**Reading the Bible Again…For the First Time**

**(Hermeneutics: The Science and Art of Biblical Interpretation)**

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**LESSON NINE: Reading the Book of Revelation**

“It is difficult to say what anything means [about the book of Revelation]

until one has decided in a sense what everything means”!

Robert Mounce, *Revelation* (p. 12)

**INTRODUCTION:**

The opening quotation captures the reason why the casual and even the expert readers of Revelation often find themselves in the dilemma of understanding what Revelation intends to teach. The history of the interpretation of the Apocalypse exposes four major systems which are used to unpack the meaning of this book. Each system is the result of an elaborate process of interpretive decisions about the whole Bible leading up to the book of Revelation. Once certain interpretations are made, presuppositions are formed which are utilized to explain less clear biblical passages. Revelation is uniquely qualified to be influence by such theological analysis.

The following is just ONE aspect of study of Revelation. It is probably the one that is most driven by curiosity about the future. It should not be the first approach to the book, although knowing this material makes research on Revelation “easier.” Time does not allow me to share the full range of Revelation’s material.

**A SURVEY OF THE FOUR SYSTEMS: Four Butlers that Unpack the Book of Revelation**

1. ***CHURCH AGE HISTORICAL* [A major view of past Western history…no longer viable]**
2. Definition: The book of Revelation provides a sequential symbolic forecast of the whole course of human history from the time of John until the end of history.
3. Description:

The Church Age Historical system is no longer a major contender for interpreting Revelation. This view is well represented in the detailed commentary by Albert Barnes (*Notes on the New Testament: Revelation*. Reprinted by Baker, 1949. Composed about 1851). Barnes marches through Revelation and draws parallels between its portrayals and actual events in Western history. Sample correlations which Barnes proposed:

First seal / White horse = Peace and prosperity in Roman empire from Domitian (AD 96) to Commodus (AD 180)

Fifth seal = Diocletian’s efforts to extinguish Christians (AD 284-304)

First trumpet = Invasion of the Roman empire by Alaric, king of the Goths (AD 395-410)

Angel and little scroll = Angel announces victories of the Reformation and the little book is the agent of victory, the Bible. (Ch. 10)

Beasts of ch. 13 = The first beast is the civil/secular power of Rome and the second is the Papacy.

First vial/bowl = The French Revolution strikes a blow against the Papacy.

Seventh vial/bowl = Complete overthrow of Papacy. With this, Barnes ceases to connect with fulfilled history.

1. Brief analysis:

1a. This view is creative but limited by an author’s own time and world— Proponents only know of the Western world and do not align events beyond about 1800!

2a. There is little unanimity between those who follow this system, thus raising doubts about historical exactness. Contrast Daniel chs. 8 and 10. Daniel is so exact the liberal theologians claim it was written after the events.

3a. Most “time statements” have to be revised to allow for correlations with events. Days and months (e.g. Rev 12:6, 1260 days and 13:5, 42 months) become 1260 years.

4a. Explanatory “insets” in the book of Revelation creates sequence problems. For example

\* Beast persecutes witnesses (11:7) before rise to power (13:1)

\* Babylon falls (14:8) but not yet (17:1-5; 18:21)

5a. This view came late in Church history, traced to Joachim of Floris who died in 1202.

1. **IDEALIST**

1. Definition: Revelation presents the timeless spiritual truths of the struggle of good and evil through symbolic language but it does not tie any statement to a specific historical event and there is no predictive prophecy in any historical sense.

2. Description:

1a. The idealist position utilizes the symbolic speech of Revelation to unpack timeless truths about God and evil. “In Revelation words take the place of pigments and brushes to create a portrait designed to visualize great principles, not particular incidents” (Hamstra in Pate, 97). John is calling the church to endure, to live for a sovereign God who will overcome evil...eventually. Such propositions are biblically true and all views would affirm such a response to Revelation. But is such a system adequate in light of how Revelation brings the whole canon to a conclusion? Were the OT prophets mere idealists or did they forecast real future events in earth history.

“We are not to look in the Apocalypse for special events, but for an exhibition of the principles which govern the history both of the world and the Church.” (William Milligan, *The Book of Revelation* [George Doran, 1889], p. 154)

2a. Examples of certain forms of idealism may be observed in interpretations of Babylon’s destruction in Revelation 16:17-17:18.

“The setting of this scene is the mythic city-state, Babylon. While a map of ancient Rome may help us recognize the city John envisions, Babylon is actually the “global village” of godless power, which determines daily life for every person at any time in human history. The description of Babylon and its punishment is an impression of social evil and its destiny.” (Robert Wall, *Revelation* [Hendrickson Publishers, 1991], p. 202)

The great city Babylon “stands for civilized man, man in organized community, but man ordering his affairs apart from God. It symbolizes the pride of human achievement, the godlessness of those who put their trust in man.” (Leon Morris, *Revelation* [Eerdmans, 1969], p. 201)

“Babylon, then, is the world as the centre of seduction at any moment of history, particularly during this entire present dispensation.” (William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* [Baker reprint, 1998/from 1940], p. 169)

3. Brief analysis:

1a. Idealism provides many valid theological insights into the nature of God and evil but it does not adequately account for specific historical referents, such as Christ culminating history within a specific space/time continuum. Revelation 20 is merely viewed as the “church’s potential to reign with Christ in this age” (Pate, 27).

2a. Idealism was introduced by Clement and Origin in Alexandria, Egypt.

3a. Idealism promotes the amillennial view.

4a. Idealism overworks apocalyptic genre and ignores Revelation’s claims to prophecy.

5a. Idealism views defending or debating its views to be a waste of time.

1. ***PRETERIST***

1. Definition: Revelation is exclusively focused on the problems of the first century and its predictive element has already been fulfilled, especially in events such as the A.D./C.E. 70 destruction of Jerusalem.

2. Description:

1a. The preterist view stresses that Revelation was fully relevant to the first generation of Christians which read it. In fact, this is stressed to the point that its value for later generations is restricted to seeing past fulfillment and having only the brief single event of the second coming of Christ in the future. “The closer we get to the year 2000, the farther we get from the events of Revelation” (Gentry in Pate, 37).

2a. The preterists view the Beast as Rome and the Harlot of Revelation 17 as Jerusalem. Thus the AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem is what is described in ch. 17.

3a. The main tenants of this system appear in 1614 with the Jesuit priest Alcasar.

3. Brief analysis:

1a. The preterist view ***requires*** an early date for Revelation, during Nero’s reign from AD 54-68, rather than the traditional later date of Domitian’s time, AD 81-96. For the preterist, AD 70 becomes the key event to explain Revelation’s predictions. If the early date is shown to be invalid, this view encounters major problems. Liberals who hold this view usually hold the late date, but since predictive prophecy is not a part of their system, this presents no problem.

2a. Most preterist interpreters hold a postmillennial explanation for Revelation 20. This Christian Reconstructionist position has the church introducing millennial conditions through the triumph of the Gospel and the Law of God.

3a. Preterist fail to deal adequately with the detailed claims of Revelation in regard to the final events of earth history (Tenney, 137).

1. ***FUTURIST***

1. Definition: Revelation 4:1-22:21 is almost exclusively predictive prophecy of a brief time period, about seven years, just prior to the second advent of Christ and the establishment of His thousand year reign on earth.

2. Description:

1a. Futurists stress Revelation 1:1, 19 and 4:1, along with a prophetic reconstruction of chs. 4-22 which focus on end times events for Israel more than the Church. Recent futurists are viewing “already” (1st century) and “not yet” (end of earth history) aspects of fulfillment in Revelation 4-22 (cf. Pate).

2a. Futurists utilize prophetic passages from Daniel, Matthew, Romans and Thessalonians to argue that the seven year period in Revelation focuses on ethnic Israel in distinction from the Church. The “time of Jacob’s trouble” relates to Israel within God’s covenant program to deal with them.

3a. Futurists point out that their ideas are well supported by the earliest church leaders, including Justin Martyr (d. 165), Irenaeus (d.c. 195), Hippolytus (d. 236), and Victorinus (d.c. 303).

3a. Most modern futurists view Revelation 1-3 in relation to real churches in Asia Minor in the first century.

3. Brief analysis:

1a. Futurist’s views have been highly popularized by prophetic charlatans and thereby an abuse of biblical texts has occurred.

2a. Many futurists view all the material after 4:1 as a series of end time events which are still future. Some challenge this view by claiming that it diminishes the value of Revelation for the first generation.

2a. Futurists argue a great deal among themselves concerning the question of the Church’s relationship to the Great Tribulation and the consequent issue of the Rapture.

1. **Eclecticism**

The futurist progressive dispensationalism article by Marvin Pate in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Zondervan), well illustrates the combining of insights into one view.

**OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE FOUR SYSTEMS**

1. The Church Historical view is not currently in vogue and Idealist views have not been popular with evangelicals.

2. The preterist view and postmillennialism has been revived in recent years by the Christian Reconstructionist movement. Futurist usually affirm a premillennial interpretation.

3. Neither the preterist or the futurist are pure in their views. The preterist focuses on the near future (now past) but still affirm Christ coming as a future event. The futurist, especially those of more recent vintage, note aspects of first century history but emphasize a end-historical future scheme.

4. The popularized ideas of many futurists have tended toward abusive interpretations and sensationalism rather than exploring deeper biblical themes which are contained in prophetic texts.

5. The futurist camp has undergone more self-critique and revision than any other system. Several decades of increased hermeneutical awareness deeply impacted futurist’s interpretations of specific texts (cf. Pate’s treatment of “progressive dispensationalist” views).

6. All views are represented by competent scholars. No resolution for this maze is in sight because views are driven by systems which are committed to certain ideas to explain the whole Bible.

**SOME CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

1. The metanarrative pattern of the Bible requires, by the example of previously fulfilled patterns, a future fulfillment of numerous statements in the New Testament.
2. Old Testament prophecy and its fulfillment sets the stage for subsequent prophecy and fulfillment.
3. Each of the four views provides some insight into the content of Revelation.

D. All of the views are “creative constructs” within larger interpretive systems in order to make sense of Revelation in their own schemes.

**RESOURCES**

FOR THIS HANDOUT

Bock, Darrell L., General Editor. *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, (forthcoming, Spring 1999).

Gregg Steve, editor. *Revelation: Four Views. A Parallel Commentary.* Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1953. [great format, POOR representation of the Futurist view, too dated]

Hultberg, Alan, Editor. *Three Views on the Rapture*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan,

**Pate, Marvin. *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan,**

FOR TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Beale, G. K. *The Book of Revelation*. NIGTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999. [amilll, historical]

Gentry, Kenneth. A two volume set on Revelation from a Preterist/Postmill view (see <http://www.kennethgentry.com> for information).

Osborne, Grant R. *Revelation.* ECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002. [premill, historical]