

2.12 - Systems of Interpretation

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We now arrive at the *major fork in the road* in understanding the book of Revelation. If you have traveled with us thus far, you are aware of various factors which influence how one understands this last book of the Bible. We've discussed how [anti-supernaturalism](#) and categorizing the book as [apocryphal genre](#) can contribute toward a tendency to see the book as [hyperbole](#) or a veiled political document. We've also discussed the importance of how [symbols are interpreted](#) and [the importance of meaning](#) for a proper [interpretation](#) to result. We also mentioned attacks upon the authority of the book by way of questioning its [apostolic authorship](#) and [acceptance into the canon](#). All of these aspects are brought together in the topic at hand: the various systems of interpretation through which the text of the book is understood. Ice identifies the major approaches to interpreting prophecy which are typically found when studying the book of Revelation:

There are four approaches to interpreting prophecy, and all related to time: past, present, future, and timeless. These are known as [preterism](#) (past), [historicism](#) (present), [futurism](#) (future), and [idealism](#) (timeless).¹

We would add a fifth approach known as [eclectic](#) (mixed).

Systems of Interpretation Compared

Name	Time Period	Revelation Chapters 4-19
Preterism	past	Describes the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 or the fall of Rome in A.D. 476.
Historicism	present	Describes major events of Christian history spanning from John's time to the Second Coming of Christ.
Futurism	future	Describes a future period prior to the Second Coming of Christ.
Idealism	timeless	Describes spiritual truths. Good will eventually prevail over evil. Readers are encouraged in their current trials.
Eclectic	mixed	Typically favors idealism while borrowing some elements from other systems.

Each "system of interpretation" approaches the text with a different set of presuppositions and necessarily derives *adifferent* understanding of the meaning conveyed by the book. Here is the source of the primary "confusion" over the book and why so many despair of grasping its contents. Not only are there a number of major interpretive systems applied to the book, but within each system there is a certain amount of variation in understanding the secondary features of the text. The amount of interpretive variation *within* each interpretive system ranges from relatively little (futurist) to large and substantial (historicist, idealist, eclectic).² In keeping with the previously stated Golden Rule of Interpretation, we believe that the [Futurist Interpretation](#) is the correct approach to understanding the book of Revelation. It results in the most consistent understanding among practitioners of any one system and has the benefit of being applicable across the entire body of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. It also has the advantage of being the normal way most people read throughout the day and is as equally applicable to understanding a breakfast menu as an owner's manual for an automobile. When we use literal interpretation, we retain the eschatological worldview of the contemporaries of Jesus and the New Testament:

The Dead Sea Scrolls offer to us a window into the eschatological worldview of Jesus and the New Testament. **Their eschatology followed a literal interpretation of prophetic texts** and a numerological calculation of temporal indicators in judgment and pronouncements, and understood a postponement of the final age, while not abandoning their hope of it. In many ways their eschatology was not dissimilar from modern Christian premillennialism and reveals that as a system of interpretation, premillennialism is more closely aligned to the first-century Jewish context than competing eschatological systems. [emphasis added]³

Our treatment of the book will make mention of alternative interpretations at important junctures, but to attempt to mention them all would only lead to hopeless confusion and a commentary spanning thousands of pages which might never be completed! "It is nearly impossible to consider all the interpretive options offered by people holding the other three views."⁴ Nevertheless, it is important to understand each of the popular systems in order to grasp how widely different results can be derived from the identical text.

2.12.1 - The Importance of Interpretation

The importance of having an objective guide to interpret the text can be seen in the following comments of Gregg who has taught the book of Revelation over a considerable period of time. "Over the next decade, I found myself favoring first one view and then another as I became aware of the merits of each."⁵ "Revelation was written to be understood and to confer a blessing upon its readers, . . . Some readers may be curious about my own approach to the book of Revelation. It is not my desire to showcase my own opinions (**which have changed a number of times and may do so again in the future**) . . ." [emphasis added]⁶ When those who purport to guide the inexperienced shift between the major interpretive views, is it any wonder many despair of ever understanding this book? The adverse effects of a waffling teacher upon his students is surely one of the reasons why teachers will receive greater judgment (Jas. 3:1). "Many are told that scholars themselves are woefully divided as to the meaning of this prophecy. And if godly men who study God's Word cannot figure out its meaning, how can the average Christian? With such a comprehensive and interpretive mountain to climb, Revelation unfortunately remains a closed book to many people."⁷ If experienced teachers are so unsure about how to approach the text that they admit they may be teaching quite different conclusions to the next batch of students who follow their guidance, how valuable can such guidance be in the first place? Such an approach denies the perspicuity of Scripture and the stated intention God gives for the book (Rev. 1:1[±], 3[±])! Gregg's words above underscore the importance of being consistent in one's system of interpretation. If one is unsure about the principles underlying how to read and understand the text, then confusion and lack of conviction are sure to be the result. This can hardly result in the blessing promised by God (Rev. 1:3[±]). Since every interpreter makes a commitment, implicitly if not explicitly, to a particular system of interpretation, it is important to recognize errors which result when any one of the systems is taken to an unbiblical extreme:

A return to the Biblical text is the only recourse in this strife of opposing theories. The truth in each [interpretive system] is drawn from its accord with the statements of Revelation; the error in each arises from an overextension of the truth or from an exaggeration of some one interest.⁸

In the treatment of interpretive systems which follows, considerably more space is devoted to describing the [preterist](#) system. Although it is our view that only the futurist interpretation properly reflects the intended meaning of the text and that the other views are to be faulted in their departure from literal [hermeneutics](#), we spend extra time on preterism because of its seeming rise in popularity at the time of our writing. It is our hope to expose the major shortcomings of the approach so that some who might have been swayed by its teachings are better able to discern the dangers. For an excellent chart by Daniel Atkin, Robert Sloan, and Craig Blaising summarizing and comparing the views of the different interpretive systems with respect to the book of Revelation, see [Trent C. Butler, Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England, eds., [Broadman and Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary](#) (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003), s.v. "Revelation"].

2.12.2 - Preterist Interpretation

The term "[preterism](#)" is based on the Latin *preter*, which means "past." Preterism understands certain eschatological passages which are yet future as having *already been fulfilled*. All biblical interpreters understand that certain prophecies have been fulfilled, but preterists differ in that they interpret a greater portion of Scripture as already having come to pass. There are different types of preterism resulting from differences in views as to which passages have been fulfilled and what events they were "fulfilled" by.

2.12.2.1 - Types of Preterism

Mild or partial [preterism](#) holds that most of the prophecies of Revelation were fulfilled in either the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) or the fall of the Roman Empire (A.D. 476), but the Second Coming of Christ is yet future. This form of preterism is orthodox and is the most frequent view encountered in our day.

Moderate preterism has become, in our day, mainstream preterism. Today it appears to be the most widely held version of preterism. Simply put, moderates see almost all prophecy as fulfilled in the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem, but they also believe that a few passages still teach a yet future second coming (Acts 1:9-11; 1Cor. 15:51-53; 1Th. 4:16-17) and the resurrection of believers at Christ's bodily return. . . . In addition to R.C. Sproul, some well-known moderate preterists include Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., Gary DeMar, and the late David Chilton (who converted to full preterism after all his books were published).⁹

Full, extreme, or consistent preterism holds that all the prophecies of Revelation are already fulfilled, that we are currently living spiritually in the “new heavens and new earth” and denies a future bodily return of Jesus. Full or consistent preterism is heretical.

Extreme or full preterists view themselves as “consistent” preterists. . . . Extreme preterists believe that “the second coming MUST HAVE already occurred, since it was one of the things predicted in the O.T. which had to be fulfilled by the time Jerusalem was destroyed” . . . This means there will never be a future second coming, for it already occurred in A. D. 70. Further, there will be no bodily resurrection of believers, which is said to have occurred in A.D. 70 in conjunction with the second coming. Full preterists believe that we now have been spiritually resurrected and will live forever with spiritual bodies when we die. . . . Full preterists say . . . we are now living in what we would call the eternal state or the new heavens and new earth of Revelation 21⁺-22⁺. Champions of this view include the originator of full preterism, . . . J. Stuart Russell . . . Max R. King and his son, Tim . . . David Chilton . . . Ed Stevens, Don K. Preston, John Noe, and John L. Bray.¹⁰

Although mild (partial) preterism is considered orthodox, full (extreme, consistent) preterism denies the bodily Second Coming of Christ and so is outside of orthodoxy. While one is most likely to encounter the mild preterist view in reading commentaries on the book of Revelation, one should be aware of the tendency of mild or partial preterism to develop into full or consistent preterism, thus crossing the line between orthodoxy and heresy. “Extreme preterism is sometimes known as ‘consistent preterism’ because it consistently applies the principles of preterism to all prophecy. If moderate preterists were consistent, they unavoidably would be extreme preterists, and would have to deny the reality of the eternal state.”¹¹ Since full (extreme, consistent) preterism is heretical and less frequently encountered, we will focus primarily upon mild (moderate, partial) preterism which seems to be increasingly popular in our day. In its approach to the book of Revelation, partial preterism divides into two primary views concerning what events are foretold by the book: “Preterists hold that the major prophecies of the book were fulfilled either in the fall of Jerusalem (AD 70) or the fall of Rome (AD 476).”¹² “The second form of preterist interpretation holds that Revelation is a prophecy of the fall of the Roman Empire, ‘Babylon the Great,’ the persecutor of the saints, in the fifth century A.D. The purpose of the book is to encourage Christians to endure because their persecutors assuredly will be judged.”¹³

2.12.2.2 - The Motivations of Preterism

Although all [preterists](#) insist that their view of Scripture is the best way to understand and explain the text, it is useful to understand that some preterists are influenced in their tendency to interpret future passages as having been already fulfilled by a variety of motives. One motive is to respond to the criticism of skeptics who have pointed out that Jesus’ promises to come *soon* have not yet materialized. Preterists believe that their view that Jesus has come in a “spiritual way” prior to A.D. 70 vindicates the Bible in the eyes of such skeptics (e.g., Bertrand Russell). But tailoring interpretation to favor non-believers is unlikely to win them to Christ.

Do preterists think that Bertrand Russell, or anyone else who is antagonistic to the Christian faith, is going to be convinced that the Bible is God’s Word by arguing that Jesus came in A.D. 70? A preterist coming [of Christ] is a pathetic coming. It does no honor. . . to the integrity of Scripture. The substitutionary atonement of Christ, the Trinitarian nature of the Godhead, and many other [doctrines], are all truths that come from Scripture, but also truths that invite the attack of agnostics, atheists, humanists, and secularists. Why is it, when we come to prophecy, that suddenly we must tailor our interpretation to suit non-believers?¹⁴

As we have previously mentioned, there is also the motivation to remove what appears to be a coming global judgment out of the path of Christian reconstructionism and dominion. How are Christians to be motivated to convert the governmental institutions of the world through political action if the book of Revelation, understood in a normal way, seems to describe an unparalleled time of persecution and global catastrophe in divine response by God to global apostasy on the part of the nations?

[Gentry] associates cultural defeatism and retreatist pietism with assigning a late date to Revelation and wants to date the book before A.D. 70 so as to have biblical support for the implementation of long-term Christian cultural progress and dominion. This probably reflects his basic motivation for the early dating of Revelation: a desire for an undiluted rationale to support Christian social and political involvement.¹⁵

If it is not practical to undermine the authority of the book, then the next best thing is to reinterpret its teachings in a way which sweeps its predictive revelation aside. This is accomplished within preterism by moving the future back to the past.¹⁶ But how could what appears to be a global time of unparalleled trouble (Dan. 12:1; Jer. 30:7; Mat. 24:21; Mark 13:19; Rev. 3:10⁺; 7:14⁺) be moved from the future to the past? The way preterism accomplishes this shift is to explain that the book’s description of a coming time of tribulation involving *Babylon* and the [earth dwellers](#) is actually a veiled description of God’s wrath being poured out on *Jerusalem* and the *Jews* in the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in A.D. 70.

The Preterist will be glad to remind the futurist that the opening verses of Revelation chapter one indicate a first-century fulfillment: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must *shortly come to pass*. . . for the time *is at hand*” (Rev. 1:1⁺, 3⁺). For the preterist, the book of Revelation was written around A.D. 68 and it has the same focus

as the Olivet Discourse: some impending disaster in the immediate future that will affect the ancient Roman world. What might that be? Preterists unanimously point to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.¹⁷

The events of the book are understood as describing this time period, localized to the events of Rome and the Mediterranean, and during which [Nero](#) (most commonly) occupies the role of the [Beast](#) of Revelation 13+. In the destruction of Jerusalem, the Jewish state finds its ultimate judgment and complete rejection while the blessings of the kingdom are transferred to the “New Israel,” the Church. Never mind that John uses completely different terms to describe the primary recipients of God’s wrath, the preterist manages to maneuver Israel into place as the recipient of God’s judgment. “ ‘The preterist perspective . . . sees . . . Babylon the Great’ represent[ing] apostate Israel, who aids Rome in oppressing Christians. Accordingly, part of the purpose of the book is to encourage Christians that their Jewish persecutors will be judged for their apostasy and to assure the readers that they are now the true Israel.”¹⁸ The preterist identifies the Beast of Revelation with pagan Rome which Daniel sees as the object of final judgment, but then insists that it is *apostate Israel* that is the focus of God’s judgment in the book of Revelation.¹⁹ Although many preterists are devout, conservative, and orthodox in their views, the preterist system of interpretation has also attracted liberal and neo-orthodox interpreters who tend to view the Scriptures as a textbook for sociological progress and minimize its supernatural and judgmental elements.²⁰ In summary, preterism is often fueled by several underlying motivations: *First*, a desire to move the time of tribulation described by the book of Revelation from the future into the past. This removes a major stumbling block to the view of [Dominion Theology](#) as embraced by Christian reconstructionists that all the world’s institutions will eventually come under the sway of Christianity through the worldwide dissemination and progression of the gospel. *Second*, a desire to reinterpret the many passages in both [OT](#) and [NT](#) which speak of a future time of restoration and blessing involving the *nation* Israel as applying to the Church. Israel’s rejection of Messiah Jesus is seen as an irrecoverable error necessitating the replacement of Israel by the Church as the spiritual inheritor of previous promises to Israel.²¹ *Third*, an attempt to interpret Scripture in a way which minimizes the objections of skeptics. *Fourth*, a desire on the part of more liberal preterists to avoid taking predictive prophecy as supernatural and descriptive of events to come.

2.12.2.3 - The Beginning of Preterism

As will become evident in our discussion of the [futurist system of interpretation](#), the early church was not [preterist](#) in its outlook.

Dr. Henry Alford summarized the early history of preterism this way: “The Praeterist view found no favour, and was hardly so much as thought of, in the times of primitive Christianity. Those who lived near the date of the book itself had no idea that its groups of prophetic imagery were intended merely to describe things then passing, and to be in a few years completed.”²²

Justin Martyr (c. 100-165), who would have been in a position to know believers who had lived through the events of [Nero](#) and the fall of Jerusalem, knows nothing of preterism:

Justin Martyr . . . certainly knew many believers who had lived through the events of A.D. 70. He also clearly regarded thesecond coming of Christ as a future event. . . . Justin, who could not have written much more than fifty years after the destruction of Jerusalem, still saw a **future fulfillment** of both the Tribulation prophecies and the return of Christ in glory. [emphasis added]²³

The *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve* (dated as early as A.D. 70 or soon thereafter) evidences a futurist interpretation of the Olivet Discourse, one of the favorite passages frequently used in support of the preterist view.²⁴ Most cite the Spanish Jesuit Alcazar, who died in 1614, as the first real preterist.²⁵ Even then, his development of a preterist interpretation is seen to be in response to the Reformers having identified Babylon with the Roman church and a need to provide an alternative understanding:

[Alcazar’s] work was not free from controversial bias. The Reformers had identified Babylon with the Roman church, and had succeeded in making the Revelation a powerful controversial weapon in their favor. In order to offset this interpretation, Alcazar attempted to show that Revelation **had no application to the future**. [emphasis added]²⁶

Tenney puts his finger on the heart-beat of preterism. The same motivation fueled Alcazar as modern preterists: a desire to show that what God appears to have predicted concerning the future is in fact not coming upon the earth. It is our conviction that preterism is helping to lay the groundwork to undermine the predictions of the book of Revelation so that a future apostate Church lacks an understanding of the anti-Christ role it occupies prior to His return. It seems that the further we get from the events of John’s day, the more popular it becomes to understand events of his day as having “fulfilled” the predictions of the book of Revelation. But what is especially troubling about this trend is that evidence seems totally lacking that those much closer to the events and culture of John’s day had any notion of the preterist perspective.²⁷

If the preterist contention that the prophecies of the Olivet Discourse and Revelation were fulfilled in the first century is true, then why is there no evidence that the early church understood these prophecies in this way? . . . There is zero indication, from known, extant

writings, that anyone understood the New Testament prophecies from a preterist perspective.²⁸

2.12.2.4 - Hermeneutics of Preterism

Although a full discussion of the [hermeneutics](#) of [preterism](#) is beyond the scope of our purpose here, it is helpful to understand some key aspects concerning how preterists approach the interpretation of Scripture in general, and the book of Revelation in particular. The hermeneutics of preterism places great emphasis on all passages which convey the notion of “soon” or could be understood as teaching that certain events should have occurred near to the time of the New Testament. The preterist system of interpretation involves a “slippery slope” where some so-called “time texts” are said to have already been fulfilled (Rev. 1:3⁺; 2:16⁺; 3:11⁺), whereas other equivalent time texts are left as possibly future (e.g., Rev. 22:20⁺). The “slippery slope” begins with mild preterism, and leads toward full (extreme) preterism which denies the Second Coming of Christ (heresy). The basic tension preterism has is if *some* of the passages which state that Jesus’ coming is “near” *must* indicate His return within the generation that heard these statements, then why not *all* such passages? Yet if this view is applied to all such passages consistently (the view of *consistent preterism*), then passages such as Revelation 22:20⁺, “Surely, I am coming quickly,” which an overwhelming number of commentators hold to refer to His physical, bodily return, must also have been fulfilled and so all of Jesus’ promises about His Second Coming must have *already occurred*. The problem here is that the preterist approach denies the doctrine of [imminency](#). (See our discussion of [Imminency](#).) Preterists believe in the doctrine of imminency, but deny that passages which teach the any-moment return of Christ have in view His literal Second Coming. “Our study of the New Testament is drastically off-course if we fail to take into account the apostolic expectation of an imminent Coming of Christ (not the Second Coming) which would destroy ‘this generation’ of Israel and fully establish the New Covenant Church.”²⁹ But Scripture teaches that the any-moment coming of Jesus is not just a symbolic “cloud coming” of preterism which is neither discernible by the skeptical world nor by His Church,³⁰ rather, He may come at any moment to *gather the Church to Himself* (John 14:1-3; 1Th. 4:13-18; 1Cor. 15:51-53). So one thing to notice concerning the hermeneutics of mild preterism is its inconsistent treatment of passages concerning the coming of Christ. It tends to place as many Second Coming passages in the past as possible, taking care not to post-date passages which are especially germane to Christ’s bodily Second Coming and risk falling into the heresy of full preterism. This is what happened with the late David Chilton. His commentary on the book of Revelation, written while a mild preterist, takes Revelation 22:6-7⁺ as having been fulfilled in the first-century.³¹ Eventually he came to believe that all Second Coming passages found their fulfillment in the first century and became a full preterist, denying a future bodily return of Christ.

It seems that more and more preterists are becoming hyperpreterists. . . . [mild preterism’s view] opens the door for people to move into the heretical position of hyper-preterism. . . . we have already seen the late David Chilton take this route. Walt Hibbard, the former owner of Great Christian Books (previously known as Puritan and Reformed Book Company), once a reconstructionist, moved from partial to full preterism. . . . Once a person accepts the basic tenets of preterism, it is hard to stop and resist the appeal to preterize all Bible prophecy.³²

Most preterists stop short of allegorizing away the bodily return of Christ (the error of *hyper*-preterism). But it is frankly hard to see how any preterist could ever give a credible refutation of hyper-preterism from Scripture, given the fact that the hermeneutical approach underlying both views is identical. Hyper-preterists simply apply the preterist method more consistently to *all* New Testament prophecy.³³

The preterist interpreter views all prophetic passages through a set of glasses which *require* that nearly all time indicators such as “soon,” “quickly,” “near,” “at hand,” etc. be understood as having had a first century fulfillment. As we mentioned above, for the preterist who holds to a yet future literal bodily return of Christ, there are at least *some* passages concerning His return which do not have a first-century fulfillment (e.g., Rev. 22:20⁺). The problem for the preterist then becomes one of determining which passages teach an imminent return which he will allow to stretch out for nearly 2000 years like the futurist, and which to assert as being already fulfilled by a non-physical *cloud coming* of Christ. For wherever a “time text” is associated with the return of Jesus which the preterist believes *requires* a first-century fulfillment, an invisible, spiritual coming of Christ “must” have occurred. But this gets tricky because non-literal, invisible “comings” are a dime a dozen—being impossible to objectively validate since there are no witnesses.³⁴ Here is the Achilles Heel of the preterist hermeneutic: when and when not to “go spiritual” in understanding a passage. While the initial dilemma is restricted mostly to Second Coming passages, it soon extends outward to a myriad of prophetic predictions because in order to find a first-century fulfillment to the many details which Scripture has revealed as yet future, the preterist is forced into searching historic documents in a sort of “newspaper exegesis after-the-fact” to find *some* event or persona who has a similarity to the Scriptural text.

Preterists search first century “newspapers” to see what events fit in with their scheme of first-century fulfillment. Though futurists are often charged with practicing “newspaper exegesis,” preterists are the real masters of the art. Interestingly, for the preterist, the closer we move to the time of the Lord’s physical return, the *farther* we get from the events they believe are indicated in the book of

Revelation.³⁵

Sometimes a similar event or persona is found, although never one that fulfills the *details* of the text for a careful reader. Other times the record of history is unable to produce. This eventuates a symbolic interpretation or spiritualization of the text because some prophetic events are completely lacking a first-century analog. Thus enters another characteristic of preterist interpretation: a flipping back and forth between taking the text literally or symbolically:

The biggest problem with the preterist position is the lack of consistent hermeneutics. They work hard to find historical evidence of [literal] prophetic fulfillment in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Any time an event described in a prophecy cannot be linked to an actual historical event, preterists immediately resort to a symbolic interpretation of the text. . . . What are the criteria for taking something literally? When does something become symbolic?³⁶

Preterists are inconsistent when they interpret Revelation's numbers. On the one hand, they interpret the numbers 42 (Revelation 13:5⁺), 666 (Revelation 13:8⁺), and 1⁺, 5⁺, and 7⁺ (Revelation 17:10⁺) in a straightforward, literal fashion. On the other hand, preterists contend that the numbers 1,000, 12,000, and 144,000 are purely symbolic.³⁷

The preterist hermeneutic is like a vehicle with two gears. The route along the text proceeds in first gear (literal interpretation) until a "bump" appears in the road (lack of historic fulfillment). Then the preterist shifts to second gear (symbolic or figurative interpretation) to get over the bump before dropping back into first gear. Since preterism sees almost all of the book of Revelation as having already been fulfilled in the past, it holds that nearly the entire book is focused solely on the readership of John's day.³⁸ One wonders how many first-time readers of the book of Revelation who arrive without any special bias would reach the following conclusion of preterism?

The Book of Revelation is not about the Second Coming of Christ It is about the destruction of Israel and Christ's victory over His enemies in the establishment of the New Covenant Temple. In fact, as we shall see, the word *coming* as used in the book of Revelation never refers to the Second Coming. Revelation prophesies the judgment of God on apostate Israel. [emphasis added]³⁹

2.12.2.5 - Damaging God's Word

There are so many problems and dangers associated with [preterism](#), it is difficult to know how to enumerate them. Here we will touch on our main concerns regarding this system of interpretation and the damage it does to God's Word:

1. **A Denial of Predictive Prophecy** - Preterism removes the capstone of God's written revelation. The last book of the Bible no longer includes information covering the entire sweep of history through the physical Second Coming of Christ, but has largely spent its significance as a historical document concerning events over 1900 years ago involving Rome and Israel. All that remains is a hazy notion that somehow the eternal state must be what we are experiencing on earth now.⁴⁰
2. **A Denial of Global Judgment** - Preterism localizes the book of Revelation making it nearly impossible to see how God *could* have described events truly global and future if that *had* been His intent.⁴¹
3. **A Denial of Reality** - If we are in the new heavens and new earth of Revelation 21⁺-22⁺ as preterists would have us believe, then Scripture means nothing. Either that, or we need to begin embracing a dualistic view of reality which denies our common senses, similar to that of Christian Science. The transition set forth in the creation of a new heavens and a new earth and a complete removal of the curse of Genesis is simply not evident to any objective observer. If this is the new heavens, Jesus was a charlatan.⁴² Moreover, it would be news to most people in the world that the decisive victory of Satan portrayed in the book of Revelation has already been accomplished.⁴³
4. **A Blurring of Canonical Boundaries** - Preterism majors on searching first-century non-canonical writings for "fulfillments" to predictive prophecy. The results are predictable. Teaching and writing by preterists invariably draws almost as heavily from non-canonical writings (the "fulfillments") as Scripture (the predictions). We have witnessed the effects of this blurring of the boundary of the canon firsthand, especially on new untaught believers. The result is the elevation of faulty historic writings and the denigration of [inerrant](#) Scripture. There is also the danger of pointing inexperienced believers to errant and uninspired [apocryphal](#) and historical writings as the main diet in the place of God's Holy Word.⁴⁴
5. **A Denial of the Imminent Second Coming** - As more and more passages dealing with Christ's return are interpreted as first-century "cloud comings," the imminent expectation of His Second Coming, so central to the expectation of the New Testament, fades. Commenting on the writing of commentaries, preterist Chilton observes, "Indeed, if my eschatology is correct, **the Church has many more years left** to write many more words!" [emphasis added]⁴⁵ So much for an expectation of the imminent return of our Lord!

2.12.3 - Idealist Interpretation

Mounce and Osborne provide a good summary of the idealist approach to interpreting the book of Revelation

Its proponents hold that Revelation is not to be taken in reference to any specific events at all but as an expression of those basic principles on which God acts throughout history. . . . The idealist approach continues the allegorical interpretation which dominated exegesis throughout the medieval period and still finds favor with those inclined to minimize the historical character of the coming consummation. . . . Its weakness lies in the fact that it denies to the book any specific historical fulfillment.⁴⁶

This popular approach argues that the symbols do not relate to historical events but rather to timeless spiritual truths. . . . As such, it relates primarily to the church between the advents, that is, between Christ's first and second comings. Thus it concerns the battle between God and evil and between the church and the world at all times in church history. . . . The millennium in this approach is not a future event but the final cycle of the book . . . describing the church age.⁴⁷

By employing allegorical interpretation, the book is reduced to a symbolic exhibition of good versus evil. "The more moderate form of allegorical interpretation, following Augustine, . . . regards the book of Revelation as presenting in a symbolic way the total conflict between Christianity and evil or, as Augustine put it, the City of God versus the City of Satan."⁴⁸ Idealists have much in common with [preterists](#) in that they avoid an understanding of the book of Revelation which would seem to be describing future events. Here again, there is an overemphasis on the readers of John's day, as if the book were only written to describe historic events of their time and hold devotional value for those that follow:

Its flaw is not so much in what it affirms as in what it denies. Many idealists could be classed as preterists, since they hold that the imagery of the Apocalypse is taken from its immediate world, and that the prevailing conditions of Domitian's reign are reflected in the symbolic episodes that fill its pages. They refuse to assign to them any literal historical significance for the future, and they deny all predictive prophecy except in the most general sense of the ultimate triumph of righteousness. "The problem with this alternative is that it holds that Revelation does not depict any final consummation to history, whether in God's final victory or in a last judgment of the realm of evil."⁴⁹⁵⁰

Idealist Calkins summarizes idealism in five propositions:

1) It is an irresistible summons to heroic living. 2) The book contains matchless appeals to endurance. 3) It tells us that evil is marked for overthrow *in the end*. 4) It gives us a new and wonderful picture of Christ. 5) The Apocalypse reveals to us the fact that history is in the mind of God and in the hand of Christ as the author and reviewer of the moral destinies of men.⁵¹

Thus, the capstone of biblical revelation, chock full of self-proclaimed prophetic relevance, is reduced to something akin to a devotional.⁵² Idealism also suffers from an inconsistency of interpretation where small sections are interpreted literally, but then the interpreter reverts back to symbolism and allegory. There is no clear or consistent means for determining when this shift should occur. A fundamental mistake is made when the fact that John is receiving revelation *through* a series of visions is seen as license to hold that John's communication is something less than logically coherent.

They have John in a sort of "dream world" until their personally contrived formula has him revert to a literal mode of predicting the future in more precise terms. To be sure, the bulk of the Apocalypse resulted from John's prophetic trance(s) . . . (Rev. 1:10⁺; 4:2⁺; 17:3⁺; 21:10⁺). There is, however, no justification for equating such a trance with a dream where logical coherence is nonexistent. Though in some sort of ecstatic state, John's spirit was wide awake and its powers were exercised with unusual alertness and clarity.⁵³

In our view, the idealist interpretation has only one aspect to commend it: an appreciation of the value of the realities recorded in the book of Revelation to all the people of God throughout history. Especially to those who face great trials, persecution, or even martyrdom. With this, we wholeheartedly agree. In almost every other way, we oppose the idealist interpretation because it violates the Golden Rule of Interpretation and makes an accurate historical understanding of the events God has revealed almost impossible. The bankruptcy of this approach is best illustrated by the huge variation in the interpretive results of its practitioners. If the idealist interpretation is the correct one, then the true meaning of the book of Revelation cannot be reliably determined. But then perhaps it would not matter if the book were given only to inspire the saints!

2.12.4 - Historicist Interpretation

The historicist system of interpretation understands the book of Revelation as setting forth the major events of Christian history spanning the time of John until the present.⁵⁴ "Historicist interpreters generally see Revelation as predicting the major movements of Christian history, most of which have been fulfilled up to the time of the commentator."⁵⁵ "Proponents of this method have tended to take Rev. 2⁺-19⁺, including the seals, trumpets, and bowls as well as the interludes, as prophetic of salvation history, that is, the development of church history within world history."⁵⁶ This view has also been called the *continuist* view.⁵⁷ The beginning of

historicism has been attributed to Joachim of Fiore (12th century) or Nicolas of Lyra (died 1340).

This approach began with Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth century. He claimed that a vision had told him the 1,260 days of the Apocalypse prophesied the events of Western history from the time of the apostles until the present. The Franciscans followed Joachim and like him interpreted the book relating to pagan Rome and the papacy (due to corruption in the church). Later the Reformers . . . also favored this method, with the pope as the Antichrist.⁵⁸

Nicolas of Lyra (teacher of theology at Paris, died 1340) . . . Abandoning the theory of recapitulation, he finds in the course of the book prediction of a continuous series of events from the apostolic age to the final consummation. The seals refer to the period extending into the reign of Domitian; in the later parts are predicted the Arian and other heresies, the spread of Mohammedism, Charlemagne, the Crusades, and other historical details.⁵⁹

The historicist view has been the interpretive approach of numerous well-known individuals: Albert Barnes, Bengel, Elliott, Martin Luther, Joseph Mede, Isaac Newton, Vitringa, William Whiston, and John Wycliffe.⁶⁰ See Ice for a summary of historicist interpretation of Revelation 6⁺-19⁺ (that of Albert Barnes),⁶¹ One of the problems the historicist view encounters is that the events of the book of Revelation appear to be clustered within a relatively short time period (Rev. 11:2-3⁺; 12:6⁺, 14⁺; 13:5⁺). In order to apply this period to history from the time of John to that of the interpreter, the 1260 days of the time period are understood as “prophetic days” and interpreted as years

The principal difficulty in the way was to dispose of the predictions which limited the final stage of Antichrist’s career to forty-two months, or twelve hundred sixty days. This was accomplished by what is known as the “year-day” theory, which regards each of the 1260 days as “prophetic days,” that is, as 1260 years, and thus sufficient room was afforded to allow for the protracted history of Roman Catholicism.⁶²

A variation on this approach was to use the 2,300 days of Daniel 8:14 to arrive at yet a longer period of time.⁶³ One of the primary motives behind the full development of historicism was a desire to interpret the book of Revelation as an anti-Roman Catholic polemic where the [Beast](#) was seen as denoting the pope and the papacy. This suited the needs of the enemies of the “Babylonish” papacy, especially during the Reformation. “This method of interpreting the book of Revelation achieved considerable stature in the Reformation because of its identification of the pope and the papacy with the beasts of Revelation 13⁺. Thiessen lists Wycliffe, Luther, Joseph Mede, Sir Isaac Newton, William Whiston, Elliott, Vitringa, Bengel, and Barnes as adherents of this approach.”⁶⁴ Pink sees historicism and its anti-pope focus as being a key contributor to the rise of [postmillennialism](#)

The dominant view which has been held by Protestants since the time of the Reformation is that the many predictions relating to the Antichrist describe, instead, the rise, progress, and doom of the papacy. This mistake has led to others, and given rise to the scheme of prophetic interpretation which has prevailed throughout Christendom. When the predictions concerning the Man of Sin were allegorized, consistency required that all associated and collateral predictions should also be allegorized, and especially those which relate to his doom, and the kingdom which is to be established on the overthrow of his power. When the period of his predicted course was made to measure the whole duration of the papal system, it naturally followed that the predictions of the associated events should be applied to the history of Europe from the time that the Bishop of Rome became recognized as the head of the Western Churches. It was, really, this mistake of Luther and his contemporaries in applying to Rome the prophecies concerning the Antichrist which is responsible, we believe, for the whole modern system of post-millennialism.⁶⁵

Historicism suffers with idealism in the variety of interpretations which arise from its proponents

Elliott, in his *Horae Apocalypticæ*, holds that the trumpets (Rev. 8:6⁺-9:21⁺) cover the period from A.D. 395 to A.D. 1453, beginning with the attacks on the Western Roman empire by the Goths and concluding with the fall of the Eastern empire to the Turks. The first trumpet was the invasion of the Goths under Alaric, who sacked Rome; the second was the invasion under Genseric, who conquered North Africa; the third was the raid of the Huns under Attila, who devastated central Europe. The fourth was the collapse of the empire under the conquest of Odoacer. The locusts of the fifth trumpet were the Moslem hordes that poured into the west between the sixth and eighth centuries, and the sixth judgment of the four angels bound at the Euphrates (Rev. 9:14⁺) was the growth and spread of the Turkish power.⁶⁶

This has led to endless speculation that is totally without biblical support. Identifications have included monks and friars as “locusts,” Muhammad as the “fallen star,” Alaric the Goth as the first trumpet, Elizabeth I as the first bowl, Martin Luther as the angel of Sardis, Adolf Hitler as the red horse.⁶⁷

The key problem for historicism is the need to constrain the events of the book of Revelation into the historic mold brought to the text by the interpreter. Since different interpreters give priority and attention to different historical events or geographical regions, the results predictably vary. Moreover, when the chain of events of the book mismatch those of the historic period, there is the need to

leave literal interpretation for the flexibility of spiritual interpretation. Thus, an inconsistent interpretive approach results.⁶⁸ John Hendrik de Vries decries the historical method of interpretation: "It turns exegesis into an artful play of ingenuity."⁶⁹ Historicism is not very popular today. This is partly because of its consistent failure to account for the actual events of history to our own time.⁷⁰ The variation in results obtained by proponents has also been so great that it tends to invalidate the approach.⁷¹ Osborne lists a number of weaknesses of the system, including: (1) an identification only with Western Church history; (2) the inherent speculation involved in the parallels with world history;⁷² (3) the fact that it must be reworked with each new period of world history.⁷³

The historicist position, . . . suffers from the inability of interpreters of this school to establish a specific verifiable criterion of judgment whereby positive identification for the fulfillment of specific prophecies can be proved to be historically fulfilled by specific events in world history, in historical instances of fulfillment to which most of the interpreters of this school could agree. The method requires the student of Revelation to go outside the Bible and seek for the fulfillment of predictions in the past events of world history, and to one not well taught in history the method is impossible to carry out, leaving the book of Revelation largely closed to the ordinary reader.⁷⁴

The historical interpreters differ so much among themselves that we may well ask, Which one of them are we to believe? It is this very diversity which has caused so many earnest students to put the Apocalypse aside in despair.⁷⁵

Modern advocates of historicism include the Seventh-Day Adventists and the followers of the late David Koresh of Waco, Texas.⁷⁶

2.12.5 - Futurist Interpretation

The approach to interpreting the book of Revelation which has gained perhaps the widest exposure of all systems of interpretation in recent times is the futurist interpretation. This is a result of a number of seminaries in the recent past which have championed a literal interpretive approach to all of Scripture within a framework which understands related Old Testament passages and promises involving Israel, and which distinguishes between Israel and the Church. The futurist interpretation is the basic interpretive framework behind the hugely popular *Left Behind* series of novels by authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.⁷⁷ Futurism derives from the consistent application of literal [hermeneutics](#), the Golden Rule of Interpretation, across the entire body of Scripture, including the book of Revelation. Contrary to the claims of many of its critics, it is not an *a priori* view which is imposed on the text.⁷⁸ As evidenced by the testimony of the early Church, futurism is the most natural result of a plain reading of the text and the way that most unbiased readers would understand the book on their first reading. Futurism gets its label from its refusal to see unfulfilled passages as having been fulfilled by *approximately similar* events in the past. Hence, it holds that many of the events in the book of Revelation await future fulfillment:

The futurist generally believes that all of the visions from Revelation 4:1⁺ to the end of the book are yet to be fulfilled in the period immediately preceding and following the second advent of Christ. The reason for the view is found in the comparison of Revelation 1:1⁺, 19⁺ and 4:1⁺.⁷⁹

Futurists see eschatological passages being fulfilled during a future time, primarily during the seventieth week of Daniel, at the second coming of Christ, and during the millennium. While all dispensationalists are futurists, not all futurists are dispensationalists. Futurists are also the most literal in their interpretation of prophecy passages. Dr. Tenney says: "The more literal an interpretation that one adopts, the more strongly will he be construed to be a futurist."⁸⁰

Osborne summarizes the two primary forms taken by futurism:⁸¹

There are two forms of this approach, dispensationalism and what has been called "classic premillennialism." Dispensationalists believe that God has brought about his plan of salvation in a series of dispensations or stages centering on his election of Israel to be his covenant people. Therefore, the church age is a parenthesis in this plan, as God turned to the Gentiles until the Jewish people find national revival (Rom. 11:25-32). At the end of that period, the church will be raptured, inaugurating a seven-year tribulation period in the middle of which the Antichrist will make himself known (Rev. 13⁺) and instigate the "great tribulation" . . . At the end of that period . . . Christ returns in judgment, followed by a literal millennium (Rev. 20:1-10⁺), great white throne judgment (Rev. 20:11-15⁺), and the beginning of eternity . . . Classical premillennialism is similar but does not hold to dispensations. Thus there is only one return of Christ, after the tribulation period (Mat. 24:29-31; cf. Rev. 19:11-21⁺) and it is the whole church, not just the nation of Israel, that passes through the tribulation period.⁸²

Futurism was undeniably the system of interpretation held by the majority in the early church. "Variations of this view were held by the earliest expositors, such as Justin Martyr (d.165), Irenaeus (d.c.195), Hippolytus (d.236), and Victorinus (d.c.303)."⁸³ Modern futurists wholeheartedly agree with the statement of Jerome, writing in A.D. 393: "John . . . saw . . . an Apocalypse containing boundless mysteries of the future"⁸⁴ As early as [Irenaeus](#) (130-200) and Hippolytus (170-236), basic futuristic concepts such as the

remaining week of Daniel's seventy weeks (see our discussion of [related passages and themes](#)) had already become evident:

When Knowles deals with the next major contributors—Irenaeus (130-200) and his disciple Hippolytus (170-236)—he describes their views as “undoubtedly the forerunners of the modern dispensational interpreters of the Seventy Weeks.” Knowles draws the following conclusion about Irenaeus and Hippolytus: “We may say that Irenaeus presented the seed of an idea that found its full growth in the writings of Hippolytus. In the works of these fathers, we can find most of the basic concepts of the modern futuristic view of the seventieth week of Daniel ix. That they were dependent to some extent upon earlier material is no doubt true. Certainly we can see the influence of pre-Christian Jewish exegesis at times, but, by and large, we must regard them as the founders of the school of interpretation, and in this lies their significance for the history of exegesis.”⁸⁵

Because futurism is a result of literal hermeneutics (see below) and the early church was spared the damaging effects of [allegorical interpretation](#), the early church also understood Scripture to teach a future, onethousand-year reign of Christ on earth in fulfillment of [OT](#) promises of the Messianic Kingdom.⁸⁶ This was a widespread view among early interpreters:

[Justin Martyr] asserts that it teaches a literal Millennial Kingdom of the saints to be established in Jerusalem, and after the thousand years the general resurrection and judgment. . . . Irenaeus . . . finds in the book the doctrine of chiliasm, that is, of an earthly Millennial Kingdom. . . . Hippolytus is a chiliast . . . identifies . . . Antichrist, who was represented by Antiochus Epiphanes and who will come out of the tribe of Dan, will reign 3 1/2 years, persecuting the Church and putting to death the two Witnesses, the forerunners of the parousia (held to be Elijah and Enoch). . . . Victorinus . . . understands the Revelation in a literal, chiliastic, sense . . . The two witnesses are Elijah and Jeremiah; the 144,000 are Jews who in the last days will be converted by the preaching of Elijah . . . the false prophet, will cause the image of Antichrist to be set up in the temple at Jerusalem.⁸⁷

Notice that Victorinus, writing well in advance of modern futurists, but *after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70*, sees the [Temple](#) of Revelation as being a *future* Temple, just like modern futurists. Unfortunately, with the [rise of allegorical interpretation](#) and the opposition of the heresy of Montanism (which utilized an extravagant form of millennial teaching drawn from the book of Revelation),⁸⁸ the futurist view fell into disfavor, not to be seen in a favorable light again for over a thousand years.⁸⁹ During the Reformation, literal interpretation flourished in response to the allegorical methods employed throughout the Middle Ages by the Roman Church. However, the Reformers never fully extended literalism to prophetic passages and key Reformers did not fully appreciate the book of Revelation. The primary fork in the road between futurism and all other systems of interpretation concerning the book of Revelation comes in the refusal of the futurist to be imprecise with the details of God's revelation.⁹⁰ For example, when a passage states that a man “performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men” (Rev. 13:13+), the futurist expects fulfillment to involve: (1) a man; (2) performing great signs in a similar way that great signs were performed in the OT and by Christ in the gospels; (3) who calls down literal fire from literal heaven as was done in the OT; (4) viewed by other men. He then asks the simple question: Is there any reliable historic record of such an event since the time of John's writing? The obvious answer is, “No!” Hence this event awaits future fulfillment. It really is that simple! There is a strong connection between literal interpretation and futurism: “The more literal an interpretation that one adopts, the more strongly will he be construed to be a futurist.”⁹¹ Literal interpretation allows the text to speak for itself.⁹² Critics frequently misrepresent futurism as if it places its *entire* emphasis on understanding the book of Revelation as applying to the future: “The futurist position especially encounters the difficulty that the book would have had **no significant relevance for a first-century readership**.” [emphasis added]⁹³ This is a major misunderstanding of the futurist position which holds that the early chapters of the book are specifically addressed to the then-existing churches in Asia Minor and fully appreciates the historical setting and contents of these passages. Moreover, futurism concurs with Swete that the events of the book of Revelation are relevant in *every* age as a great source of blessing and security for persecuted believers:

In the Epistle of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons, written in 177 to their brethren in Asia and Phrygia, which bears many signs of the use of the Apocalypse by the Christian societies of South Gaul during the troubles in the reign of Marcus Aurelius. . . . It is impossible to doubt that the roll which contained St John's great letter to the parent Churches in Asia was often in the hands of the daughter Churches in Gaul, and perhaps accompanied the confessors to the prisons where they awaited the martyr's crown.⁹⁴

The critics of futurism require complete primary relevance of the *entire* book for the readers of John's own day. But those most closely associated with the culture and times of the readers evidence no such requirement! The witness of [Justin Martyr](#) and Irenaeus is especially important because they both had close association with the earliest Christians who would have been familiar with the times during which John wrote the book of Revelation. Even so, they fail to understand the events recorded in the book in the way in which [preterists](#) or idealists insist, but reflect the futurist view. Writing in the early 2nd century, they were much better positioned than we to understand the relevance of John's message to their times! Are they to be accused of being guilty of making the book “irrelevant”? The mistake being made is constraining the book of Revelation as if it had only a *single* purpose. No matter which view is taken, if one fails to understand the many purposes of the book, the interpretive result will be the lacking. Preterist Chilton remarks: “No Biblical writer ever revealed the future merely for the sake of satisfying curiosity: The goal was always to direct

God's people toward right action in the present. . . . The prophets told of the future **only** in order to stimulate godly living." [emphasis added]⁹⁵ If Chilton were correct, then there would be little reason for prophecy to be *predictive*. The fact is, the prophets gave prophecy for more reasons than merely the stimulation of godly living. This was indeed an important reason, but not the only reason. The many fulfilled prophecies *testifying to the identity of Jesus* at His First Coming provide an abundant counter example to Chilton's claim. It is a misrepresentation of the futurist interpretation to assert that it denies the relevance of the text to the first-century readership. This is tantamount to saying that appreciating the prophetic predictions throughout Scripture essentially denies the relevance of the same passages to those who originally received them. The pattern of prophetic passages throughout Scripture is clearly one of both immediate local application and future prediction. Even in cases where there is no immediate local application by way of historical events (e.g., Isa. 53), the passages still contain inestimable worth to the original recipients in setting forth the will of God as well as inspirational value in the sure hope of what God will do in the future (Rom. 8:24-25). In the Apocalypse, this dual application of prophetic Scripture (both immediate/local and future/remote) is made explicit in the organizational framework set forth by Christ (Rev. 1:19⁺) and in the setting off of the seven epistles from the remaining material. Other criticisms of futurism are manifestly silly. Gregg denies futurists the right to use the analogy of Scripture (Scripture interprets Scripture):

A major feature of the Tribulation expected by *futurists* is its seven-year duration, divided in the middle by the Antichrist's violating a treaty he had made with Israel and setting up an image of himself in the rebuilt Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Yet none of these elements can be discovered from a literal interpretation of any passage in Revelation. . . . The *futurist* believes that Revelation 20⁺ describes a period of world peace and justice with Christ reigning on earth from Jerusalem, though no part of this description can be found in the chapter itself, taken literally. This observation does not mean that this futurist scenario cannot be true. But it must be derived by reading into the passages in Revelation features that are not plainly stated.⁹⁶

Gregg would have futurists interpret the book of Revelation as if it were delivered with no connection to existing prophetic information given by God. Never mind what the rest of Scripture has to say about Israel, Daniel's seventy weeks, Jacob's trouble, the Great Tribulation predicted by Jesus, or other matters. Those who attempt a comprehensive understanding of Scripture by bringing together *everything* God has said on related subjects are accused of "reading into" passages that which is simply not there! Obviously, care needs to be exercised when connecting passages which seem to have related aspects, but if a good case can be made for a correlation, then the interpreter who fails in this synthesis is failing in his task before God. Chiding futurists who correlate the little horn of Daniel (Dan. 7:8), the man of sin of Paul (2Th. 2:3), and the **Beast** of Revelation (Rev. 13:1⁺) because of obvious and intentional similarities given in Scripture, but *providing no sensible or profitable synthesis in its place* is a pattern frequently demonstrated by critics. This is the primary reason why futurists can offer a systematic and detailed outline of eschatological events while the other systems fail to provide anything even remotely similar. It almost seems that the critics of futurism dislike the certainty and coherence it offers in its interpretation of prophecy. But if God supernaturally gave the **inspired** Scriptures through a single author (the Holy Spirit), why shouldn't such coherence and correlation be expected? To the futurist, the book of Revelation has relevancy to John, to the **seven churches** of Asia, to the Church throughout history, and to the saints all the way through the Second Coming of Christ and into the eternal state. Now *that's* relevancy!

The book of Revelation is important to us because it portrays the world as a global village. Entering the twenty-first century, no better expression describes our earth and its people. Besides a mushrooming population, other factors are pushing all humanity together, such as an interlinking economy, jet age transportation, and satellite communications.⁹⁷

We believe in the futurist interpretation of the book of Revelation. This is because we are convinced of the **Golden Rule of Interpretation** as the key to properly understanding God's Revelation. This is true of all written communication where the desire of the author is to convey a clear message rather than to puzzle or obscure. It is our conviction and experience that applying the Golden Rule from Genesis to Revelation will result in a futurist interpretation of Scripture and is the only reliable means of accurately knowing what God intended to the degree we may understand Him as His finite creatures.

2.12.6 - Ecclectic Interpretation

The final system of interpretation we discuss briefly is that of an eclectic interpretation. This system picks and chooses elements from each of the other interpretive systems and applies them at different places in the text. It is the ultimate "interpretive smorgasbord" whose proponents proclaim combines the best from each system. "The solution is to allow the preterist, idealist, and futurist methods to interact in such a way that the strengths are maximized and the weaknesses minimized."⁹⁸ This sounds appealing and is in keeping with the trend towards diversity so prevalent in our day. Rather than struggle within the restrictive framework of any one system, why not "have them all?" The answer, once again, is **hermeneutics**, hermeneutics, hermeneutics! Thomas identifies the Achilles Heel of the eclectic approach: "It leaves to human judgment the determination of where the details of a text end and its general picture begins. Allowing this liberty for subjective opinion cannot qualify as objective interpretation."⁹⁹ One can't simply combine the elements from disparate systems of interpretation, for they are often at odds with one another. Therefore, the *subjectivity* (a word to be avoided in interpretation) of the interpreter now rules over the choice of *when* to use *which* system.

Obviously, different interpreters will make this decision differently across the text and the results will be as eclectic as the system itself. This, too, is a bad thing if you believe that God's Word has one primary meaning which He desires all His saints to understand. Taking one example from Beale:

Accordingly, no specific prophesied historical events are discerned in the book, except for the final coming of Christ to deliver and judge and to establish the final form of the kingdom in a consummated new creation—though there are a few exceptions to this rule. . . . ([e.g., Rev. 2:10⁺, 22⁺ and 3:9-10⁺, which are unconditional prophecies to be fulfilled imminently in the specific local churches of Smyrna, Thyatira, and Philadelphia).¹⁰⁰

Here Beale arbitrarily and personally decides that “no specific prophesied historical events are discussed,” but then immediately makes equally arbitrary exceptions. And if things which are said to three of the [seven churches](#) can be held to be “unconditional prophecies,” why not the many other prophecies throughout the rest of the book? We submit that no two eclectic interpreters will make the same distinctions as to which portions of the text are to be treated historically, literally, symbolically, figuratively, or devotionally. Therefore, a reliable meaning *cannot be derived* from such an approach. This is not to say that futurists unanimously agree about the precise details of related matters, but it is easily demonstrated that they arrive at a much narrower variation in understanding—a cluster of “near hits” around the center of the target while the eclectic interpreters are scattered all over the target. A growth in popularity of the eclectic interpretation is to be expected given our postmodern age, for the eclectic system of interpretation has much in common with it: *First*, the tendency to embrace all paths as being approximately equivalent; *Second*, the desire to avoid treating other views negatively; *Third*, the willingness to allow for a variety of interpretations of what truth is (*your truth is your truth, my truth is my truth*). The Word of God's objective claim that there is a *single* path to truth undermines the claims of an eclectic approach much as it does the claims of postmodernism. Those who advocate this view are often idealists who recognize some of the weaknesses of their system and desire to dabble in aspects of the other systems. The resulting interpretation is highly varied and idealistic in overall tone.

Notes

¹Thomas Ice, [“What Is Preterism?”](#) in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, eds., [Borrow The End Times Controversy](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 18.

²The astute reader will recognize the smaller variation in the interpretive results of the futurist system as an implicit endorsement of its validity.

³Randall Price, [“Dead Sea Scrolls, Eschatology of the.”](#) in Mal Couch, ed., [Dictionary of Premillennial Theology](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996), 91.

⁴John MacArthur, [Revelation 1-11 : The MacArthur New Testament Commentary](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 11.

⁵Steve Gregg, [Revelation Four Views: A Parallel Commentary](#) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 1.

⁶*Ibid.*, 4.

⁷Mal Couch, [“Why is Revelation Important?”](#) in Mal Couch, ed., [A Bible Handbook to Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 16.

⁸Merrill C. Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1957), 144.

⁹Ice, [What Is Preterism?](#), 22-23.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 23-24.

¹¹Larry Spargimino, [“How Preterists Misuse History to Advance their View of Prophecy.”](#) in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, eds., [Borrow The End Times Controversy](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 19.

¹²Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 41.

¹³Gregory K. Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 45.

¹⁴Spargimino, [How Preterists Misuse History to Advance their View of Prophecy](#) 26-27.

¹⁵Robert L. Thomas, [“Theonomy and the Dating of Revelation.”](#) in Richard L. Mayhue, ed., [The Master's Seminary Journal](#), vol. 5 (Sun Valley, CA: The Master's Seminary, 1994), 187-188.

¹⁶Idealism is also guilty of reinterpreting the book to avoid the obvious implications of a horrific time yet future coming upon the world.

¹⁷Spargimino, [How Preterists Misuse History to Advance their View of Prophecy](#) 9.

¹⁸Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 44.

¹⁹"The prophecies of Daniel 2 and 7 alluded to throughout the Apocalypse foresee a last judgment of the evil nations, not primarily of unbelieving Israel. Interestingly, these preterist interpreters identify the beast of Daniel 7 in Rev. 13:1±ff. with a pagan nation (Rome), which Daniel then sees as the object of final judgment. But then they identify apostate Israel elsewhere in the book as the main object of Daniel's prophesied final judgment."—Ibid.

²⁰"Since the preterist and idealist interpretations are not committed to predictive prophecy in Revelation, they tend chiefly to be advocated today by liberal or neo-orthodox interpreters. To them, Revelation is merely a statement of faith in sociological progress and the eventual triumph of a more equitable world order."—Henry Morris, [The Revelation Record](#) (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1983), 26. "The [preterist] view [is] held by a majority of contemporary scholars, not a few of whom are identified with the liberal interpretation of Christianity."—Alan F. Johnson, [Revelation: The Expositor's Bible Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), 13.

²¹Regardless of statements by Paul to the contrary: Rom. 11:11-12.

²²Thomas Ice, "[The History of Preterism.](#)" in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, eds., Borrow [The End Times Controversy](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 45.

²³John MacArthur, "[Signs in the Sky.](#)" in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, eds., Borrow [The End Times Controversy](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 113.

²⁴"The full text of *The Didache* was rediscovered little more than a hundred years ago, in a codex found in Constantinople in 1873. This document proves that those who actually lived through the events of A.D. 70 regarded Matthew 24:29-31—the entire Olivet Discourse—as yet-unfulfilled prophecy."—Ibid., 112.

²⁵"[A] Spanish Jesuit, Alcasar (died 1614), was the first to interpret the entire premillennial part of Revelation (chaps. 4-19) as falling totally within the age of the Apocalypticist and the centuries immediately following. . . . Alcasar was a thoroughgoing 'preterist.' "—Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), 40-41.

²⁶Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#), 136.

²⁷Contrast the following statement with the claims of Gary North who writes in the publisher's preface to Chilton: "[the preterist] viewpoint is an old one, stretching back to the early church."—David Chilton, [The Days of Vengeance](#) (Tyler, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), xv.

²⁸Ice, [The History of Preterism](#), 39.

²⁹Chilton, [The Days of Vengeance](#), 575.

³⁰"The nature of the event has to do with a 'Cloud Coming' of Christ . . ."—Kenneth L. Gentry, [Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation](#) (Atlanta, GA: American Vision, 1998), 123.

³¹"In case we might miss it, he says again, at the close of the book, that 'the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to His bond-servants the things which must shortly take place' (Rev. 22:6+). Given the fact that one important proof of a true prophet lay in the fact that his predictions came true (Deu. 18:21-22), St. John's first-century readers had every reason to expect his book to have immediate significance."—Chilton, [The Days of Vengeance](#), 42.

³²Thomas Ice, "[Some Practical Dangers of Preterism.](#)" in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, eds., Borrow [The End Times Controversy](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 426.

³³MacArthur, Borrow [Signs in the Sky.](#), 111.

³⁴Isn't this the very reason why the Scriptures indicate the return of Jesus will be visible, global, and unmistakable?

³⁵Spargimino, [How Preterists Misuse History to Advance their View of Prophecy](#) 20.

³⁶Gordon Franz, "[Was 'Babylon' Destroyed when Jerusalem Fell in A.D. 70?.](#)" in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, eds., Borrow [The End Times Controversy](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 236.

³⁷Andy Woods, "[Revelation 13 and the First Beast.](#)" in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, eds., Borrow [The End Times Controversy](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 243.

³⁸[Preterists assume] that the book uses a future orientation not to describe future reality but to challenge the situation of the original readers. There are two main variations within preterist interpretation: those who see the book describing events leading to the predicted judgment of apostate Israel and the destruction of the Jewish Temple in A.D. 70 and those who understand its focus as describing the situation of the Christian church within the Roman Empire (the conflict between church and state).—Grant R. Osborne, [Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 1. Osborne mentions a third variation which has more in common with the idealist interpretation, providing "a spatial interaction between the earthly and the heavenly so as to give new meaning to the present situation."—Ibid., 19.

³⁹Chilton, [The Days of Vengeance](#), 43.

⁴⁰"The preterist has an interpretation which has a firm pedestal, but which has no finished sculpture to place on it."—Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#), 144.

⁴¹Concerning Revelation 10:11⁺ wherein John is told, "And he said to me, 'You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings,'" Chilton says, "St. John's prophecy regarding the destruction of Israel and the establishing of the New Covenant will encompass the nations of the world. . . . John is to extend the proclamation of [the] Gospel to all nations."—Chilton, [The Days of Vengeance](#), 270. But this is a misreading of the text. The text states that what John will yet reveal in the book is *about* these global entities not *to* them. The passage has nothing to do with proclaiming the gospel, but everything to do with proclaiming the revelation which is being given to John which *concerns* these peoples, nations, tongues, and kings. The fact is, the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 is just not that big of a deal to the modernman in Siberia and is not what is in view.

⁴²"The city of God, described in the last chapters of the book, is obviously unrealized. Even if it be regarded as a symbol of some perfect state of human society, it has not yet been achieved. The preterist view simply does not account adequately for the claim of Revelation to be a prediction of the future."—Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#), 137.

⁴³"The major problem with the preterist position is that the decisive victory portrayed in the latter chapters of the Apocalypse was never achieved. It is difficult to believe that John envisioned anything less than the complete overthrow of Satan, the final destruction of evil, and the eternal reign of God."—Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), 41-42. "[Mild preterist] Gentry actually believes we are in some way in the new heavens and the new earth of Revelation 21⁺-22⁺. If this is true, then we all must be living in the ghetto side of the New Jerusalem. But there is no ghetto in the New Jerusalem."—Ice, [Some Practical Dangers of Preterism](#), 420.

⁴⁴"Because of their first-century template for interpreting Bible prophecy, preterists come close to investing certain historians with canonic authority. . . . Should Josephus's writings become the sixty-seventh book of the Bible?"—Spargimino, [How Preterists Misuse History to Advance their View of Prophecy](#), 219.

⁴⁵Chilton, [The Days of Vengeance](#), xiii.

⁴⁶Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), 43.

⁴⁷Osborne, [Revelation](#), 20.

⁴⁸John F. Walvoord, [The Revelation of Jesus Christ](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966), 17.

⁴⁹Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 48.

⁵⁰Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#), 143.

⁵¹Ice, [What Is Preterism?](#), 21.

⁵²Robertson says, "There seems abundant evidence to believe that this apocalypse, written during the stress and storm of Domitian's persecution, was intended to cheer the persecuted Christians with a view of certain victory at last, but with **no scheme of history in view.**" [emphasis added]—Mal Couch, [Introductory Thoughts on Revelation](#) (Ft. Worth, TX: Tyndale Theological Seminary, n.d.).

⁵³Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#), 1:34.

⁵⁴One of the problems with this approach is that as Jesus delays in His coming, the “present” is constantly changing requiring a re-analysis of the “fit” between the events given by John and the span of history.

⁵⁵Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 46.

⁵⁶Osborne, [Revelation](#), 19.

⁵⁷Mal Couch, [Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications), 258.

⁵⁸Osborne, [Revelation](#), 18.

⁵⁹Isbon T. Beckwith, [The Apocalypse of John](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 329.

⁶⁰“This [view] was held by Martin Luther, Isaac Newton, Elliott, and others.”—Mal Couch, [“Interpreting the Book of Revelation.”](#) in Mal Couch, ed., [A Bible Handbook to Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 47. “This method of interpreting the book of Revelation achieved considerable stature in the Reformation because of its identification of the pope and the papacy with the beasts of Revelation 13+. Thiessen lists Wycliffe, Luther, Joseph Mede, Sir Isaac Newton, William Whiston, Elliott, Vitringa, Bengel, and Barnes as adherents of this approach.”—Walvoord, [The Revelation of Jesus Christ](#), 18.

⁶¹Ice, [What Is Preterism?](#), 19.

⁶²Arthur Walkington Pink, [The Antichrist](#) (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1999, 1923), s.v. “intro.”

⁶³“This spiritualistic approach is built upon the day/year theory, whereby 1260 days (literally 3 1/2 years) mentioned in Daniel and Revelation cover the time (1260 years) of the domination of Antichrist over the church. Another variation is to apply the day/year theory to the 2,300 days of Daniel 8:14. Thus, the historicist attempts to figure out when Antichrist came to power (i.e., the Roman Church and the papacy) by adding 1,260 or 2,300 years to arrive at the time of the second coming and the defeat of Antichrist.”—Ice, [What Is Preterism?](#), 18.

⁶⁴Walvoord, [The Revelation of Jesus Christ](#), 18.

⁶⁵Pink, [The Antichrist](#), s.v. “intro.”

⁶⁶Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#), 138.

⁶⁷Edward Hindson, [Revelation: Unlocking the Future](#) (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), 14.

⁶⁸“The historicist is constantly confronted with the dilemma of a far-fetched spiritualization in order to maintain the chain of historical events, or else if he makes the events literal in accordance with the language of the text he is compelled to acknowledge that no comparable events in history have happened.”—Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#), 138.

⁶⁹Walvoord, [The Revelation of Jesus Christ](#), 19-20.

⁷⁰“The deterrent to a strictly dated interpretation of Revelation is the failure of all such schemes that have hitherto been proposed. No matter how the figures and intervals in it have been pressed and twisted to yield results, no clear parallel to the current era has yet been devised.”—Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#), 135.

⁷¹“Proponents of this view living at different periods of church history cannot agree with one another, since they limit the meaning of the symbols only to specific historical referents contemporary with their own times.”—Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 46.

⁷²Preterism suffers from this same weakness, although in a more restricted historic time-frame.

⁷³Osborne, [Revelation](#), 19.

⁷⁴Jerome Smith, [The New Treasury of Scripture Knowledge](#) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), Rev. 4:1.

⁷⁵E. W. Bullinger, [Commentary On Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1984, 1935), Rev. 8:7.

⁷⁶“Those who followed events surrounding David Koresh in Waco, Texas, may be interested to know that he, along with [Seventh-

Day] Adventists, are among the few historicists of contemporary times. This view was popular from the time of the Reformation to the beginning of the twentieth century, and has diminished since.”—Ice, [What Is Preterism?](#), 18.

⁷⁷Dr. Tim LaHaye is a noted futurist theologian having published numerous works on prophecy, some of which we draw on in this work. See the [bibliography](#).

⁷⁸We can offer our own experience in support of this claim. Having been born-again and taught for five years within a Church which embraced preterism, it was our own careful study of the details of Scripture *across the entire span of books* which caused us to reject preterism in favor of what we only later came to understand was called futurism.

⁷⁹Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#), 139.

⁸⁰Ice, [What Is Preterism?](#), 21.

⁸¹There is also a form of *extreme futurism* in which even the first three chapters of the book of Revelation are seen as yet future. [Bullinger, [Commentary On Revelation](#)]

⁸²Osborne, [Revelation](#), 20-21.

⁸³Johnson, [Revelation: The Expositor's Bible Commentary](#), 12.

⁸⁴In two places, Jerome stated clearly that John was banished under Domitian. First, in his *Against Jovinianum* (A.D. 393), Jerome wrote that John was ‘a prophet, for he saw in the island of Patmos, to which he had been banished by the Emperor Domitian as a martyr for the Lord, an Apocalypse containing boundless mysteries of the future.’ ”—Mark Hitchcock, [“The Stake in the Heart—The A.D. 95 Date of Revelation.”](#) in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, eds., [Borrow The End Times Controversy](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 135.

⁸⁵Thomas Ice, [“The 70 Weeks of Daniel.”](#) in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, eds., [The End Times Controversy](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 350.

⁸⁶“The early church fathers believed in a literal, thousand-year, earthly reign of Christ because they interpreted the teachings of Revelation in a normal rather than mystical way.”—Larry V. Crutchfield, [“Revelation in the New Testament.”](#) in Mal Couch, ed., [A Bible Handbook to Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 25.

⁸⁷Beckwith, [The Apocalypse of John](#), 320.

⁸⁸“The opposition to the heresy of Montanism, which made great use of the Apocalypse and gave extravagant form to its millennial teaching, caused it to be either rejected or differently interpreted.”—*Ibid.*, 323.

⁸⁹“This was the method employed by some of the earliest fathers (e.g., Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus), but with the triumph of the allegorical method . . . after Origen and of the amillennial view after Augustine and Ticonius, the futurist method (and chiliasm) was not seen again for over a thousand years.”—Osborne, [Revelation](#), 20.

⁹⁰As we noted earlier, this is one reason why many who are trained in the sciences and engineering tend toward this view of Scripture. Being trained in logic and the analysis of details, we reject the approximate “fulfillments” and interpretations of the other systems in favor of a God Who fulfills His predictions down to the gnat’s eyelash.

⁹¹Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#), 142.

⁹²“Dispensationalism is actually built on the idea of letting the Bible speak for itself with a normal, literal hermeneutic. If simple rules of grammar and observation are put into place, the Scriptures will begin to make sense, from Genesis to Revelation.”—Couch, [Why is Revelation Important?](#), 41.

⁹³Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 47.

⁹⁴Henry Barclay Swete, [The Apocalypse of St. John](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998, 1906), xciii.

⁹⁵Chilton, [The Days of Vengeance](#), 27.

⁹⁶Gregg, [Revelation Four Views: A Parallel Commentary](#), 41.

⁹⁷Couch, [Why is Revelation Important?](#), 17.

⁹⁸Osborne, [Revelation](#), 21.

⁹⁹Robert L. Thomas, [Revelation 1-7](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 35.

¹⁰⁰Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 48.

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