

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE INTERPRETATION OF REVELATION

David L. Larsen, Professor Emeritus of Preaching
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois

JESUS IS GOING TO WIN! That is the blessed thrust of the Revelation. Our great Sovereign God has the first word, the intermediate word and the last word. This is the bottom line of the climactic and concluding book in the Biblical canon. How apt, how fitting, how appropriate. As Genesis commences with the creation of the heavens and the earth, man and wife, rivers, the tree of life, paradise lost with the entrance of sin, the rise of Babel, death and exclusion - and now the Revelation, God's book of outcomes, caps off Holy Scripture with the New Heaven and the New Earth, the Last Adam and His Bride, "the river of the water of life," paradise regained in the garden city of God, the doom of Babylon, life and reconciliation for the Lord's own - Eden more than restored - and we marvel again at the perfection, the architectonic beauty and genius of Holy Scripture! No wonder Satan and his minions hate the Revelation!¹

.....its canonicity has been disputed. Almost universally accepted in the west but challenged by Eusebius and the East because of their hatred of chiliasm. Westcott and Laird lay out the evidence--solidly locked in place.²

.....its authorship has been debated. Despite some stylistic and other differences, Beasley-Murray affirms "the remarkable affinities between the Gospel of John and the Revelation."³ John the Apostle is its author.

¹D.H.Lawrence: "The work of a second-rate mind - appealing to second-rate minds." Typical attack.

²B.F.Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament* (1889); R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (1957). The evidence is massive.

³G.R.Beasley-Murray, *New Bible Commentary* (1953) 1168.

.....it has been sadly ignored in many circles. The early Luther would have

none of it; the revered John Calvin refused to write a commentary on it and Zwingli did not think it was a true book of the Bible, etc. etc. Grievous.

.....its mid-nineties date has been assailed but Mark Hitchcock most lately and others have made a decisive case for the traditional date. This is key!

.....and still it is true as R.H. Charles observed long ago:

“From the earliest ages of the Church, it has been universally admitted that the Apocalypse is the most difficult book of the entire Bible.”⁴

We have always had to contend with the “know-nothings” like Gloag who argued that no one knows what Revelation means or Martin Kiddle who wrote on Revelation for the Moffatt Commentaries who maintained that **“Revelation is full of obscurities--the book is so strange as to become meaningless--scholars are lost in the maze. Visions are tinged with incoherencies so that much of the book appears incapable of reasonable explanation--such fantasies and incoherent contradictions--intentionally cryptic. The first readers had the master-key which unlocked the mysteries--we have lost the key...”⁵**

So much for authorial intention. Then he writes 460 pages on the book!

LAUNCHING THE ECCLESIAL INTERPRETATION OF REVELATION

The early church was virtually universal in holding to the imminent and pre-millennial return of Christ and was keen in her interest in and use of the book of Revelation. She had not yet formulated or developed a system of eschatological understanding and was not clear on the two-stage parousia (as with Christological, Trinitarian and Soteriological doctrine) but this was to come. Early interpreters perceived the inter-locking of the

⁴R.H. Charles, *Lectures on the Apocalypse*, in Wilbur M. Smith, *Wycliff Bible Commentary* (1962) 1491

⁵Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John - Moffatt* (1940) xvii-xxi

book with the OT (with its 278 allusions, mainly from Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah). This inter-locking inclined them strongly to futurism. They derived immense consolation from the depiction of the ultimate defeat of the final form of the Roman Empire as they daily faced the ferocity of an earlier form of the Empire in their own life-time (correlated with Daniel 2,7).

While we have lost the commentary of Hippolytus on Revelation (d. 232), we have his commentary on Daniel in which he emphasizes the detached seven years as the key to the wrap-up of space-time history. He sees their echo in the 3 1/2 years, 42 months and 1260 days of Revelation, as well as the meaning of “saints” based on Daniel 7 and the “virgins” of Revelation 14 as companions of the bride. That Chiliasm was orthodoxy in these early centuries is conceded by virtually all, including the amillennial Ned B. Stonehouse of Westminster whose doctoral dissertation was on *The Apocalypse in the Early Church*.⁶ Simcox is only typical in weighing in on the issue:

“From the time of Tertullian and Hippolytus--not to say Justin and Irenaeus--we have a consistent expectation of the course of events that will precede the last judgment....”⁷

Jerome begins to have doubts about Chiliasm and Augustine, once a confirmed premillenarian was seduced by Tyconius, the Donatist lay-theologian who was tintured by Origen’s allegorizing proclivities. His disastrous domestication of the Kingdom makes the Apocalypse incomprehensible and represents the abandonment of eschatology. The

⁶Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Apocalypse in the Ancient Church* (1929). Shows Victorinus (d.304) saw clearly that the Anti-Christ’s reign of terror was to climax in three and a half years of tyranny.

⁷G.A. Simcox, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* in Wilbur M. Smith, op. cit. 1493

Church exists as the 1000 year reign between the two advents and Revelation makes no predictions about specific events of other than the release of Satan for a short flurry at the end of the thousand years.

LANGUISHING IN THE LETHARGY OF THE STATUS QUO

Although the futuristic understanding of Revelation was largely smothered by Augustine's idealistic/poetical hybrid⁸, there were always vigorous exceptions such as St. Patrick the Irish evangelist who saw upwards of 12,000 come to Christ. In the year 1000 A.D. there was something of an eschatological stir (especially among those who latently subscribed to the 6000 year theory of human history). Revelation with its disturbing visions of judgment was portrayed in the artistic representations found in church chancels throughout Christendom. Joachim of Fiore in the 12th century challenged the Augustinian miasma with his electrifying thesis: it is "in my time" that Revelation will be fulfilled. He wrote a commentary on Revelation 9 which sent shock-waves throughout Europe for centuries.

The reverberations of this early historicism reached the later Luther who largely abandoned his earlier Augustinianism and proclaimed: 'THE POPE IS THE ANTI-CHRIST!' and hence the end of the age is at hand. He hastened to finish his commentary on Ezekiel lest the Lord's return find it uncompleted. The other Reformers rather tamely followed him in this but without his bellowing gusto. Historicists have tended to see Revelation as

⁸The idealistic/spiritualistic/poetical interpretation really seals and closes up Revelation, cf Daniel 12:9, Revelation 22:10. Milligan in *The Expositor's Bible* and Tom Torrance's sermons are examples.

a history of humankind, the rise of Islam, the story of the Crusades, the invention of printing and the Napoleonic Wars. John Napier, a Scot, in his *Plaine Discovery of the Whole Revelation of St. John* (1593), correlates the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 with “a precise timetable uncovered in Revelation, even down to the determination that the seventh and last age of history had begun in 1541 and would last until 1786.”⁹

H. Grattan Guinness (1835-1920) represents the climax of historicism. He was a gifted preacher, educator and missionary statesman. Yet he sees the whole history of the papacy in Daniel 7. Revelation is about Romanism. His convoluted eschatology figures 1260 years from the Decree of Justinian in 533 A.D. to the French Revolution. So? In his last book in 1917 he is desperately trying to stretch his terminal dates. Because the system had reached its max in continuous revision, it is now kaput. The late and beloved David L. Cooper in seeing World War I as the key sign of the end became an historicist/futurist. So have all of us who see the return of the Jews from 105 countries to Israel in our time as a significant fulfillment of prophecy. The blending of interpretive schemes which is increasingly common in our time had its beginning in the Middle Ages.

There have long been preterists among us who have seen the Beast in Revelation 13 as Rome; the Kings of the East as Roman generals. It is most interesting that there is no record of preterism in the early church. We

⁹Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety: How to Re-Open the Dynamics of Biblical Genres* (Kregel) 2007. In the light of such nonsense, one can almost appreciate G.B. Shaw’s naughty opinion that “Revelation is a curious record of the visions of a drug addict.”

ourselves would subscribe to the idea that the fall of Jerusalem is in a real sense a proleptic anticipation of the fall of the final phase of the fourth great world empire of “the times of the Gentiles.” Only those like J. Stuart Russell are consistent preterists (or pantelists). Most contemporary preterists meld their preterism with post-millennialism and could therefore be denominated “duplex” preterist/futurists. Very few purists in this area.

LIVING IN THE FRENZY OF PROPHETIC FEVER

In the wake of Joachim of Fiore’s periodization of history and his relentlessly historicist and futuristic view of Revelation, seismic shocks continued to be felt throughout Europe. Savonarola preached powerfully from the Book of Revelation in Florence, Italy in the fifteenth century. James Reston, Jr. shows us the apocalyptic atmosphere in fifteenth century Spain in which John the Revelator was the patron saint. Revelation was about to be fulfilled - the Church as the “woman” of chapter twelve would trample the serpent under her feet. Entwined in much of this was intense antipathy to the Jews. As the year 1500 approached the precocious young Nuremberg artist, Albrecht Durer produced his disturbing woodcut portrayals of Revelation, the most famous of which shows the four horsemen galloping across the foreboding sky.¹⁰

This was one of those times when John’s vision as outlined in Revelation “spread to exercise a formative sway over diverse social movements and

¹⁰James Reston, Jr., *Dogs of God: Columbus, the Inquisition and the Defeat of the Moors* (Doubleday) 2005.

and over broad sections of society.”¹¹ So persons as desperate as the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II and even Christopher Columbus on his

epochal voyages to “diffuse the Gospel in all the world” saw themselves as fitting into the Apocalyptic scenario of Revelation. Was there ever such a book as this in all of history? Isaac Newton the great scientist wrote commentaries on Daniel and Revelation and Roger Bacon saw his work in science as supplemental to the prophecies of Revelation.

Queen Elizabeth I saw her time (as did many of her subjects such as John Foxe (of *Book of Martyrs* fame) as set in “these last and worst days of the world,” as adumbrated in the Revelation. Not only in what is ordinarily called “the Radical Reformation” (the Anabaptists and Zwickau prophets), but in staunch mainline Anglicans like Joseph Mede and Thomas Brightman at Cambridge (who saw the seven churches as prefiguring the history of the Church) we see a fascinating absorption in Revelation. The Venerable Bede (673-735) in his Latin commentary on Revelation may have followed Tyconius and Augustine, but the majority followed the Antiochene historical-grammatical exegesis of Hippolytus, such as Bishop Bale (who wrote the first English commentary on Revelation) started out postmillennially but came to imminence and premillennialism. Even that rascal James I of England wrote a commentary on Revelation. One of the engrossing themes of discussion was the identity of the two witnesses in Revelation 11.¹² The Puritans loved Revelation - it was the only book

¹¹Leonard I. Sweet, “The Revelation of St. John and History,” in *Christianity Today*, March 11, 1973, 9f

¹²Rodney L. Peterson, *Preaching in the Last Days: The Theme of the Two Witnesses in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (Oxford) 1993.

on which Jonathan Edwards wrote a commentary. John Cotton of Boston

lectured his congregation for weeks on Revelation 13 and published his ruminations in 1655. Cotton was a postmill.¹³ The Mathers premill.

The continental Pietists were not indolent in this effusion of apocalyptic - J.A. Bengel (1687-1752), the father of textual criticism, wrote two commentaries on Revelation. He influenced John Wesley to become a premillennialist and was quite eclectic in his interpretation of Revelation. The likes of Vitringa, Cocceius and Philip Spener stood with Bengel in seeing the 144,000 as Jews who would be converted and the 1000 years at the end of the world. Ironically, Friedrich Engels (of Marx and Engels) estimated that the Revelation of St. John was “worth more than all the rest of the New Testament put together,” with which we would not agree but note with interest. Is it possible to speak of “benign” neglect of this book?

LUXURIATING IN THE LARGESS OF BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY

With the virtual collapse of Puritan and Pietistic orthodoxy and the attendant and related onslaught of Enlightenment rationalism, the 18th century would have been a disastrous wash-out in this spiritual chronicle apart from the outpouring of the Great Awakening. Not unrelated to this revival, are the halcyon days of renewed interest in Revelation in the 19th century and the long-developing systematization of eschatology. The various schools of thought “dug in” but none more dramatically and impressively than dispensationalism and pre-tribulationism as a serious

¹³Documented in my *The Company of Hope: A History of Bible Prophecy in the Church* (2004)

attempt toward a consistent literal hermeneutic in which the plain, simple, normal, historical and original meaning of the text is sought in this literary genre as in all others. The Powerscourt Conference in Ireland and the Albury Conferences in England spawned the likes of John Nelson Darby and his spiritual kin who on the basis of the Daniel/Revelation axis built a

system of understanding prophetic truth with remarkable influence on schools, missionary enterprise and a vast font of literary output. While not even aware of his precursors in seeing a two-stage parousia, Darby saw the exegetical and logical need for differentiating between the signless coming of Christ for His saints and the sign-full coming of Christ with His saints to set up the Theocratic millennial Kingdom and rule for 1000 years.

And at the apex of this herculean project was an understanding of the Book of Revelation which even with a host of idiosyncratic variations held the high ground against the continuing assault of Augustinianism and a plethora of other incredible schemas.¹⁴ An enormous literature has developed which reverently treats these themes as capped off and confirmed in the Revelation. The hymnody alone (down to Larry Norman's "I wish we'd all been ready") is staggering. Drawing upon the divergent strands of historical interpretation, we would see some preterist, idealist, historicist elements but predominately futurist elements in Revelation.

"There are many Anti-Christ's" but there is coming "the Anti-Christ."

¹⁴What book of Scripture has elicited such preposterous interpretations as Emmanuel Swedenborg's huge six volume work, *The Apocalypse Revealed*, in which he argues the Last Judgment took place in 1757 and the parousia in 1758. He lived 1688-1772. Swedes can be dense. Or Adela Yarbro Collins' work (she is NT professor at McCormick), *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (1984) in which she says she agrees with E.D.Hirsch but then runs Revelation through the grid of C.G.Jung the analyst.

LOOKING AT THE MAIN ISSUES FOR THE INTERPRETER

The Book of Revelation after all is not the "the old curiosity shop." We defy literary deconstructionism and its denial of the author's rights. A text is not a nose of putty to be shaped in any way its user desires. But in just skimming over two thousand years of interpretation, one must ask: why have there been such differences and disparities in understanding the

meaning of this “unveiling” of Jesus Christ? If Peter found some things “difficult to understand” in the writings of the Apostle Paul, what shall we say about the Apostle John in his masterpiece from Patmos? Why has this book been so difficult and so debated throughout its long history?

1)The Greek text of the book has its grammatical peculiarities but these are deliberate. The author seems to be thinking in Hebrew but writing in Greek.

2)Apocalyptic visions abound in symbols and images. This is more the use of indirect discourse as is also seen in narratives, parables, hymns and poetry. The use of symbolic language does not preclude literal persons, events and numbers. Sometimes the symbol is explained in the text or can be understood from the larger context (e.g. sea in Revelation 17:15). We do wrestle with the meaning of pillar, various colored horses, locusts, sun, moon and stars, the two olive trees, the drying up of the Euphrates, horns and crowns and heads.¹⁵ Constant reference to other apocalyptic is required--viz. the Olivet Discourse of our Lord, the Thessalonian letters, etc.

3)John the Revelator’s heavy reliance on the OT necessitates virtual mastery of Daniel and Zechariah and other corollary prophetic materials.

4)The striking unity and structure (the series of sevens, fours, twelves) are

¹⁵Most helpful here is the discussion in W. Graham Scroggie, *The Great Unveiling* (1979) 55ff

critical and recognizing that the book is roughly chronological but with some significant pauses and parentheses (as in the thirty minutes of silence in heaven in 8:1ff as the seventh seal yields the seven trumpets. By unity I mean that the sovereign God is always calling to repentance and salvation. This is a great book of judgment but also of salvation. Heavenly worship scenes interpose at critical junctures. Hymnic and liturgical language abound as Christ is the focus of praise. “The Lamb in the midst of the

throne” underscores His victory through His sacrificial death (“the blood of the Lamb”). Here we see human depravity in its most blatant forms and the Great White Throne Judgment (there is no universalism here) but Christ conquering in combat.

5) Successive visions underscore John’s mandate: “write what you see” (1:11). 140 times we have “see,” “behold,” or “perceive.” Alternate scenes in heaven and earth and the use of both throne room and tabernacle/temple imagery somewhat complicate but greatly enrich our read. The “sharp sword out of His mouth” (1:16, 19:15) is a bit hard to visualize making however an almost impressionistic portrayal.

Revelation was given to us to be understood - so that we who hear it might “take it to heart!” (1:3). There are practical concomitants that must follow upon our grasp of its meaning (22:7). In other words, Revelation is a guide to our conduct as well as a source of our doctrine. And we ever have the divine author of the book, the Holy Spirit, to guide and direct.

LISTENING TO THE PROPHECY OF THIS BOOK BECAUSE THE TIME IS NEAR

The broad lines of interpretation are clear if we use a consistent hermeneutic. All that is in the previous 26 books of the NT bridges into Revelation and its panoramic presentation of the consummation of the age. Where is any semblance of the premillennial pessimism of which we hear so much? What a glorious finale as the Alpha and the Omega wraps it up - the earthly people and the heavenly people in their proper places, the Holy City

and the New Jerusalem! All praise be to our God! As C.S. Lewis says of Asalen in concluding *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*:
“Asalen is a great and powerful lion; and Asalen is a good lion.”

The text in its various contexts (natural thought unit, chapter, the book as a whole) is the reality we seek to mine. We must preach what the text says not our system (although we shall preach from within a system whether we like it or not). The lines of the historic schools of interpretation have blurred to some degree and we are all eclectic in a basic sense. We are after all seeking to listen to the Lord God “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (1:8). To be substantively a preterist seems to me to walk into a cul-de-sac. As Merrill Tenney put it so well: “The preterist has an interpretation which has a firm pedestal, but which has no finished sculpture to put on it.”¹⁶ The idealist is correct in seeking applicable principles but has cut loose from serious exegesis and any intertextuality. The historicist is dead in the water. Here is where history can help, not as a substitute for the hard work of exegesis or theology but as a vital exhibit of the fall-out of the schools of interpretation and cautions for us all. The

¹⁶Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (1959) 144. A wise and judicious study.

substantive futurist is convinced that the Scriptures (and particularly the book of Revelation) have much to say about what Jesus Christ is yet going to do. He is not in absentia. He is not clueless and hanging on wondering about outcomes as the “open theists” would have it.

The Lord has much yet that He intends to do and accomplish!

The history of prophetic interpretation should also engender some measure of hermeneutical humility. How many of our comrades have been lured into unsound and hyper-speculative bypaths? Over-reach and over-statement can undercut our credibility so quickly. Is every issue of uniform clarity? We believe in the perspicacity of Holy Scripture (its essential clarity) - but is every interpretation at the same level of certainty as is the Virgin Birth of our Blessed Lord? We savor in anticipation canvassing the blessed chapters of this unique and extraordinary book given to us---but there may be questions we shall not all see exactly alike:

Who will the two witnesses be?

Do the seven churches have an application beyond their first century lessons to in some sense presage successive and in some cases parallel ages in the history of the Church? Some major shifting here.

Is the Babylon of 17-18 more European or more Middle-Eastern? The original reference committee of the Scofield Bible split down the middle on this issue. Could it be both? Has Babylon become code for the immense final syncretism like “Gog and Magog” as used in Revelation 20 illustrating the prophetic telescoping of the Ezekiel 38-39 war?

Remember William R. Newell felt the first beast in Revelation 13 is the Anti-Christ on the end-time (as I am sure most of us do) but dear H.A. Ironside saw the second beast out of the earth as the Anti-Christ.

Where and when will be “the marriage supper of the Lamb?”

I have always been sure that “the bride” in chapter 19 is the Church and then I read my beloved Graham Scroggie. I am still not convinced.

Who are the 24 elders? It seems so clear to me but not to others who may not be older than I but wiser and more perceptive?

Sometimes on these issues, simply to acknowledge that there is

a difference of opinion on the subject will suffice without unnecessarily chewing up precious time with intricate and interminable argumentation.

Then just charge ahead and preach it!

What a felicitous choice of a subject for our deliberation in these days. Dear old Lange in 1870 put it this way:

“Doubtless in the future, the importance and influence of this book (the Revelation) will constantly increase with the growing confusion and gloom of the times, with the increased danger which they offer to sound and sober faith.”¹⁷

Or to conclude with the testimony of G. Campbell Morgan whose love for the Word has been such a large boon to so many of us:

“There is no book in the Bible which I have read so often, no book to which I have tried to give more patient and persistent attention.....there is no book in the Bible to which I turn more eagerly in hours of struggle and battle than to this, with all of its mystery and so many details I do not fully understand....”¹⁸

‘TO HIM WHO HAS LOVED US AND LOOSED US FROM OUR SINS IN HIS OWN BLOOD, AND HAS MADE US TO BE A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS TO SERVE HIS GOD AND FATHER---TO HIM BE GLORY AND POWER FOREVER AND EVER! AMEN!’ (1:5b-6)

¹⁷in Wilbur M. Smith. op. cit. 1501. Interesting observation by Dr. Paul Boyer of the University of Wisconsin in his *When Time Shall Be No More* (Harvard, 1992): “The most dynamic energized sector in (American) religion has been the evangelical one and the eschatological vision is central.”

¹⁸ibid. 1491