

Preterism, Futurism, Historicism, or Idealism?

[Biblical Theology – Systematic Theology](#)



We are told that there are four basic ways to interpret the book of Revelation: preterism, futurism, historicism, and idealism. There is also something of an “ecletic” position one can take, which, as the name suggests, picks and chooses elements from the other four. This same set of options applies to all of the New Testament prophetic sections. The Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21) is a battleground passage especially between preterists and futurists. 1 John’s discussion of the spirit of antichrist—and whether it is one or many, or even a person at all—as well as the parallel concept in 2 Thessalonians 2, also provide a window into how

this debate regards not only the “when” questions, but also the “what kind” questions.

Let us consider a brief description of these four views and then draw a few conclusions.

Preterism

The word ***preterism*** comes from the Latin *preteritio*, meaning “**a fact or condition of being in the past.**” Kim Riddlebarger summarizes the view:

“The preterist understanding of biblical prophecy sees Christ’s predictions in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24; Mark 13) as referring to the Roman army’s destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. Preterists also argue that the apostle John wrote the Book of Revelation before A.D. 70 and that it describes Nero Caesar’s persecution of the church. The references to judgment on Babylon refer to Israel, not Rome.”¹

The preterist will point to a few declarations of timing by Jesus. The straightforward reading is of that the coming of the kingdom and of Christ’s appearance (in some way) is literally to be expected of that generation (see Matthew 10:23; 16:28; 24:34). The “end of the age” in the Gospels is the end of the Jewish age—not of the end of the world as a whole.

J. Stuart Russell’s *The Parousia* (1878) was a main articulation of this view. Among biblical scholars, G.B. Caird and N. T. Wright have held to it, as have other theologians such as R. C. Sproul, Greg Bahnsen, Kenneth Gentry, and Keith Mathison.

We must carefully distinguish between a full versus a partial preterism. A partial preterist would believe that about some things, but not all things. For example, one can be a partial

preterist and still point to the final judgment, resurrection, and Second Coming of Christ as having still to come. And there are other examples, like a final antichrist, a final tribulation, and so forth. Since full preterism denies even these essentials of the gospel hope, it is rightly considered to be heresy, a subject I have written about [elsewhere](#).

Futurism

Cornelis Venema explains the futurist interpretation: “The futurist approach to the book of Revelation regards the visions of chapters 4–22 as referring to events that lie in the future, events that will occur immediately prior to Christ’s second coming and the end of history. Many, though not all, futurists are premillennialists and dispensationalists.”² Aside from dispensationalists, Leon Morris, Robert Thomas, George Eldon Ladd, Grant Osborne, and Robert Mounce have all held to this position.

While futurism by no means depends on dispensationalism, yet the assumptions of dispensationalism positively require an exclusive futurism. If futurism is not basically true, then dispensationalism is overthrown. All hinges on everything being on delay for Israel. Conversely, if anything too substantive was fulfilled at (or soon after) Christ’s First Advent, then the door is opened up for the Gentile church into Israel’s promises.

So how does the futurist view the Olivet Discourse? George Eldon Ladd makes an important distinction about form:

“The Olivet Discourse is not apocalyptic in form. It makes no use of pseudonymity; it lays no claim to heavenly revelations or visions; nor does it rewrite history in the guise of prophecy. It pictures Jesus taking his stand among his contemporaries and speaking to them about the future as the prophets did. It is distinctly prophet rather than apocalyptic in form.”³

Key words can be found in Mark 13:7, for example: "...but the end is not yet." This seems to carry the sense of a larger time interval. What do futurists say about the phrase "this generation" (Mat. 24:34)? They have three basic options: 1. ethnic generation; 2. future generation; or 3. a 'kind' or 'sort' generation. In other words, it could mean that this people group—the Jews—will not pass away until the fulfillment; or that a future generation meeting other criteria (e.g. the founding of the Jewish nation in 1948, or consolidation of land in 1967) will not pass away until fulfillment; or that some future generation like their generation in their apostasy from Christ.

Historicism

Ladd gives this summary of historicism:

*"This perspective views Revelation as a symbolic prophecy of the entire history of the church down to the return of Christ and the end of the age. The numerous symbols of the book designate various historic movements and events in the western world and the Christian church ... One of the prevailing features of this interpretation has been the view that the beast is the Roman papacy and the false prophet the Roman Church. This view was so widely held that for a long time it was called the Protestant view."*⁴

At first glance it would not appear that historicism is the sort of position that ever could find support in Scripture. However those texts that hint at an interval of time in between Christ's two advents, and especially those that build an expectation for the whole church to persevere through recurrent phenomena—these can be at least provide a framework. Matthew 24:5-8 would be one example. Note the words MANY (false teachers and false christs) and THE BEGINNING (namely, of "birth pains"). It is not simply that these are a harbinger of what is immediately ahead, but they could be viewed as a

beginning in a longer series of the same or similar events.

Joachim of Fiore taught a form of this view in the twelfth century, though not one that the Reformed tradition would want to emulate. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and many of the magisterial Reformers held a more grounded version of it. So too did the many postmillennialist Puritans. While dispensational premillennialists are obviously futurists in their basic outlook, when it comes to the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, they become historicists. This is one more shadow cast upon their claimed “literal” hermeneutic, but the idea is that these seven churches represent seven eras in the history of the church age.

Idealism

Venema summarizes the idealist position as follows:

“The idealist approach differs from the first three approaches in its reluctance to identify any particular historical events, institutions, or people with the visions of the book of Revelation. Sometimes called ‘idealism,’ this approach views the visions of Revelation as a portrayal of the church’s struggle throughout the entire period between the first and second comings of Christ.”⁵

But there is a problem of conceiving of idealism in a post-metaphysical age. On the most obvious level, consider the alternative labels usually given to idealism and what those tend to imply: the “spiritual approach,” the “allegorical approach,” the “nonliteral approach.” In other words, both the critic and, very often, the proponent, has in view something that is something of a placeholder for one’s unwillingness to take a position. It has often been called “the liberal” view for this reason, because it comes across as just teaching a “moral.”

The key, however, is that the symbols of Revelation are not

“specific” but “typical” persons and events. This is the closest thing to the correct view. However, *when* it fails to incorporate the specifics of the other views into it, typologies lose their essence. Types are, at least immediately, *things*—at first, things with which we are familiar—things on earth, in history.

A good example of a helpful idealism, that applies the essences to history, can be seen in Hendriksen’s *More than Conquerors*. These cycles and visions of the spiritual realm give us “a philosophy of history.”⁶ They don’t give us an unbridgeable dualism. As one example that Hendriksen gives:

“We have seen that throughout the history of the world bowls of final wrath always follow trumpets of judgment whenever the latter are unheeded. The order is never reversed. Trumpets warn. Bowls are poured out.”⁷

Development can be seen in the Amillennial-Idealist view of Revelation from the middle (e.g. Hendriksen) to the end (e.g. G. K. Beale) of the twentieth century. The product of this reflection of the pattern of Revelation has been called *progressive parallelism*. Riddlebarger explains: “Progressive parallelism is the idea that the series of visions in Revelation describe the course of history between the first and second comings of Christ, each from a different prophetic perspective, although these visions intensify before the end of time.”⁸

Arguably Augustine held this idealist view. But that is anachronistic. And like his Amillennialism, it touches the ground. It brings the fight to earth. It would be better to think of Augustine, and most of the premoderns as *realist* first, and then, only secondarily emphasizing past, present, or future types. I will explain what I call the realist position elsewhere. But Anthony Hoekema, Richard Bauckham, Robert Godfrey, as well as the aforementioned Hendriksen,

Beale, Venema, and Riddlebarger, could all be listed under this perspective.

General Evaluations

The trouble with historicism has been well chronicled. It tends to be myopic. To identify events and figures after the time of the Bible is to stand at the center of church history, even if one thinks they are standing at its end. Given the materials that we have access to, this tends to only see the church in Europe and now America. As to Revelation, the historicist has to assume up front that it's chronological. Given that the book just is so symbolic, there simply are no compelling arguments to be found for any correspondence between symbol and historical substance.

As to the supposedly compelling preterist reading of the Olivet Discourse, it is often assumed that the disciples' misinformed question demonstrates that Jesus could only have been speaking about 70 A.D. in every details. They asked a two-part question. Or did they? The problem is that the assumptions within the different views prejudice the question about the question. When will these things be? What will be the signs of Christ's return? Now there was a third question of sorts. As Sproul remarks, "only one of the three accounts includes the question about the coming of Christ and the end of the age. This question is reported by Matthew but omitted by both Luke and Mark."⁹

For the preterist, this "end of the age" fits Matthew's emphasis of Israel's judgment. But the argument can easily be made the other way. The disciples themselves understood things as the typical Jew—(1) the coming of the Messiah and (2) end of all things, as all one and the same; and "that the temple would stand till the end of time,"¹⁰ a fact which Calvin notes, but which the preterist must ignore or minimize. Interestingly, Sproul quotes the Reformer here and yet, anticipating one of Russell's objection, says, "This means

that Jesus was answering a question that contained a false assumption.”¹¹ But again, I must ask: why should that be inherently problematic? Jesus was always doing that and rarely explaining everything as a precondition of moving on with His teaching.

Futurism has its own difficulties, especially with Revelation. It assumes the chronological form up front. One implication is that we have not even arrived yet at what Revelation is talking about (with the exception of Chapters 2 and 3). And because the rapture is seen to be symbolized by 4:1, everything from 4:1 is utterly inapplicable to the lives of any Christian except those who will miss the rapture.

A Fractured Vision

I would argue that all four of these views are making at least one common mistake. I call this modern presentation “a fractured vision” because it is my belief that modern eschatology has been unable to see a unified reality due to its ignorance of the traditional Western metaphysical outlook. The subject of New Testament prophecy and apocalypse is no different. From a more metaphysical standpoint, these four models could all be legitimate perspectives on one reality, but none of them can function as the whole picture. Taken in their fractured way, they each ignore how the Bible had already utilized types, not merely concerning a future fulfillment, but also as a copy of the eternal essence of things. The book of Hebrews three times speaks of types and shadows having this quality.

To recognize this is not merely to be an idealist who just so happens to like putting things in a philosophical manner. It is to take seriously what those spiritual symbols are ultimately symbols of. Once we grasp this, we are not surprised to see dual fulfillment, or even recurrent fulfillment, everywhere. In fact, we come to expect it. But to see that pattern at all is to begin to belief behind these

narrow conceptions of preterism, futurism, historicism, and even post-metaphysical idealism.

I called the unified, more metaphysical, picture Realism, and it is subject for a separate writing.

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1. Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 21.
 2. Cornelis Venema, "[Interpreting Revelation](#)," Table Talk.
 3. George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 316.
 4. Ladd, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 11.
 5. Venema, "[Interpreting Revelation](#)," Table Talk.
 6. William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 34.
 7. Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 35.
 8. Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 22.
 9. R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 31.
 10. Calvin quoted in Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, 32.
 11. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, 32.