

other approaches find ways of applying all such references to the future Second Coming.

None of these considerations challenge the validity of the doctrine of the Second Coming, but they demonstrate that there is more than one event or phenomenon that can be spoken of as a “coming” of Christ. This fact should caution interpreters against jumping to immediate conclusions when they encounter such expressions in Revelation, and requires that we carefully consider the overall context of each statement through the eyes of the differing approaches.

The Millennium in Revelation

It may surprise many to learn that the greatest issue of controversy related to the book of Revelation, from earliest times to the present, has not been over the identity of the two witnesses, or the meaning of the number “666,” or the timing of the Rapture in relation to the Tribulation. Already, in the third century, the watershed issue in the interpretation of the Apocalypse was defined in terms of one’s understanding of the meaning of the “thousand years” in Revelation 20. The term “Millennium” (from the Latin: *mille* = thousand, and *annus* = years) has generally been adopted to refer to this period. In all the Bible, only this one chapter, occurring near the end of Revelation, mentions the thousand-year reign of the saints with Christ. Those acquainted with the history of interpretation (see discussion below) will realize that it is no exaggeration to call this the most controversial chapter in the Bible. The likelihood that this chapter refers to the same period as that depicted in the many Old Testament passages describing the golden age of the Messiah’s reign (e.g., Ps. 72; 110; Isa. 2:1–4; 11:1–11; Ezekiel 34; Daniel 2; etc.) means that one’s understanding of the Millennium determines much of what one thinks about the fulfillment of scores of Old Testament prophecies as well.

Despite the importance of the subject, the question of the chronological relation of this period to Christ’s Second Coming, and that of whether these passages are to be understood literally or in a spiritual sense, have never been answered with unanimity by the church. Three Christian views on the Millennium may be distinguished from one another: 1. *premillennialism*, 2. *postmillennialism*, and 3. *amillennialism*.

1. *Premillennialism* (once known as *chiliasm*) is the belief that the second coming of Christ will precede the millennial kingdom. Taking a mostly literal approach, premillennialists expect a period of one thousand years’ duration, during which Christ will reign with his saints here on earth prior to the establishment of the eternal new heavens and new earth. The millennial reign will be characterized by

international peace and justice resulting from the universal enforced rule of Christ over saved and unsaved alike. At the end of this time, Satan’s brief period of freedom will put humanity to one final test just before the final judgment.

There are two principal varieties of premillennialism: 1) *historic premillennialism* and 2) *dispensational premillennialism* or, simply, *dispensationalism*. The latter differs from the former in its emphasis on the continuing centrality of national Israel in God’s eschatological program and in anticipating a Rapture³¹ of Christians to heaven before the beginning of the Tribulation.³²

Premillennialism has been accused by its critics of promoting a pessimistic outlook for the temporal future—though, if this is what Scripture teaches, premillennialists can hardly be faulted for such pessimism. This view is most likely to be held by those adopting a *futurist* approach to Revelation (e.g., Walvoord, Ryrie, Gaebelstein, Ironside, etc.).

2. *Postmillennialism* teaches that Christ will return at the end of the millennial period. According to this camp, the millennial kingdom will be established through the evangelistic mission of the church. This enterprise will be so successful that all, or most, people will become Christians, resulting in a lengthy period of peace on earth before Christ’s second coming. Many great evangelical leaders, including Benjamin B. Warfield and Jonathan Edwards, were postmillennialists, as are a growing number of modern evangelicals, known as *Christian Reconstructionists*. The latter group place emphasis on the need to reform, through law and the Gospel, the political and cultural spheres, as a part of bringing the world systems into greater conformity to the demands of Christ, the King. Postmillennialists are often (though not always) inclined toward the *preterist* approach to Revelation (e.g., Chilton, Gentry, DeMar—though not Rushdoony, who is an *idealist* postmillennialist), since their optimistic view of the future works better if the disasters described in Revelation are seen as belonging to a time now past, rather than to the end of history.

3. *Amillennialism* understands the thousand years of Revelation 20 as a symbolic number representing an indefinitely long period of time, which happens to correspond to the entire span of time from the first coming of Christ until his second coming. In other words, the Millennium is the same as one might call the “Church Age.” Most aspects of chapter 20 (like most aspects of the rest of Revelation) are taken as symbolic. The binding of Satan happened spiritually at the cross; the reign of the saints is the present age; the loosing of Satan is a final period of deception coming on the world in the end of the age; the fire from heaven that devours the wicked is the second coming of Christ. Those embracing this understand-

ing have included virtually every theologian from Augustine through the Reformation, and there are many adherents today. Amillennialists are found in the ranks of several of the various approaches to Revelation, including *historicists* (e.g., Martin Luther), *preterists* (Jay Adams), and *idealists* (William Hendriksen), but only rarely among *futurists* (Abraham Kuyper).

It should be remembered that the various approaches to Revelation are not linked inseparably to any particular millennial position, so that one's eschatology does not necessarily dictate which general approach to Revelation is to be preferred.

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

The Early Church

Full-length commentaries on Revelation³³ from the first three centuries of the church have not survived for us to examine, with the exception of that of Victorinus of Pettau (d. 303), which seems to have come down to us in a form altered from its original state. Of this, Swete writes:

Of the commentary of Victorinus in general it is impossible to speak with confidence until it is before us in a form nearer to that in which it came from his pen. But the extract published by Haussleiter from what appears to be the original work confirms the statement that Victorinus held firmly by the chiliastic [*premillennia*1] interpretation of Apoc. xx.³⁴

We know that Melito of Sardis (170), Irenaeus (180), and Hippolytus of Rome (220) all wrote complete commentaries on Revelation, but none of these have survived to the present. There are fragments of exposition on Revelation to be found in Justin Martyr (d.165), Melito, Irenaeus, and other early fathers. In his writings, Tertullian (d. 220) quoted from eighteen of the twenty-two chapters.³⁵ From these, we can know what these men believed about a number of the subjects in Revelation, and can extrapolate from them what their general view of the book must have been.

Views of Ante-Nicene Western Fathers

Papias (c.130), bishop of Phrygian Hierapolis, interpreted the Millennium as a future golden age on earth, and “embellished his description of it with features drawn from Jewish sources.”³⁶ His millennial (in those days, called *chiliastic*) ideas were followed, in the main, by Justin, Irenaeus and Tertullian, and Lactantius

(d. 320). It is on this basis that premillennialists today often claim that the early church was uniformly premillennial. This conclusion, however, is not wholly trustworthy in light of the evidence.

We do not have access to very much that was written in the first four centuries of the church, and a large variety of interpretations may have been held for which no documentation has survived. Justin Martyr (a premillennialist), writing on this very subject, left clear testimony to the presence in his day of alternative viewpoints in the church. In his *Dialogue With Trypho*, Justin wrote:

I and many others are of this opinion [premillennialism], and [believe] that such will take place, as you assuredly are aware; but on the other hand, I signified to you that many who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise.³⁷

It seems clear that there were “many” whom Justin regarded as “true Christians” and “who belong to the pure and pious faith” who did not hold to his brand of premillennialism—or possibly not to premillennialism at all. That he did not regard them as heretics serves to illustrate that the early church would not have agreed with dispensationalist John F. Walvoord’s assessment that premillennialism is of comparable importance to the doctrines of verbal inspiration, the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, and bodily resurrection.³⁸ The evidence suggests that the development of eschatological systems was not a chief priority among the earliest Christians. Thus, many of the principal fathers neglected to say enough about their views on this subject to enable us to determine their exact sentiments. We are certainly at liberty to question the validity of sweeping statements of dispensationalists like Charles C. Ryrie, when he asserts that “Premillennialism is the historic faith of the Church.”³⁹ A more accurate statement of the case would be that the eschatological fragments of the relatively few writers whose works we can examine bear witness to the premillennial convictions of those particular writers.

In addition to his expectation of a thousand-year terrestrial kingdom and a restored Jerusalem (based on Revelation 21), Irenaeus identified the first beast of Revelation with Paul’s man of sin and considered a possible identification of 666 with the word *Lateinos* (meaning, “Roman”), suggesting Rome. Based upon 17:12, he believed that the empire would be divided into ten kingdoms and Rome reduced to ashes.⁴⁰

In his tract, *On Christ and Antichrist*, Hippolytus identified the two witnesses of chapter 11 as Enoch and Elijah. The pregnant woman of chapter 12 was seen as the

church, and the whore Babylon as Rome. He saw the first beast as the Roman Empire, to be wounded to death but restored under Antichrist. The second beast was seen as ten kingdoms that will replace the empire.⁴¹

In Rome, Tertullian understood the book similarly. To him, Babylon is Rome; the two beasts are the Antichrist and the false prophet who wage war with the church. There will be a bodily resurrection, followed by a kingdom of a heavenly order but having its seat on earth.⁴²

Thus the western fathers of the Ante-Nicene church whose works have survived took a quasi-literal and *eschatological* approach to the Book of Revelation. They lived, of course, too early in history for them to take a *historicist* approach, such as that which later arose and which spread the fulfillments of the prophecies over the space of over 1,800 years. Events, which later *historicists* would view as ancient history, were, in those days, present and future realities. This means that the fathers would have spoken *futuristically*, even if they were identifying the prophetic events with the same phenomena that *historicists*, and some *preterists*, now associate with past fulfillments.

The Alexandrian Fathers

The Alexandrian fathers rejected chiliastic views (Millennialism). These fathers introduced an allegorical approach to Revelation. Origen (c. 185–254) repudiated the literal interpretation of the chiliasts as “Jewish.”

Prior to Origen, Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) interpreted the twenty-four elders as a symbol of the equality of Jew and Gentile in the church; locusts’ tails as the mischievous influence of immoral teachers; and the many-colored foundation stones of the New Jerusalem as the manifold grace of apostolic teaching.⁴³

Origen interpreted the seven-sealed roll as Scripture, to which Christ alone has the key; the white horse rider, he believed, represents the opening of heaven by the Divine Word through the white light of knowledge which he imparts to believers.⁴⁴

Methodius followed the Alexandrian approach as well. In his exposition, the male-child of 12:5 represents the baptized soul in which Christ is born; the dragon’s seven heads are the seven greater sins; his ten horns are intended to contrast with the ten commandments; the beast is a symbol of fleshly lust.⁴⁵

This allegorizing method of interpretation, which did away with the expectation of specific historical fulfillments, eventually displaced the eschatological approach, though both are found together in the commentary of Victorinus in 303. Victorinus’ commentary followed the allegorizing approach. It appears that August-

inian editors may have altered it, however, because in its present form it champions *amillennialism*, whereas Jerome (c. 345–420) listed Victorinus, along with Tertullian and Lactantius, as a *chiliast* (that is, a premillennialist).

Tyconius (c. 390), a Donatist, also followed the allegorizing method, though he did not rule out altogether the possibility of historical fulfillments. He applied the Millennium to the interval between the first and second advents of Christ. “His interpretation was taken over by Jerome and Augustine and became normative in the church for the next eight centuries.”⁴⁶

Augustine (c. 354–430), in *The City of God*, interpreted Revelation 20 in the same manner as did Tyconius. The same general allegorizing method was followed in the commentaries of Primasius (c. 550), Alcuin (c. 735–c. 800), Rabanus Maurus (c. 775–c. 836) and Walafrid Strabo (c. 807–c. 849). Swete summarizes:

Primasius, Cassiodorus, Apringius, Bede, Beatus, and most of the writers on the Apocalypse who followed them in the earlier centuries of the Middle Ages, were content with a mystical exegesis which varied in its details according to the fancy of the individual expositor or the needs or ideas of his time.⁴⁷

During this general period, two commentators stand out as exceptions to the trend of Tyconius:

Andreas of Cappadocia (early sixth century) produced the greatest of the Greek commentaries. Swete regards him as “perhaps the best known of ancient expositors of the Apocalypse, and certainly none of them is more edifying or, in his own way, more attractive.”⁴⁸ This work blends the methods of Irenaeus, Origen, and Tyconius and makes its own contribution in suggesting some historical fulfillments alongside mystical interpretations. Andreas saw Babylon as the world opposing the church in general, but more specifically identifies the seven kings (17:10) as seven embodiments of the world power, the sixth being Rome and the seventh Constantinople. He remains, with Tyconius and Augustine, amillennial.

The Development of Historicism

In the West, Berengaud (ninth century) also combined the mystical with the historical interpretation. As with later *historicists*, Revelation is seen as covering the whole course of human history, but with a broader range of history in view. The first six seals are applied to the period from Adam to the fall of Jerusalem; the first six trumpets represent the preaching of the word from times of patriarchs to the age of Christian martyrs; the two witnesses are Enoch and Elijah prior to the second coming of the Lord; the first beast is Antichrist with seven deadly sins as heads;

the second beast is seen either as a follower of Antichrist or of all followers of Antichrist taken collectively; Babylon is pagan Rome, but as representing more generally the devil's city; the ten horns are interpreted as the successive incursions of barbarians which broke up the Roman Empire. As with modern *amillennialists*, the 1,000 years extend from the ascension of Christ to the end of the world; and the first resurrection is seen as the present condition of saints.⁴⁹

The development of a "more concrete *historicism*"⁵⁰ can be seen in the works of Anselm of Havelberg (1129–1155) and Rupert of Deutz (1111–1129), though the later *historicism* emphasizing a chronological division of the book came from Joachim of Floris (1130–1201), who also originated the earliest forms of postmillennialism.⁵¹

Joachim's *historicism* was taken over by most of the Franciscans, especially in Paris, and influenced many in Europe during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Though Joachim was loyal to the Church of Rome, many during this period who followed his system began to find in Revelation's first beast a symbol of the Roman papacy. It was this element in *historicism* that later galvanized the Reformers in their resistance to Rome.

Martin Luther (c. 1500) was one of the first commentators to see Revelation from chapter 4 onwards as a prophetic survey of church history. The particulars of John Calvin's interpretation are not known, since Revelation is the only New Testament book upon which he did not produce a commentary. However, Luther's general approach to Revelation was followed by virtually all the Reformers and by Protestants well into the nineteenth century. The papacy was consistently identified with Revelation's beast and with Babylon.

Coming to the defense of the papacy, Spanish Jesuits presented two alternative approaches to the *historicism* of the Reformers. One response was that of Francisco Ribera (1537–1591), a professor at Salamanca, who taught that John, in Revelation, only foresaw events of the near future and of the final things at the end of the world, but had none of the intervening history in view. The Antichrist was defined as a future individual who would arise in the end times. Babylon was seen as Rome—not under the popes—but in a future corrupted state. This was the beginning of many of the ideas that later developed into features of the modern *futurist* approach to Revelation.

Another Jesuit scholar, Luiz de Alcazar (1554–1613), introduced a *preterist* approach to Revelation, in which chapters 4 through 11 were interpreted as depicting the church's struggle against Judaism, culminating in the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70; while chapters 12 through 19 reflect the church's struggle with paganism.

ending in the fall of Rome in 476; and chapters 20 through 22 as the triumph of the church in papal Rome.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Protestant scholars further developed the details of Luther's *historicism*. "In England Joseph Mede and two eminent Cambridge mathematicians, Sir Isaac Newton and William Whiston, found minute fulfillments of St. John's prophecy from the days of Domitian to their own."⁵² A similar system was followed on the Continent by Vitringa and Bengel.

The Rise of Literary-Critical and Dramatic Approaches

In this same general period, the great Dutch Protestant theologian, Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), introduced two departures from the general Reformed approach to Revelation: (1) He was the first Reformed exegete to give up the identification of the papacy with the Antichrist; and (2) He understood some of the visions to reflect the period before and some the period after the fall of Jerusalem. Grotius, according to Bruce, "may . . . be regarded as the pioneer of the literary-critical approach to the book."⁵³ He is widely regarded as a *preterist*,⁵⁴ and Swete says that he "trod generally in the steps of Alcazar."⁵⁵

At the end of the eighteenth century, a view was proposed by Eichhorn, which would today be called the *dramatic* approach, and it is fundamental to the approach of many modern interpreters of Revelation from the *idealist* camp. On this view, Revelation is a great poem, or drama, divisible into acts and scenes, having as its theme the progress and victory of the Christian faith.

The nineteenth century presented new challenges to those of the continuous-historical persuasion. *Historicists* had not expected history to continue quite so long, and now interpreters had to find room for the new historical data, like the French Revolution and its results.

The Rise of the Futurist Approach

For approximately two centuries, Protestants had regarded *futurism* as a product of the papacy's self-defense against the claims of the Reformers. Non-Catholics had generally shunned it, though a form of *futurism* was adopted by the Fifth Monarchy Men in the seventeenth century. "Their excesses brought it into disrepute, but it was renewed in the 19th century by the early teachings of the Plymouth Brethren and by the Bible Conference movement in the 19th and 20th centuries."⁵⁶ The official entrance of the *futurist* approach to Revelation into Protestant circles came through Samuel R. Maitland, librarian to the archbishop of Canterbury, around 1827. The Plymouth Brethren leader, John Nelson Darby, then incor-

porated it into his dispensational theology, for which he is most remembered. Other Protestant scholars who began to embrace *futurism* included Isaac Williams in England, and Stern, Bisping, and others on the continent.⁵⁷

The Development of the Idealist Approach

Meanwhile, others like Auberlen were developing the modern *idealist* interpretation that holds that the point of Revelation is to reveal a *philosophy of history*. Specific persons or events are referred to only when they were outstanding examples of a principle.

By the end of the nineteenth century a new attitude toward Revelation was developing amid the liberal scholarship in Germany, which soon spread to England and America. This was the *literary-critical* approach, mentioned earlier. This system of research concerns itself primarily (exclusively?) with the literary source materials used by the apocalyptic author and his method of utilizing them for his purpose. Historical or eschatological fulfillments of the visions are not looked for in actual time and space.

The Contemporary Conservative Protestant Scene

Conservative Protestant commentaries (those that do not follow the literary-critical approach) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been divided:

The *historicist* approach continued into the nineteenth century in the writings of E. B. Elliott (*Horae Apocalypticæ*, 1847), A. J. Gordon, Albert Barnes, and others. To my knowledge, the only modern commentaries that still espouse this view today have not come from recognized scholars (not that this fact should condemn them), but from Seventh-Day Adventists and essentially self-published authors who are desirous to reintroduce this viewpoint to a modern readership.⁵⁸ Eugene Boring would seem to be correct when he writes, "Although widely held by Protestant interpreters after the Reformation and into the twentieth century, no critical New Testament scholar today advocates this view."⁵⁹

The *preterist* approach was defended in the nineteenth century by Moses Stuart (1845) and in the early twentieth century by James Snowden (1919). Preterism has had a recent resurgence in the writings of *Christian Reconstructionists* like Gary DeMar, David Chilton and Kenneth Gentry.

One of the first popular presentations of the *futurist* approach, and the most influential, was that of J. A. Seiss (*Lectures on the Apocalypse*, 1909). During the twentieth century, the *futurist* approach to Revelation (mostly in its dispensational form) became the most familiar view among Christian laypeople and in the secular

culture as well! This popularity was facilitated by various factors. The publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909, as well as the Bible Conference Movement in America and Britain, propelled dispensational *futurism* to a place of prominent visibility among Protestant laypeople. In the early to middle decades of the twentieth century, many Bible institutes sprang up, especially in America (the most important being Dallas Theological Seminary) to promote the same viewpoint. Graduates from these schools have produced a never-ending stream of books and publications advocating various opinions within this same approach to Revelation. Christian television, radio, movies, novels, and electronic media, were utilized to very great advantage by dispensational advocates of *futurism*, with the result that many Christians and non-Christians alike believe that the book of Revelation is, and always was, universally understood to be a foreglimpse of the end of the world. The publication of the phenomenally successful *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey in 1970 and the best-selling *Left Behind* novel series published from 1995 to 2007 wove dispensational *futurism* into the very fabric of American pop culture.

Apocalyptic Futurism has been advocated by sound scholars, such as Walvoord, Mounce, and Ladd, to be sure, as well as by innumerable cranks and eschatological faddists, who have often given Bible prophecy a bad name by their repeated speculations concerning the date of the Second Coming, and by their assigning of tenuous correspondences between Revelation's visions and the specific developments in an ever-changing modern political milieu.

However, *futurism* has not grown-up without rivals. Beginning in the twentieth century, the *idealist* approach also received wide acceptance in modern evangelical commentaries, though various labels have been attached to it. Since Eichhorn, in the eighteenth century, the dramatic nature of the book has intrigued many students of its students. In 1939, William Hendriksen popularized this view in his book *More Than Conquerors*, though the view was found in a number of works earlier in the twentieth century as well. At the time of this writing, the most respected commentaries in the evangelical academy seem to be those espousing such an approach.

The *preterist*, *futurist*, and *idealist* approaches will all be with us for some time to come, and the *historicist* approach has an abiding voice in the classic commentaries of Matthew Henry, John Wesley, Adam Clarke, Albert Barnes, and others, which show no signs of vanishing from evangelical libraries (and may, for all anyone may predict, experience a resurgence). This fact gives all four evangelical viewpoints a right to be heard by a contemporary audience, and that is why they are afforded a comparison in this volume.