

CONSISTENT BIBLICAL FUTURISM

Part I

by Thomas Ice

Sixteen and a half years ago when I started working full-time as director of the Pre-Trib Research Center, I immersed myself in the major viewpoints of those of us who believe in the literal interpretation of the Bible. The theology that comes out of that approach is often called dispensationalism. While dispensationalists have amazing unity on so many issues, especially in comparison with other prophetic systems, I noticed a few significant areas of differences. What I hope to do in this new series is to identify the main areas of differences, suggest right views, and offer an explanation as to why dispensationalists have some differing viewpoints.

DIFFERENCES

Some of the items dispensationalists differ among ourselves include the following: Whether Babylon in the New Testament refers to Rome or Babylon. What is the timing of the invasion of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38 and 39? Does Matthew 24:3–9 refer to the church age or the first part of the 70th week of Daniel? Is the rapture in Matthew 24 or 25? Is the church referenced in Matthew 24 or 25? Is the Greek word *apostasia* a reference to “departure from doctrine” or “a physical departure” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3?

Over the years of investigating and discussing these issues, I have seen some patterns develop relating to most of these issues. It appears to me that many who take certain views on Babylon and the Olivet Discourse are taking views that are more consistent with historicism, rather than the futurism they normally follow. But how does one go about validating an interpretation and an interpretative system like futurism? I will put forward some approaches to examine these issues during this series. I will also deal with whether Psalm 83 or Isaiah 17 could be fulfilled in the church age, outside the realm of the tribulation.

I know that everyone within our dispensational camp will not agree with what I will come up with, but I have never seen anyone try to identify and classify our differences in a systematic way. So, I will bring forth my thoughts on these issues, post them for public discussion, in order to see if they are helpful for some within the dispensational orbit.

STRIVING FOR CONSISTENT BIBLICAL FUTURISM

I have come to believe that most of the differences within dispensationalism arose from a lack of consistently applying the futurist perspective of biblical prophecy. It appears to me that the issues related to the Olivet Discourse and the identity of Babylon in the New Testament, for example, are holdovers from the historicist interpretative approach that dominated Protestant eschatology from about 1525 until around 1800.

Historicism is one of the four interpretative approaches to the book of Revelation relating to the time of fulfillment. The other three are preterism, idealism, and the dispensationalist view, futurism. Futurism is the result of a consistent application of the grammatical-historical hermeneutic popularly known as the literal interpretive approach. The other three approaches use the grammatical-historical method to some extent, but they all allegorize the text to a large degree and in various ways to support their overall notions of when and how Revelation would be fulfilled. I believe futurism is the result of interpreting the book of Revelation literally, understanding that there are

symbols, figures of speech, and various literary devices that the author intended in conveying the meaning of his message.

The general notion of historicism, sometimes called the continuous-historical method, holds that the book of Revelation, especially chapters 4—19 or the tribulation period, are being fulfilled somewhere in church history. Thus, according to mainstream historicism,¹ the events of Revelation 4—19 have pretty much all taken place in Church history. Proponents of this view are mainly waiting for Armageddon and the second coming. The key point that will arise in this series is that historicism believes that the events of the tribulation period are being fulfilled in the current church age. Thus, prophecy is being fulfilled in our day, the church age. Also, historicists believe that Babylon is a code word for Rome, usually religious Rome. This is another non-literal interpretation that flows out of the historicist notion that each successive Pope is the Beast of Revelation or Antichrist.

On the other hand, the general notion of a futurist view of Revelation is that we are in the church age, a period about which there is very little specific prophecy. The events of Revelation 4—19, the tribulation period, are not happening in our day since they will only occur after the rapture, during the 70th week of Daniel, which is future to our day. That chapters 4—19 are future is something that all futurists agree on in relation to the Book of Revelation. If they did not agree on this then they would not be futurists.

MIXING HISTORICISM WITH FUTURISM

When one moves to the Olivet Discourse, one has to decide if Jesus' sermon covers the same basic time period as Revelation 4—19, which most futurists usually agree that it does to some extent. However, many dispensationalists inconsistently, I believe, interpret parts of the Olivet Discourse in a similar way that historicists have over the years. Some may say that I am being too slavish to the theatrical and abstract system of futurism. However, in my case, I first came to the conclusions exegetically and then wondered why there were these two schools of thought within dispensationalism, when we are usually on the same interpretative page. Then, over the years, as I read many older commentaries and studied the development and viewpoints of historicism, it became apparent to me that in the shift within Protestantism from historicism to futurism, there was some historicist baggage that was left behind.

I believe that taking Babylon as anything other than Babylon in the New Testament is a holdover from historicism. We have seen since the 1980s, a major shift by dispensational interpreters away from the idea that Babylon is a codeword for Rome, either political or religious. Why? The shift has occurred because nowhere in the biblical text are there contexts that support the notion that Babylon is used for anything other than referring to Babylon. It is the same issue that we all encounter when dealing with whether Israel always means Israel. Thus, the view that Babylon means Babylon is consistent with the grammatical-historical hermeneutic and the system that flows naturally from such an interpretative approach, which is futurism. The historicist view that Babylon is Rome relies on arguments from outside the biblical text to make its case. Such an approach we know as allegorical interpretation. Thus, if one holds the view that Babylon is Rome and is otherwise a futurist, then that would be an example of my

¹ An example of mainstream historicism is found in their great champion E. B. Elliott and his scholarly work entitled *Horae Apocalypticæ; or, A Commentary on the Apocalypse, Critical and Historical*, 5th edition (London: Seeley, Jackson, and Halliday, 1862), 4 vols.

claim that an interpretation is inconsistent with futurism, even though many futurists may inconsistently hold such a view. Further, I have observed in my study of the history of interpretation that futurists holding the Babylon is Rome perspective appear to have carried it over from a body of historicist scholarship that is still widespread, rather than from making a case from the biblical usage, which would be the grammatical-historical approach that leads to futurism.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE

While writing this article, I received an e-mail message from a good futurist friend who holds to pretribulationism. However, my friend's e-mail contained an article that used the phrase "nations in distress with perplexity" from Luke 21:25. The article applied that passage to what is happening in the world today. However, when one looks at the passage, those words were spoken in the context of the tribulation. How should a consistent futurist use this passage, if it can be used at all, in application to today?

Luke 21:25 can be applied today by a consistent futurist who first notes the context is of the future time of tribulation when this prophecy will take place. Since we are likely at the end of the church age, then we already see the same kinds of things happening today that are a foretaste of things to come. To apply that passage directly to today, when futurists would all agree the Luke passage is set within the tribulation, is to function like a historicist. Many futurists deal with the prophecies concerning Jerusalem in Zechariah 12—14 as if they are happening today. This passage is also set within the tribulation. However, there is no doubt that even today, before we have reached the latter half of the tribulation that nations are lining up against Jerusalem. Knowing where these prophecy events are leading does give us insight about why affairs in our own day are trending in the direction they are going.

RESOLVING DIFFERENCES

In this series, I hope to at least demonstrate why there are differences within the dispensational camp on events surrounding primarily the Olivet Discourse. My approach will be to argue that we should move from the clear to the less clear passages to see if there are parallel items in the clear passages that help us interpret the less clear passages. I know some will dispute my judgment as to what are the clear passages, but I will provide a rationale for my decisions. I will attempt to establish a framework for development of a consistent futurism, as opposed to a historicist-futurist model that is often seen put forth within dispensational circles.

I believe that the clearest, most extensive passage on the 70th week of Daniel is found in Revelation 4—19. All futurists believe that these chapters in Revelation cover the tribulation period. I will then hope to demonstrate, when comparing the Olivet Discourse, Paul's teachings on the tribulation (primarily 2 Thessalonians 2), along with the Old Testament prophets, that all passages speak of events that will occur within that seven-year period known as the tribulation, or in very close proximity to it. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES