Approaches to Interpreting the Book of Revelation

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Scholars have approached interpreting the book of Revelation through four major methods: idealism, preterism, historicism, and futurism. This paper seeks to define and present the problems or rationale behind each view. It will be important to keep in mind that although it is recognized that many notable scholars hold to all four views, the position of this paper holds to futurism (with a blend of historicism) and will contain an inclination toward this view. Great authors have contributed in ideas and notable points, but Scripture ultimately interprets Scripture.

**Idealism**

**Definition**

Idealism takes an allegorical approach to all the events described in Revelation. It views the language as symbolic that holds no prophetic substance. There also contains no timeline; all the events are in random order. Idealism fails to recognize any of the events in Revelation as having historical or futuristic elements. Instead, the whole book is seen as an allegory of the struggle between good and evil. Idealism contains an encouraging motif for the saints because this spiritualized battle between good and evil is ultimately overcome by what is right.

**Problems**

This view is has many obvious, surface-level issues that are not difficult to identify.

First, it sets Revelation apart from the other 65 books in the Bible. Most supporters of idealism interpret the rest of Scripture literally, but somehow find Revelation different. The problem with this view is that Revelation doesn’t ask for special interpretation, but opens just like any other book by stating its purpose and reason for existence: “The revelation of Jesus
Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place” (Revelation 1:1, *English Standard Version*).

Continuing off the first point, it becomes a dangerous area when one potion of the Bible is given a method of interpretation and others are not. If this subjective and less-than-concrete interpretation works for Revelation, then why not the rest of Scripture? This leads us to ask how we know whether or not the whole of Scripture is also just a well-written allegorical story with no purposeful chronology applied. Tenney (as cited in Benware, 2003) presents good insight on this matter:

The central theme of the Apocalypse is declared by the title which is given to it in the first line of its text...If the book was intended to be read to a listening congregation, as the initial beatitude states (1:3), the opening verses must have contained some directive for thinking to make it intelligible. The audience would have to know the theme in order to follow it as the various details of action are presented in quick succession. (p. 272)

Another crucial issue that arises with this method of interpretation is that it gives authority to the reader and not God through his inspired Scripture. Man is now in control of how the Bible is interpreted and no two interpretations will agree with each other.

Some might choose this approach because Revelation contains strong language and is difficult to tackle and place with the rest of Scripture, or simply because the events are extremely hard to imagine. Gundry (2009) sums up his discussion on idealism well: “This approach contains a kernel of truth but arises mainly from embarrassment over the extravagance of apocalyptic language” (p. 508).
Historicism

Definition

According to historicism, the events described in Revelation are a vivid and representative interpretation of church history. It is seen “as a symbolic prenarration of church history from apostolic times until the second coming and the last judgment” (Gundry, 2009, 508). The embellished actions in Revelation are part of a timeline that actually took place in the early church and have no future meaning for the reader today.

Problems

“None of what was supposed to happen, happened. Rome was not overthrown by God and the saints certainly did not share in any such victory” (Interpretive Models, 2011). Although the Roman Empire did fall, the ultimate victory in Christ’s return has not happened yet. This is where historicism falls short. Although much of historicism goes too far in its interpretation, it must be noted that portions of Revelation are historical. The seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 certainly did exist at one point so they have a historical (along with apocalyptical) element to them. Jamieson (1997) expounds upon the tension found in historicism: “The church-historical view goes counter to the great principle, that Scripture interprets itself. Revelation is to teach us to understand the times, not the times to interpret the Apocalypse” (Jamieson, 1997, 655).

Preterism

Definition

The Preterist view is a mix between idealism and historicism: “a symbolic approach presentation of church history” (Benware, 2003, 272). Many elements of Revelation are viewed as allegorical, but the events have happened in history and were soon completed after John wrote
The benefit of this view is that it interprets the book in its primary historical setting first” (Interpretive Models, 201). Since this view takes in careful consideration of the times it was written, it holds that Revelation gave great encouragement to the Christians of the time because the government was oppressive (historical), yet God will be ultimately victorious (idealism).

**Problems**

It might be quite obvious to the reader that although some of these events could have coincided with history, they have not ultimately been completed (much like the historical problems). “Consequently, preterists may try to salvage the significance of the book for modern time by resorting also to idealism” (Gundry, 2009, 508) which means that parts of the book are read as historical and the others as allegorical. This leaves us with the major problem of idealism: how do we know what has happened and what is allegorical? Man has once again become the determiner of Scripture’s meaning.

**Futurism**

**Definition**

On the subject of determining the genre of Revelation, Saubin says that “so inseparable is the relationship between prophecy and apocalyptic genres of Revelation that the book may be called ‘prophetic apocalypse or apocalyptic prophecy’” (Saubin, 2008, 166). This genre decision calls for the use of futurism as the interpretation method. Futurism sees the events in Revelation 4-22 as yet future (the first 3 chapters will be discussed in the rationale). In these chapters the Tribulation, return of Christ, Millennial reign, and eternity are described. Futurism claims to
interpret Revelation “literally,” but Ryrie (as cited in Benware, 2003) describes the interpretation method best:

The concept of a literal interpretation always raises questions since it seems to preclude anything symbolic, and the book obviously contains symbols. Perhaps saying “normal” or “plain” interpretation would be better than “literal,” since futurists do recognize the presence of symbols in the book. The difference between the literalist and the spiritualizer is simply that the former sees the symbols as conveying a plain meaning. (p.273)

It is not that futurism throws out the idea of symbolism and historical parallels, but recognizes that John is writing as Jesus instructed: “Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are, and those that are to take place after this” (Revelation 1:19). Futurism says that Revelation is applicable to the church today just as much as it was at the time of its writing almost 2,000 years ago.

**Rationale**

Jamieson (1997) accurately stated that “in this book, all the other books of the Bible meet” (p. 655). Revelation contains closure to prophecies (from the Old and New Testaments) that have not yet been fulfilled. If Revelation isn’t studied from a futuristic perspective, it would be impossible to harmonize passages in Daniel, Jeremiah, Zechariah, Matthew, John, 2 Thessalonians, and Romans into a “unified eschatological program” (Benware, 2003, 272).

Chapters 1-3 are a great example of how interpretation methods can and should be mixed. They are letters addressed to 7 churches of John’s time that did exist in Asia when John wrote this (historicism). Also, other scholars have hypothesized that the characteristics of the
churches seem to parallel with the church throughout history (preterism). However, these are only “sub-themes” and should not be applied to the entire book.

Conclusion

Revelation contains elements of allegory and history, but ultimately looks forward to events that have not happened yet. It is *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (1:1) which in the Greek itself means “uncovering” of future events (Gundry, 2009, 506). They are made known to us by a sent angel and John’s great vision (1:2). It is the only book in the Bible that promises a blessing to its reader (Missler, 2011), so we ought not to take its interpretation and meaning lightly.

Great encouragement can be found in the study of Revelation. Sure, there is encouragement found in idealism and the other views, but futurism offers closure to the great plan God has always had. Revelation is the ultimate bookend of the Bible that closes with numerous parallels to the beginning bookend, Genesis. In the beginning we see the earth created (1:1), entrance of sin (3:4-7), and man driven out of Eden (3:4-7). Revelation sees the earth pass away (21:1), end of sin (21:4, 8; 22:14-15), and man restored to Eden (22:1-21).

Praise must fill our hearts when we read the words of theis prophecy and remember the grace which has saved us from all which is coming upon this age.

Another blessing is the assurance of ultimate victory and glory. (Arno C. Gaebelein as cited in MacDonald, 1995, 2349)

All the major methods of interpretation have some truth in them for notable scholars have dedicated much time and effort into the study. However, after a closer look and consideration, the opinion of this paper lies with futurism. Futurism upholds a holy and serious view of God’s inspired word and that “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).
It is called the *Revelation* because God therein discovers those things which could never have been sifted out by the resigns of human understanding, those deep things of God which no man knows, but the Spirit of God, and those to whom he reveals them. (Henry, 1995, 2463)
References


