time of bliss to be realized in perfected monasticism, an idea that gave a fresh spark of life and zeal to monks.

At times the Beast represents the Devil, but at other times the Beast is Mohammedism. The deadly wound is that which Islam suffered in the Crusades, but nevertheless survived and recovered from. The false prophet represented the heretics which plagued the church.

¹⁷ J. D. Douglas, ed. *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1978), s.v. “Joachim of Fiore,” by Robert G. Clouse.

¹⁸ Regarding Joachim's views, Swete (ccxii) adds, "Of the seven heads of the Beast the fifth is the Emperor Frederick I., and the sixth Saladin; the seventh is Antichrist; the destruction of Antichrist will be followed by the millennium, which thus recovers its place as a hope of the future."

Although he accepted the legitimacy of the papacy, he attacked the general worldliness that had crept into the church (which could be restored through monasticism).

Joachim's influence continued after his death, both through his writings and those pseudonymously attributed to him. The Franciscans, in particular, held him in high esteem and considered him a prophet. Consequently, many held to the idea that the church was living in the *last days*. The Book of Revelation was thus used to foster the idea of reformation within the church. In the ensuing years, the cries of reformation within the church led to an attack upon the Pope himself (in contrast to Joachim's support of the papacy). So, the Beast was understood to refer to the Pope (the Antichrist), and the Roman Catholic Church was the woman sitting on the Beast (Rev 17). Keep in mind that this notion *predated* the Reformation itself!

B. Nicholas of Lyra (ca. 1265–1349)

One of the other influential figures prior to the Reformation was Nicholas of Lyra, a Franciscan scholar who studied theology at Paris (ca. 1308). Norman describes him as departing from the general allegorical tendency: "The best-equipped biblical scholar of the Middle Ages, knowing Hebrew and acquainted with Jewish commentaries, notably Rashi, he was especially concerned to expound the literal sense of Scripture as against the current allegorical interpretation."¹⁹ In regard to Revelation, Nicholas set a whole new course for interpreting the book, one which influenced many generations. In his view, the Book of Revelation was meant to portray all of church history from the apostolic era until the final consummation (progressively fulfilled throughout church history). He claimed to find references to such events as the rise and spread of Islam, Charlemagne, and the Crusades. However, he felt that the millennium (which began with the founding of the Mendicant orders) was already present, and anticipated that Satan would be released and return again before the complete end of history. Nicholas's idea that Revelation portrayed the whole general sweep of church history (the historicist approach) was to have a significant influence on later commentators, particularly those of the Reformation (including Martin Luther!).

V. FROM THE REFORMATION THROUGH THE 18TH CENTURY AD

We cannot say that the historicist approach was the only one of this period, but it was certainly the dominant one of those outside the Catholic Church. The rise of the *literary-critical* school of thought, however, in the 18th century (with its attack upon the inerrancy of Scripture) provided alternative views to Revelation.

A. The Historicist Approach of the Reformation (*continuous-historical*)

For Luther and other Reformers, the historicist approach was widely adopted. In their attack upon the Catholic Church, the Beast was readily seen as the Pope and the woman sitting on the Beast as the Roman Catholic Church (Rev 17). In contrast, the Catholic Church viewed Luther and the other Reformers as the Antichrist, and the various Protestant sects as the False Prophet.

Though viewing the book as a panoramic sweep of church history, the interpretation of details would vary from one commentator to the next. Each generation seemed to find particular reference to events and persons of its own age (from Constantine to Napoleon).

¹⁹ J. D. Douglas, ed. *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1978), s.v. "Nicholas of Lyra," by J. G. G. Norman.

The historicist approach (made famous by Luther) was embraced by such notables as John Wycliffe, John Knox, William Tyndale, Ulrich Zwingli, Philip Melancthon, Sir Isaac Newton, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Finney, C. H. Spurgeon, Matthew Henry, Adam Clarke, J. A. Bengel, and Joseph Mede. It has even continued into the 19th century through the works of men like Albert Barnes (1798-1870; Presbyterian minister and author of *Barnes Notes*), E. B. Elliott (*Horae Apocalypticae*, 1847), and A. J. Gordon (1836-1895; editor of the *Watchword* monthly periodical which focused on prophecy). Despite this list of prominent evangelical Protestant leaders who took the historicist approach, it is almost totally abandoned today by contemporary commentators.

Despite a common embracing of the historicist approach, commentators would differ on details. Some would take the recapitulation theory of the judgment cycles (that the trumpets and bowls essentially repeated the judgments of the seals), while others would view the cycles as one long unfolding of church history. Throughout this period, date-setting for the time of the end continued to be practiced, often utilizing the "year-for-a-day" principle.²⁰ This was particularly true as dramatic moments of history were faced, especially throughout the 1700's and leading up to the French Revolution (as well as the advent of Napoleon).

B. Roman Catholic Approaches

In an attempt to counter the historicist approaches which focused upon attacking the Catholicism and the Pope, certain Catholic commentators provided alternatives.

1. Franciscus Ribeira (1537–1591)

A Spanish Jesuit and professor at Salamanca by the name of Ribeira (having a knowledge of both Greek and Latin commentators of the patristic period) published a commentary in the late 16th century.²¹ In contrast to the historicist approaches, Ribeira stressed that most of the book had its fulfillment in John's near future or would be fulfilled in the *end-times*. Although he related the first five seals to a past age (from the Apostles to the persecution under Trajan), the rest of the book (beginning with the 6th seal) awaited the Last Days. Thus, he eliminated the speculative tendency of trying to relate various events of church history to details in Revelation. Of even more significance, he shifted the interpretation of the beast as the Pope to an individual yet to come in the future.

2. Luiz de Alcazar (1554–1613)

Another Spanish Jesuit named Alcazar (whose commentary was published in 1614) took a very different approach than Ribeira, in which he interpreted most of the

²⁰ According to the "year-for-a-day" principle, advocates hold that the dates mentioned in both Daniel and Revelation are symbolic (often taking a day to mean a year). Gregg explains,

"On this principle, five months (150 days) is taken to designate 150 years. The significant period of 1260 days is interpreted as the same number of years. 'An hour, and a day, and a month, and a year' becomes (depending whether a year is 360 days or 365 days) 391 years and 15 days, or 396 years and 106 days.

In support of this procedure, appeal is made to Ezekiel 4:4-6, in which the prophet was required to lie on his left side for 390 days, and upon his right side for 40 days, representing the same number of years of judgment decreed upon Israel and Judah respectively" (Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views*, 34-5).

²¹ F. Ribeira, *Commentarius in sacram b. Ioannis Apoc.* (Salamanca, 1591).

book from a preterist view. Only the final chapters, 20–22, looked to the future. His system involved a division of chapters 4–22 into three parts:

- a. Ch 4–11 — This section supposedly depicts the church's struggle against Judaism, which culminated in the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.
- b. Ch 12–19 — This section depicts the church's struggle with paganism (along with Judaism), ending with the fall of Rome in AD 476.
- c. Ch 20–22 — Based on the assumption that the "1000 years" represents an indefinite period *during the present age*, Alcazar held that these chapters predict the "victory" of the church which began with Constantine and would continue on until the end of the world (for him, a triumph of the church as represented by Catholicism).

In one way, Alcazar's scheme is a type of historicist approach, with the book surveying the progress of the gospel throughout history. However, since most of this is correlated with church history prior to AD 476, it is basically preterist. One of the novelties in his interpretation is to identify the "strong angel" who binds Satan as Constantine. We should also observe that his approach basically eliminates any future tribulation or a future Antichrist. Although differing significantly from Ribeira's approach, both schemes were aimed at the same goal: countering the attack upon Catholicism by Protestants who followed the mainline historicist approach. Alcazar's model served to pave the way for later interpreters who followed a preterist approach of interpreting the book in light of the first few centuries when Empirical Rome persecuted Christianity.

VI. DEVELOPMENTS OF THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES AD

The past two centuries have seen anything but uniformity in approach to the Book of Revelation. Although there has been a shift away from the historicist approach of the Reformation and early post-reformation period, the past two centuries have witnessed the rise of the preterist approach, the "spiritual" approach, and the futurist approach. The latter approach, understanding the bulk of ch 4–20 as events waiting to be fulfilled in the future is the dominant approach today (though interpreters will do so in different ways according to their own eschatological grid).

A. The Rise of the Preterist School of Approach (contemporary-historical)

1. Early Forerunners of the Preterist Approach

Representatives of the preterist approach are primarily found in the past two centuries, and hence my reason for placing the discussion here. Having said that, however, traces of the preterist approach can be found much earlier. This was witnessed as early as the 6th century when Andreas of Cappadocia (though not a preterist himself) made mention in his commentary on Revelation of those of whom he was aware that understood the judgements as applying to the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in AD 70.²² Further impetus was provided by Alcazar's *interpretative scheme* (AD 1614) in which ch 4–19 were assigned a fulfillment prior to AD 476.

Alcazar's approach was resisted by most Protestant scholars after the Reformation, who continued to see the Beast as a reference to the Pope and the harlot as Catholicism. In 1644, however, a Dutch Protestant named Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) wrote a commentary on Revelation that was strongly influenced by the

²² For citations, see Kenneth Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell*, 107. Another commentator by the name of Arethas, writing sometime in either the 6th or 9th century, held a similar view.

Catholic Alcazar. He generally agreed with Alcazar's three-fold division of Revelation, but with modification to allow more correlation with the events of Constantine's day and latter events in church history. His work is significant for at least three reasons: (1) as a Protestant, his acceptance of Alcazar's basic model paved the way for other Protestant scholars to embrace a preterist approach; (2) he was one of the first Reformed exegetes to abandon the identification of the pope as the Beast; and (3) he was one of the first to call into question the *unity* of the book (thus pioneering the literary-critical approach to Revelation).

For the main, however, the preterist approach has had its strongest following in more recent times, though from three different camps: (1) critical scholars; (2) conservatives; and (3) reconstructionists. Preterists usually argue for their position on the advantage that it would be most relevant to the original audience. Furthermore, they would claim that internal notes about a *soon coming* are best understood from a preterist position. Furthermore, the instructions to John to "not seal up the book" in Rev 22:10 seem to be deliberately contrasted with the instructions to Daniel to "seal up the book" (Dan 12:9). Advocates argue that this indicates an expectation of a fulfillment in the near future.

2. Critical Scholars

Johann Eichhorn (1752–1827)

Eichhorn was a noted German critical scholar whose liberal views gained him a reputation as the "father of Old Testament criticism." In 1791 he advanced a theory that the book of Revelation represented "a great historic poem picturing in dramatic form the victory of Christianity over Judaism and heathenism, symbolized respectively in Jerusalem and Rome."²³ As a noted scholar, Eichhorn's *dramatic approach* (with acts and scenes depicting the progress and victory of the Christian faith) influenced others to approach the book primarily in terms of what it meant for the original writer and his readers.

Other critical studies have stressed the examination of Revelation in light of other apocalyptic literature from before and during the first century, as well as assessing the unity and redaction of the book.²⁴ The outcome of the work of critical scholars, however, has been the view that John wrote with an expectation that there would be a vindication of Christianity *in the relatively near future*, but that this failed to materialize (and hence, that John was mistaken). Critical scholars following the preterist approach include R. H. Charles (in the *ICC* series) and J. M. Ford (*Anchor Bible Commentary*).

3. Conservative Scholars Following the Preterist Approach

There were other scholars who approached the book from a basically preterist position, but who held to the inspiration of Scripture and did not deny the unity of the book. Representatives would include Moses Stuart (writing in 1845), J. Russell Stewart (1887), Milton Terry (1898) and Henry Barclay Swete, whose third edition of his *Commentary on Revelation* appeared in 1911.²⁵ Swete held that the book

²³ Beckwith, 333.

²⁴ One of the more significant early works to focus on the matter of apocalyptic literature was that of Lucke (*Einleitung in d. Offenbar. d. Johan.*, 2d ed., 1852).

²⁵ Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 2 vols (Andover, Mass.: Allen, 1845); J. Stewart Russell, *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of our Lord's Second Coming* (1887; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983); Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Apocalypics: A Study*

was written in the latter part of Domitian's reign, and was written primarily for John's own time (although he also combined this with the *spiritual approach*). Thus, the significance of the book is primarily for the early church, as that is where most of the fulfillment lies. Gregg points out some of the advantages to this approach:

This view has the advantage of immediate relevance to the original readers, a feature we would strongly expect to find in an epistle. It also is the only view that does not need an alternative to the literal sense of passages like Revelation 1:1 and 19, which affirm that the events predicted "must shortly come to pass" and "are about to take place"; and like Revelation 22:10, where John is told *not* to seal up the book, because "the time is at hand."²⁶

Several who have written from a preterist approach have combined this with the spiritual approach (e.g., Swete, and Albertus Pieters).²⁷ There are not many writings from this perspective in recent years, but modern-day examples can be found in Morris Ashcraft and Jay Adams.²⁸ More recently, amillennialist teacher R. C. Sproul has taken a preterist approach, viewing the events of Matthew 24 as fulfilled in AD 70.²⁹

4. Christian Reconstructionists (Dominion Theology)

Over the last three decades, a modern form of postmillennialism has arisen as advocated by those known as *Christian Reconstructionists*.³⁰ This modern movement has called for an imposition of Old Testament Law upon modern society at large (not just the Christian community!). Postmillennialism is an essential part of their theology, as they believe that society can and will become Christian (a glorious age!) as God's laws (including those of the Mosaic covenant) are applied to all of society. Hence, there is no room in their theology for an ungodly political system led by Antichrist which will be overthrown by the personal return of Jesus Christ. They alleviate the difficulties that Revelation would present to their system by relegating the fulfillment details to the first century AD with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. This has been reflected in the writings of David Chilton, Gary DeMar, and Kenneth Gentry.³¹ In contrast to earlier preterists, reconstructionists argue for an early date of writing in order to connect the details of the book with the events leading up to AD 70.

of the Most Notable Revelations of God and of Christ in the Canonical Scriptures (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1898; and Henry B. Swete, *Commentary on Revelation*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1911).

²⁶ Gregg, 38.

²⁷ Albertus Pieters, *The Lamb, the Woman, and the Dragon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1937).

²⁸ Morris Ashcraft, *Hebrews-Revelation*, in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton J. Allen, vol 12 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972); and Jay Adams, *The Time is at Hand* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1966).

²⁹ R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998).

³⁰ For a helpful description and analysis of this movement, see H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1988). Early leaders of this movement have been R. J. Rushdoony, Gary North, and Greg Bahnsen.

³¹ A couple of the more noteworthy attempts at explaining eschatology from a reconstructionist view have been David Chilton, *Paradise Restored: An Eschatology of Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Reconstruction Press, 1985); *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Fort Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987); and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation: An Exegetical and Historical Argument for a pre-A.D. 70 Composition* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

B. The Spiritual Approach (or *Idealist, Symbolic*)

This approach avoids the difficulties of historical correlation by looking for *spiritual lessons* or *principles* in the story. Such interpreters avoid identification of specific individuals or events in history. Thus the meaning of John's visions is to be spiritually understood. Gregg describes the results of the spiritual approach:

According to this view, the great themes of the triumph of good over evil, of Christ over Satan, of the vindication of the martyrs and the sovereignty of God are played out throughout Revelation without necessary reference to single historical events. The battles in Revelation may be seen as referring to spiritual warfare, to the persecution of Christians, or to natural warfare in general throughout history. The beast from the sea may be identified as the satanically-inspired political opposition to the church in any age, and the beast from the land as the opposition of pagan or corrupt religion to Christianity.³²

This approach was seen as early as William Milligan whose commentary, *The Book of Revelation*, was published in London in 1889. It has been adapted and utilized by both liberal and conservative scholars. Sometimes, this would even be blended with the preterist approach.³³ William Hendriksen's 1939 work, *More Than Conquerors*, is essentially a *spiritual approach*, though he combines other approaches as well (e.g., the preterist and historical). He sees seven segments to the book which parallel one another, each of which concerns the entire church age.³⁴ However, he asserts that the goal is not specific identification of persons and events but of *principles*. More recently, some form of blended approach involving the *spiritual* has been followed in commentaries by Leon Morris and Michael Wilcock.³⁵ Sam Hamstra summarizes and defends the idealist view in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*.³⁶

C. The Futurist Approach

Most contemporary evangelical scholars hold to some form of the *futurist approach*, in which ch 4–22 are to be fulfilled at some future point (they are future events to both John's day and most of church history). This has been popularized by dispensational writers, though they are not the only ones to take the futurist approach (i.e., one could subscribe to a futurist approach without being dispensational). We could suggest at least three different variations of the futurist approach:

- 1) Premillennial – Dispensational
- 2) Premillennial – non-dispensational
- 3) Amillennial

1. Dispensationalists hold that the church will be raptured prior to the tribulation and will not experience these judgments (hence, a rapture prior to Rev 4).

³² Gregg, 43.

³³ Examples of a blending of late-date preterist and spiritual approaches are seen in H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (New York: Macmillan, 1906); and Ray Summers, *Worthy Is the Lamb: An Interpretation of Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1951).

³⁴ Such a structural understanding of the book was not new. A similar approach had been advocated earlier by R. C. H. Lenski (*The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* [Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1935]), and Charles R. Eerdman (*The Revelation of John* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1936]).

³⁵ Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969); and Michael Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened: The Message of Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975).

³⁶ C. Marvin Pate, ed., *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1998).

Dispensationalists would also see the references in the book to Israel literally (hence, the woman in ch 12 is Israel, and Jews will be persecuted by the Antichrist during the tribulation). Since dispensationalists are also premillennialists, they would take the 1000 year reign in Revelation literally and equate this with the earthly millennium. Though there are certainly variations of opinion among dispensationalists on the details of the book, those who take this general approach have included J. N. Darby, C. I. Scofield (*The Scofield Reference Bible*), Clarence Larkin, Charles Ryrie, J. Dwight Pentecost, John Walvoord, Hal Lindsey, and Robert Thomas. More recently, C. Marvin Pate has attempted to espouse and defend a "progressive dispensationalist" approach to Revelation by applying an "already-not yet" hermeneutic.³⁷ According to Pate, there is an initial and partial fulfillment with ancient Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70, but also a future and more complete fulfillment yet to come in the Tribulation before the Second Coming. He sees the Beast as the Imperial Cult of Rome (as a partial fulfillment in the past), but also as a future antichrist.

2. Non-dispensational premillennialists argue for a post-tribulational rapture, and thus view the church as passing through the tribulation. Following the second-coming, there will be a millennial period. Some, like George Ladd, would hold to a literal 1000-year millennium (just as the dispensationalists). Others might hold to a millennium, but not necessarily for a thousand year duration (see Alan Johnson in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*).
3. Some amillennialists (not all!) have taken a generally futurist approach (e.g., I. T. Beckwith, 1919). They would hold to a literal tribulation period on earth in which the Antichrist would be present. Following the Second Coming, however, there would not be an earthly millennium. Thus, when they come to Rev 20, they would view this differently than premillennialists. For Hoekema (*The Bible and the Future*), this is a depiction of the entire age between the 1st and 2nd comings of Christ (he obviously spiritualizes the number 1000).

Although examples of the futurist approach can be found prior to the 19th century, it was primarily the writings of John Nelson Darby and the Plymouth Brethren movement beginning around 1830 that began to popularize this approach.³⁸ By the latter part of the century, the Bible Conference movement (beginning about 1876) did even more to establish the futurist approach. Two significant works in the year 1909 gave further influence to this approach. The first was J. A. Seiss's *Lectures on the Apocalypse*, and the second was the publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. This approach continued to spread to the masses through the establishment of such schools as Moody Bible Institute and Dallas Theological Seminary. The publication of Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* in 1970 (over 20 million copies sold!), despite some extremes in interpretation, brought the futurist approach to the forefront of American evangelicalism.

Since the futurist approach is held by scholars of varying millennial positions, it is not

³⁷ Pate, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, 135-75.

³⁸ Steve Gregg (32) credits Samuel R. Maitland (1792-1866) as the one responsible for the "official entrance" of the futurist approach to Revelation around 1827. Maitland was an Anglican historian who had been trained at Cambridge. From 1823-27, he was perpetual curate of Christ Church, Gloucester, and at one time served as librarian to the archbishop of Canterbury.

In addition to Maitland's influence, the futurist approach was given further impetus in Europe through the influence of Isaac Williams in England (*The Apocalypse* [London, 1852]), and on the continent through the efforts of C. Stern (*Commentar u. die Offenbarung* [Schaffhausen, 1854]) and A. Bisping (*Erklärung der Apocalypse* [Munster, 1876]).

surprising that there would be variation in matters of detail. Furthermore, there are those who would not be considered strictly futurist. Robert Mounce and Alan Johnson, for instance, combine the futurist approach with the preterist. Nevertheless, the distinctive feature of the futurist approach remains, i.e., most of the events described in chapters 4ff. await a time shortly before the return of the Lord Jesus Christ for fulfillment. This is surely the most sensible approach to the book, though there will certainly be spiritual lessons for believers of all ages.