

## Revelation - Introduction, Part 8

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COURSE COMMENTARY



### Systems of Interpretation

- **What is a 'System of Interpretation?'**  
A set of assumptions by which the text is interpreted. The assumptions are generally self-consistent and have a large impact on how the text is understood.
- **Major Fork in the Interpretive Road**  
The wide variety of meaning attributed to the *Book of Revelation* stems from differences between systems of interpretation. *Within* any specific system of interpretation, there is less variation.
- **Interpretive Systems 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.
Ecclectic	Mixed	Typically favors idealism while borrowing some elements from other systems.

- **Derived from the Text? Or Imposed upon It?**  
We believe that futurism is the only system of interpretation which is truly derived from the text. Futurism is the **product** of understanding the text through the consistent application of the "Golden Rule."

### Importance of System of Interpretation

- **Changing Interpretation**  
The text of the book is unchanging, but the meaning of the text will be seen to change when the system of interpretation shifts.

" 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**). " -- Steve Gregg, *Revelation Four Views: A Parallel Commentary*, 4.

- **When Teachers Are Confused...**

No wonder students of the book become disillusioned when those who purport to be experienced in God's Word have such diverse ideas, or radically change their views with time ([James 3:1](#)) !

## Preterism Emphasized

- **Preterism Emphasized**

Preterism appears to be gaining popularity in our time. We believe it is highly damaging to a correct understanding of the Word of God, and especially the *Book of Revelation*. We will place greater emphasis on helping the student understand its deficiencies.

## Why is Preterism Popular?

1. **No Future Tribulation**

A time marked by cataclysmic events and great tribulation is effectively "erased" from the future. This is encouraging for those whose focus is on "this world."

2. **Christian Social Action**

Having removed the Tribulation from the future, there is no longer a perceived disincentive for efforts by Christians to "change the world" through **social** and **political** action.

3. **Does Away with Pretribulational Rapture**

Those who view the pretribulational rapture of the Church as a "defeatist escape" can avoid this doctrine.

4. **Politically Correct regarding Middle East**

Preterism denies the continued importance of Israel in the plan of God and sees Old Testament promises concerning Israel to be irrelevant. Israel is seen as having no biblical mandate for possession of the Promised Land. Preterism believes the Church replaced Israel in the plan of God.

5. **Lack of Bible Knowledge**

Many Christians lack a comprehensive understanding of biblical passages concerning prophecy. Especially those from the Old Testament. Lack of teaching from the pulpit concerning prophecy exacerbates this trend. It then becomes easy to embrace views such as Preterism which contradict less-familiar passages (e.g., [Zec. 12](#); [14](#)).

## Types of Preterism

- **Amount of Prophecy Fulfilled**

**Mild** or **partial** preterism believes that most of the prophecies in the New Testament have *already been fulfilled*. Mild preterism is within the bounds of orthodoxy. **Full** or **consistent** preterism believes that all of the prophecies in the New Testament have already been fulfilled, including *the Second Coming of Christ and the new heavens and new earth!* Full preterism is unorthodox (heretical) since it denies the future bodily return of Christ.

- **Timing of Prophetic Fulfillment**

One form of preterism understands the events of Revelation as fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus of Rome in A.D. 70. Another form believes the events describe the fall of the Roman Empire in A.D. 476.

- **A Slippery Slope**

Full preterism, which is heretical, is also called "consistent" preterism because it is the natural result of applying the preterist system of interpretation across all Scripture. If Christ "came spiritually" in the judgment of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, then perhaps the Second Coming also occurred "spiritually." Numerous mild preterists have eventually become "consistent" in their interpretation and left orthodoxy for heterodoxy.

## Hermeneutics of Preterism

- **Heavy Emphasis on 'Time Texts'**

All passages which convey the notion of "soon" are understood as **requiring** fulfillment within the lifetime of the original audience. (Although some "time texts" refuse to conform to this interpretive straightjacket: [Rev. 22:20](#)).

- **Confusion over Imminency**

The coming of Christ is "imminent" -- not to take His church to Himself ([John 14:3](#); [1Cor. 15:51-53](#); [1Th. 4:13-18](#); [2Th. 2:1](#)), but to **judge Israel** !

" **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] Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, 43.

- **Hermeneutical Dance with Heresy**

The hermeneutics of preterism must walk the fine line between taking as many "coming" passages as possible as having occurred spiritually in A.D. 70, while avoiding the denial of the bodily Second Coming of Christ yet future. Which "coming" passages are invisible "cloud comings"? Which are visible and yet future? The decision is driven by the preterist framework, not exegesis of the full context of the passage.

- **After-the-Fact Newspaper Exegesis**

Even when preterists take prophetic predictions literally, they inevitably look to secular history to find fulfillment. But since many of these prophecies have not yet been fulfilled, the "fulfillment" is strained and seriously lacking (e.g., stones from Roman catapults attacking Jerusalem fulfill the "plague of hail," [Rev. 16:21](#)). This is extremely sloppy fulfillment! When did Nero sit in the Temple at Jerusalem and claim to be God ([2Th. 2:3-4](#)) ?!

Preterists often place almost as much emphasis on the uninspired writings of Josephus as the inspired text. The typical pattern is: **1)** biblical prediction followed by **2)** approximate fulfillment in Josephus or another historical writer.

## Problems with Preterism

1. **Denies Predictive Prophecy**

As more prophetic passages are "fulfilled" in the past, the Word of God has less to say about the future.

2. **Denies Global Judgment**

Revelation is localized to events in the Mediterranean some 2,000 years ago. It is not about a coming time when God's wrath is poured out on a rejecting earth!

### 3. Denial of Reality

Full preterism holds we are already in the new heavens and new earth of [Rev. 21](#) and [22](#). All forms of preterism believe that the decisive victory over Satan described in Revelation has been completed. This does not square with reality and the daily news!

### 4. Blurs Canonical Boundaries

The constant focus on secular history texts in supposed "fulfillment" of unfulfilled prophecy blurs the boundary between the canon of Scripture and other uninspired books.

### 5. Denies Imminency of Second Coming

As more passages related to the Second Coming are seen as already fulfilled in spiritual "cloud comings," the moment-by-moment expectation of the coming of Christ wanes.

"... if my eschatology is correct, **the Church has many more years left** to write many more words!" [emphasis added] Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, xiii.

## Idealist Interpretation

- **Revelation Not About Specific Events**

An expression of basic principles upon which God acts throughout history.

- **Majors in Allegorical Interpretation**

The literal understanding is almost completely suppressed in the search for "more significant" devotional and spiritual meaning.

- **Idealist Summary of Revelation**

1) An irresistible summons to heroic living.

2) The book contains matchless appeals to endurance.

3) Tells us that evil is marked for overthrow.

4) Gives a new and wonderful picture of Christ.

5) Reveals history is in the mind of God and the hand of Christ as the author and reviewer of the moral destinies of men.

Calkins cited in Ice, 'What Is Preterism?' in *The End Times Controversy*, 21.

## Problems with Idealist Interpretation

### 1. Inconsistent Interpretation

Small sections of the text are interpreted literally, then the interpreter reverts back to symbolism and allegory.

### 2. Abuse of John's Vision

The idealist interpretation assumes that since John is being shown events in a vision, that the events themselves are not real.

### 3. Variation in Results

Of all interpretive systems the idealist system results in the widest diversity of opinion concerning the meaning of the text. This provides evidence of its bankruptcy.

### 4. Shares Problems with Preterism

Future events, the Jewishness of Revelation, and the literal thousand-year reign on earth are denied. Effectively moves Revelation "out of the way" of serious Christian consideration regarding the future.

## Historicist Interpretation

- **Describes Christian History**  
Revelation sets forth the major events of Christian history spanning the time of John until the present.
- **Church History within World History**  
The focus is on "Christian history" as it moves within world history.
- **Most Events Fulfilled**  
Most of the events are seen as having been fulfilled in the times of the interpreter.
- **Famous Historicists**  
Well-known historicist interpreters include: Albert Barnes, Bengel, Elliott, Martin Luther, Joseph Mede, Isaac Newton, Vitring, William Whiston, and John Wycliffe.

## Problems with Historicist Interpretation

1. **Beast's Career only 42 Months**  
The Beast's career spans 42 months or 1260 days ([Rev. 11:2](#); [13:5](#)). Historicists must interpret each day as a "prophetic day" in order to stretch forty-two months into long time periods spanning centuries.
2. **Biased Toward Western Church**  
Most historicists have been members of the Western Church so interpretation favors events of significance to the West. Significant events elsewhere in the Christian church tend to be ignored.
3. **Wide Variation in Results**  
Like idealist interpreters, historicist interpreters obtain widely varying results, especially in the correlation of historic events with events in Revelation. Examples: monks and friars as the "locusts," Muhammad as the "fallen star," Alaric the Goth as the first trumpet, Elizabeth 1 as the first bowl, Adolf Hitler as the red horse. These identifications are highly subjective.

## Futurist Interpretation

- **Consistent Literal Hermeneutics**  
Futurism derives from the consistent application of the "Golden Rule" of literal interpretation. "The more literal an interpretation one adopts, the more strongly will he be construed to be a futurist." -- Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, 142.
- **Revelation Chapters 4-22 Future**  
All the events described beyond Chapter 3 have yet to occur. No valid historic fulfillments can be found.
- **Events are Historic and Global**  
The events described in Revelation are literal events in real history yet to come. They are not primarily devotional, nor restricted to the region of Rome or the Mediterranean.
- **Connection to Prophecy Elsewhere in Scripture**  
The *Book of Revelation* is not a "head without a body." It is intimately connected with prophetic revelation found elsewhere in Scripture (e.g., Daniel's seventy weeks, Jacob's Trouble, the Great Tribulation).

- **Relevancy to All Saints**  
The book has relevance to the churches at the time of John, but *also for all believers of all ages* because of what it records concerning the ultimate victory of Christ, the consummation of history, and the eventual destiny of both believers and unbelievers. (The present value of future events.)
- **View of Early Church**  
" Variations of this view were held by the earliest expositors, such as Justin Martry (d. 165), Irenaeus (d.c. 195), Hippoytus (d. 236), and Victorinus (d.c. 303). " -- Johnson, *Revelation: The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12.  
See the quote from Irenaeus in our discussion of the date in [Introduction, Part 6](#). This is also the view expressed in the *Teaching of the Twelve (Didache)*. It was eventually overcome by the [rise of allegorical interpretation](#).

## Ecclectic Interpretation

- **A Mixed Bag, Mostly Idealist**  
Follows the allegorization of idealism, but occasionally borrows from other systems of interpretation.
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- **Doubly-Subjective**  
Allegorical interpretation itself is highly subjective. But add to that the subjective decision about when to switch systems during interpretation. This too will vary with each interpreter.
- **Politically Correct**  
Embraces some of the ideas of postmodernism: an unwillingness to state that any particular interpretive view is correct and that all views are "valuable." Avoids overt negativeness toward other views.

## Summary

1. **Varied Meanings are due to Interpretive Systems**  
The text never changes, but interpretive systems affect how it is understood.
2. **Golden Rule = Futurism**  
Consistent application of the Golden Rule of interpretation will yield a futurist understanding.
3. **Futurism has less Variation**  
All interpreters differ in their understanding of some details. But futurism yields the smallest variation within any one interpretive system.
4. **God's Word Has a Single Meaning**  
All systems of interpretation cannot be correct. An eclectic view endorses inconsistent logic and interpretation, so it must be incorrect. Therefore we must make a decision! **How are we going to read and interpret the text?** Let the Golden Rule be your guiding principle!

For additional information on this topic, see the [commentary](#).