

## INTERPRETATIVE APPROACHES & HERMENEUTICAL GUIDELINES

### I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The Book of Revelation has mystified Bible students throughout the ages, and not surprisingly a plethora of interpretations has arisen.<sup>1</sup> In general, however, most interpretative schemes fall into one of four general categories. In this session, we will identify these four basic approaches and provide some evaluation of them. By doing so, we will be better prepared for interacting with the many commentaries.
- B. Overview of the History of Interpretation [see Appendix D for a detailed treatment]
  - 1. The earliest commentators were clearly premillennial, i.e., they believed that after the Second Coming, Christ would rule on the earth for a thousand years. Persons holding this view are sometimes called *chiliasts* (from Gk *chilioi* meaning "a thousand"). Mounce comments,  
"Early writers such as Justin, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus were chiliasts. They held that the apocalypse foretold a literal millennial kingdom on earth to be followed by a general resurrection, judgement, and a renewal of heaven and earth."<sup>2</sup>
  - 2. As time went on, and the eschatological promises did not find immediate fulfilment, confusion set in. Furthermore, the rise of the spiritualizing approach of the Alexandrian church influenced many away from the earlier more literal view. Augustine's allegorical approach and mystical exegesis influenced Christendom for at least the next 1000 years!<sup>3</sup>
  - 3. In the 12th century, Joachim of Floris's followers began to identify the Pope as the beast and papal Rome as the woman upon the beast, an interpretation that dominated during the Protestant Reformation.

### II. THE PRETERIST APPROACH (or "contemporary-historical")

- A. Basic Description:  
Revelation was fulfilled in the early age of the church during the period from John to Constantine.
- B. Elaboration

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<sup>1</sup>The commentary by I. T. Beckwith contains a helpful essay entitled "History of Interpretation," which provides a good survey up to the 20th century (see pp. 318-34).

<sup>2</sup>Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 39. The oldest extant Greek commentary on Revelation is that of Oecumenius (early 6th cent.).

<sup>3</sup>Augustine (354-430) was bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Famous as a Christian philosopher, he popularized a *spiritualizing hermeneutic* for prophetic passages of the Bible.

The church, threatened by the growing demands of emperor worship, is entering into a period in which its faith is to be severely tested. The beasts of ch 13 are identified respectively as imperial Rome and the imperial priesthood. Hence, the book's purpose was to encourage faithfulness during intense persecution, and to show how God was about to bring judgement on the world that was oppressing them. This view has its origin with a Spanish Jesuit named Alcasar in AD 1614.

Among those who have taken the preterist position, there is diversity of opinion. *Mild Preterism* describes the victory of the early church, first in the downfall of the Jewish nation and eventually the overthrow of pagan Rome. *Moderate Preterism* (popular today) sees almost all prophecy as fulfilled in the AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem. *Extreme Preterism* understands the Second Coming as the judgement which fell on Jerusalem in AD 70. For them, there is no future physical resurrection; rather, we are spiritually resurrected now. History goes on unending.

#### C. Proponents

1. G. B. Caird, H. B. Swete, R. H. Charles (*ICC*), J. M. Ford (*Anchor*)
2. Moderate Preterists:
  - a. Some reconstructionists: David Chilton, Gary DeMar (*Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church*, 3rd ed., 1997), Kenneth Gentry (*He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology*), Gary North, and Greg Bahnsen
  - b. Some Reformed Theologians: R. C. Sproul (*The Last Days According to Jesus*, 1998)
3. Extreme Preterism: Max R. King (*The Spirit of Prophecy*, 1971)
4. Leon Morris might be classified as "preterist-spiritual"

#### D. Evaluation

The decisive victory portrayed in the latter chapters was never achieved, nor has the world experienced catastrophes on the scale depicted in Revelation.

### III. THE HISTORICIST APPROACH (or "continuous-historical")

#### A. Basic Description

The details of Revelation are in the process of being fulfilled throughout the church age (a symbolic picture of church history).

#### B. Elaboration

The focus is off the initial readers and on the events of the church age, particularly the history of Western Europe through the various popes. The origin of this view is with Joachim of Floris (d. 1202), a monastic, who claimed to have received on Easter night a special vision that revealed to him God's plan for the ages. Following Joachim's proposal, the Antichrist and Babylon were connected with Rome and the papacy.

#### C. Proponents

The major Reformers (Luther, Calvin, etc.), Alford (to some extent), E. B. Elliott

- D. Evaluation  
The primary weakness is the lack of consensus as to the historical identification of details.

#### IV. THE IDEALIST APPROACH (or "timeless-symbolic")

- A. Basic Description  
The details do not refer to specific events but are an expression of basic principles on which God acts throughout history.
- B. Elaboration  
The tendency of this view is to spiritualize everything. The book is taken to present timeless truths concerning the battle between good and evil that continues throughout the church age, from which we are to derive principles. Examples:
  - 1. Faith triumphs over might.
  - 2. The inevitability of judgement.
- C. Proponents  
Wm. Hendriksen, Wm. Milligan (*The Expositor's Bible*), Mathias Rissi, P. Mauro, G. K. Beale (*The Book of Revelation*, 1999), and Sam Hamstra, Jr.
- D. Evaluation
  - 1. Denies to the book any specific historical fulfillment.  
  
Thomas points out, "Fulfillment of the events predicted in the book, most notably the personal return of Jesus Christ to earth, is not found in a repetitive cycle that marks each generation, but will at some future point be historical in the fullest sense of the word" (*Revelation I-7*, 31).
  - 2. Violates the norms of language.

#### V. THE FUTURIST APPROACH (or "eschatological")

- A. Basic Description  
  
Views Rev 4–22 as belonging to a time still in the future (in close connection with the Second Coming of Christ).
- B. Elaboration  
  
The majority of modern-day conservative scholars understand that the main part of the book awaits the world on the eve of the parousia. There is a wide variety of opinion how these things shall come about, however. For example, some could be pre-trib while others are post-trib. Some could be premill. and others amill. Normally, the beast of Rev 13 & 17 is identified as the future Antichrist who will appear at the last moment in world history and be defeated by Christ upon His return. This approach was the view of the early church fathers and was revived in the late 16th century by a Spanish Jesuit, Franciscus Ribeira.

## C. Proponents:

1. Dispensational: John Walvoord, M. Tenney, Robert L. Thomas
2. Preterist-Futurist: Robert Mounce, F. F. Bruce, George Ladd, G. R. Beasley-Murray, I. T. Beckwith<sup>4</sup>

## D. Evaluation

This approach is the only one that allows the use of a consistent literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic. The only weakness I might point out is the danger to focus exclusively on the future, and fail to point out how relevant the book is for the contemporary church (most are not guilty of this tendency, however).

## VI. HERMENEUTICAL GUIDELINES

- A. In general, the plain, normal meaning of words should be accepted (i.e., use a literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic). Don't spiritualize!

Corollary: Numbers should be taken at face value.

- B. Yes, there are symbols which must be carefully interpreted, but before you assign a "symbolical meaning" to something, make sure that it was intended to be a symbol.

## 1. Examples

- a. Rev 11:8 (an intended symbol)  
The city where the two witnesses will be slain is called *spiritually* Sodom and Egypt.
- b. Rev 7 (not a symbol)  
John indicates that 12,000 will be taken from each of the 12 tribes of Israel as special witnesses to Christ. Some have interpreted the 144,000 as a symbol of the *church*. But there is nothing in the text to suggest that this should be given a symbolic interpretation.

## 2. Even symbols have a literal meaning

While there are legitimate symbols in the text, we must be careful to distinguish between the process of *revelation* and that of *interpretation*. A symbol is a literary device intended to communicate something, i.e., there is some concrete meaning behind the symbol that must be identified. For example, in Rev 20:1-3 a great chain is used to bind Satan in the abyss for 1000 years. In actuality, a literal chain may not be binding Satan, but there is the literal truth that Satan is restricted. Hence, this could not refer to the present age in which Satan goes about as a roaring lion.

3. To understand the symbolism of Revelation, one must remember that the whole Bible builds toward it. In particular, one must be familiar with OT symbolism.

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<sup>4</sup> Beckwith (335-36) actually used the label "contemporary-historical" and "apocalyptic-prophetic" to describe his own position. He recognized the general apocalyptic genre characterizing the work, felt that the book had to first be understood in relation to the period of its origin, but that it was genuinely prophetic. Thus, he held a dual-fulfillment: the beast of Rev 13 was both a symbol of the Roman Emperors of the 1st century AD as well as the future Antichrist. The "harlot" of Rev 17-18 is clearly the Imperial city of Rome, which the beast destroys.

## C. Avoid Looking for "Hidden Meanings"

Interpretations need to be *validated*, i.e., they should be able to be defended on the basis of grammar, context, or correlation with other biblical passages. Some people, however, assign interpretations arbitrarily that cannot be verified. This tendency can become very speculative and should be avoided.

Example: the "green grass" in Rev 8:7 (the 1st trumpet judgement)

One commentator interpreted the grass as "human beings" and the aspect of green as portraying the prosperous conditions of those people.<sup>5</sup> Not only is that an arbitrary interpretation that violates normal usage of those terms, but this interpretation is incongruous with Rev 9:4.

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<sup>5</sup>Walter Scott, *Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, n.d.), 186.