PROPHETIC INTERPRETATIVE SYSTEMS
by Thomas Ice

Perhaps the best way to understand the different interpretive approaches to prophecy is to see it in relation to the other basic possible interpretative systems of prophecy. It is necessary to define and delineate the different systems, since I have on a number of occasions observed many (some with ThDs and PhDs in theology) who tend to confuse preterism and historicism. This confusion is probably the result of lack of exposure to proponents of the views. Simply put, the approaches are the only four possible ways to relate to time: past, present, future, and timeless. These are known as Preterism (past), Historicism (present), Futurism (future), and Idealism (timeless).

PRETERISM
Kenneth Gentry, a Reconstructionist preterist, defines his view as follows:

The term “preterism is based on the Latin preter, which means “past.” Preterism refers to that understanding of certain eschatological passages which holds that they have already come to fulfillment. . . .

The preterist approach teaches, for instance, that many of the prophecies of Revelation and the first portion of the Olivet Discourse have already been fulfilled. Matthew 24:1-34 (and parallels) in the Olivet Discourse was fulfilled in the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In Revelation, most of the prophecies before Revelation 20 find fulfillment in the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70):

Fellow preterist, Gary DeMar says, “A preterist is someone who believes that certain prophecies have been fulfilled, that is, their fulfillment is in the past.” Thus, a preterist interpretation of a given prophecy would attempt to explain it as an event that has already taken place in the past. A spectrum of preterists will be delineated later on in this paper.

HISTORICISM
Those who followed events surrounding David Koresh of Waco may be interested to know that he, along with Adventists, are some of the few historicists of contemporary times, even though this view enjoyed dominance from the time of the Reformation until the beginning of the twentieth century. “The historicist view, sometimes called the continuous-historical view, contends that Revelation is a symbolic presentation of the entire course of the history of the church from the close of the first century to the end of time.” This spiritualistic approach is built upon the day/year theory, whereby the 1260 days (literally 3 1/2 years) of Daniel and Revelation cover the time (1260 years) of the domination of anti-Christ over the church. Another variation would be to apply the day/year theory to the 2300 days of Daniel 8. Thus, the role of the historicist is to figure out when anti-Christ came to power (i.e., the Roman Church and the Papacy) and add 1260 or 2300 years and you have the time of the Second Coming and the defeat of anti-Christ. So if this time started some time during the reign of Constantine, say 350, then you add the two together and you would come out
with 1610. American William Miller used a variation of the day/year theory when he used the 2300 days of Daniel 8:4 as the basis for his scheme.

Another feature of historicism is seen in their effort to correlate events of Revelation with events occurring in the present church age. As the historicist sees contemporary events creeping closer to the Second Coming of Christ in Revelation 19, this leads to further date-setting as to the precise year with their day/year scheme. An example of this can be seen in the following scheme:

**Albert Barnes' Historical Interpretation of Revelation 6-19**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>BARNES' HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st seal (Rev 6)</td>
<td>White horse—a conqueror</td>
<td>Peace and triumph in the Roman Empire from Domitian to Commodus (96–180)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd seal</td>
<td>Red horse—war</td>
<td>Bloodshed from the death of Commodus (193—)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd seal (Rev 6)</td>
<td>Black horse—famine</td>
<td>Calamity in the time of Caracalla and onward (211—)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th seal (Rev 6)</td>
<td>Green horse—death</td>
<td>Death by famine, etc., Decius to Callianus (243–268)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th seal</td>
<td>Martyrs</td>
<td>Martyrdom under Diocletian (284–304)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th seal (Rev 6)</td>
<td>Heavenly disturbances</td>
<td>Consternation at the threat of Barbarian invasions, Goths and Huns (365—)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st trump (Rev 8)</td>
<td>1/3 earth smitten</td>
<td>Alaric and Goths invade the Western Roman Empire (395–410)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd trump (Rev 8)</td>
<td>1/3 sea smitten</td>
<td>Genseric and Vandals invade (428–468)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd trump (Rev 8)</td>
<td>1/3 rivers smitten</td>
<td>Attila and Huns invade (433-453)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th trump (Rev 8)</td>
<td>1/3 sun, moon smitten</td>
<td>Odoacer and Heruli conquer Western Roman Empire (476–490)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th trump</td>
<td>Torment of locusts</td>
<td>Mohometan and Saracen powers rise in the East (5 months of Rev 9:5, 150 years!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th trump (Rev 9)</td>
<td>Horsemen slay 1/3 men</td>
<td>Turkish power rises in the East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The beast and</td>
<td>They blaspheme</td>
<td>The evil career of ecclesiastical and civil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rome.
false prophet        42 months                     42 months of Rev 13:5—1260 years!
(Rev 13)
First five bowls   Wrath by sores;       The French Revolution and its aftermath
strike
are poured out    sea, rivers & sun     at the Papacy
(Rev 16)         smitten; darkness
6th bowl of wrath  Way prepared for     The frog like spirits call Paganism;
poured out        armies to come       Muhammadanism, and Romanism prepare
(Rev 16)         to Armageddon      for their final struggle against the Gospel
7th bowl           Earthquake and hail;   Papal power overthrown
poured out        Babylon remembered
(Rev 16)         for wrath
Babylon destroyed Babylon Destruction of Papal power
(Rev 17–18)      destroyed
Battle of          Christ slays        The Gospel finally triumphs morally over
its
Armageddon        the beast and     foes who appear "as if" they’re eaten by
fowls             fowls             fowls
(Rev 19)          his armies

“The historicist is constantly confronted with the dilemma of a far-fetched
spiritualization in order to maintain the chain of historical events,” claims Dr.
Tenney, “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.” The demise of historicism has resulted in less date-setting in
our own day than had been normal during times when historicism was
dominate.

**Idealism**

Idealists hold to an atemporal approach to Revelation and prophetic
literature. While they may or may not believe that there will be has been timing
to attached to eschatological passages, they do not think that it is important or
knowable. Thus, they stress the principles or lessons that can be learned from
prophecy. Therefore, it is believed that details are not important, instead one
should focus on the broad ideas conveyed in the text. An interpreter who
believes the specifics of Revelation and future prophecy in general has anything
to do with future history are dogmatists that miss the major ideas the text
intended. G. K. Beale, an idealist, describes his position as follows: “the book of
Revelation is not merely a futurology but also a redemptive-historical and
theological psychology for the church’s thinking.” Idealist, Raymond Calkins
describes his view under the following 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.

**Futurism**

Those who see predictive prophecy as future to the current church age are known as futurists. Futurists see eschatological passages being fulfilled during a future time, primarily in the 70th week of Daniel, at the second coming of Christ, and during the millennium. While all dispensationalists are futurists, not all futurists are dispensationalists. Futurism is the most literal approach. Dr. Tenney says,

The more literal an interpretation that one adopts, the more strongly will he be construed to be a futurist. The object like a burning mountain cast into the sea (8:8), the opening of the bottomless pit (9:2), and many other episodes must be interpreted symbolically if they are to be taken as applying to current or to past history. If they are yet to come, they may be a more accurate description of actual phenomena than most expositors have realized, for the physical and psychical researchers of recent years have opened to the mind of man worlds that in John’s time were completely unknown.

Futurism is the view espoused by the contributors to this book.

**Types of Preterism**

Generally, the preterist approach can be divided into a spectrum of three kinds of preterism. I will call them mild, moderate, and extreme.

**Mild Preterism**

This was the earliest form of preterism to develop and the only kind of preterism to be put forth until the eighteenth century (see chapter on the history of preterism). Jesuit friar, Alcazar, is said to provide the “first systematic presentation” in 1614. Alcazar divided Revelation into two major sections (chapters 6—12 and 13—19), “which dealt respectively with the church’s conflict against Judaism and against paganism.” Chapters 6—12 focused upon an A.D. 70 fulfillment, however, chapters 13—19 were not seen as fulfilled until the fourth century with the events surrounding Constantine and the Christianization of the Roman Empire. Mild preterism is really a blend of some A.D. 70 preterism (chapters 6—12) with historicism (chapters 13—19).

“Alcazar was the first to apply Preterism to the Apocalypse with anything like completeness,” concluded Le Roy Froom. “It thus pioneered the way for acceptance first by Hugo Grotius of the Netherlands, and later by the German Rationalists.” Mild Preterism, unlike the other two forms, does not see prophecy concluding with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Instead, “Alcazar made the church’s millennium of rest to date from the downfall of old
pagan Rome—his apocalyptical Babylon—with the destruction of Roman idolatry in the spiritual fires of the Catholic religion.”

Mild Preterism “contended that the prophecies of Revelation were descriptive of the victory of the early church, as fulfilled in the downfall of the Jewish nation and the overthrow of pagan Rome, and in this way limited their range to the first six centuries of the Christian Era, and making Nero the Antichrist.”

I am not aware of any on the contemporary scene who advocate mild preterism, even though historically it has been the most widely adopted form of preterism. Some commentators who were mild preterists include the following: Moses Stuart, R. H. Charles, Henry Barclay Swete, and Isbon T. Beckwith.

Moderate Preterism

Moderate Preterism has become, in our day, mainstream preterism. Today it appears to be the most widely held version of preterism. Simply put, it sees almost all prophecy as fulfilled in the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem, but does believe in a literal resurrection of Christ and believers, as well as a literal second coming of Christ, both occurring in the future. They do believe that a few passages still teach a yet future second coming (Acts 1:9-11; 1 Corinthians 15:51-53; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) and the resurrection of believers at Christ’s bodily return. Moderate preterism is more A.D. 70 oriented than mild preterism, but stops short of full preterism’s insistence that all prophecy was fulfilled in A.D. 70.

Partial preterist, R. C. Sproul describes his view as follows:

While partial preterists acknowledge that in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 there was a parousia or coming of Christ, they maintain that it was not the parousia. That is, the coming of Christ in A.D. 70 was a coming in judgment on the Jewish nation, indicating the end of the Jewish age and the fulfillment of a day of the Lord. Jesus really did come in judgment at this time, fulfilling his prophecy in the Olivet Discourse. But this was not the final or ultimate coming of Christ. The parousia, in its fullness, will extend far beyond the Jewish nation and will be universal in its scope and significance. It will come, not at the end of the Jewish age, but at the end of human history as we know it. It will be, not merely a day of the Lord, but the final and ultimate day of the Lord.

In addition to R. C. Sproul, some well-known moderate preterists include the following: Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., Gary DeMar, and David Chilton in his books which were all published before he converted to full preterism.

Extreme Preterism

Extreme or full preterists view themselves as “consistent” preterists (we will call this view full preterism throughout the book). If this is true, then where does their consistency lead? Extreme preterism believes 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 in 70 A.D.!” This means that there will never be a future second coming, according to this form of preterism, since it has already occurred in A.D. 70. Further, there will be no bodily resurrection of believers, since this occurred in A.D. 70 in conjunction
with the second coming. They do believe that we now have been spiritually resurrected and will live forever with spiritual bodies when we die. This view does not see a prophesied end of history. It appears to go on without end, since we are not merely in the millennium, but now living in what we would call the eternal state or the new heavens and new earth of Revelation 21—22. There are many other aspects to this view, but needless to say, it spiritualizes the text to an extreme degree while arguing that they are conservative, orthodox Christians.

Champions of this view include the originator of full preterism, the British Congregationalist, J. Stuart Russell, who taught the odd view that since Christ returned in judgment at some time during the A.D. 70 event, the rapture took place in the year A.D. 66. The modern-day, American champion of full preterism is Max R. King and his son Tim of the Parkman Road Church of Christ in Warren, Ohio. Formerly moderate preterist, David Chilton, converted to full preterism about a couple of years before his death in 1997. Other full preterists include: Ed Stevens; Don K. Preston; John Noe; and John L. Bray.

Partial preterists like Dr. Gentry and Dr. Sproul believe that full preterism is heretical since it denies a future second coming and cannot hold to an orthodox view of the resurrection which is associated with Christ’s return. Dr. Sproul says of full preterist Max King, “For this schema to work, the traditional idea of resurrection must be replaced with a metaphorical idea of resurrection, dying to an old redemptive age or eon and ‘rising’ to the new eon.” Dr. Gentry lays out a number of problems with full preterism in an article entitled, “A Brief Theological Analysis of Hyper-Preterism.” “First, hyper-preterism is heterodox,” declares Dr. Gentry. “It is outside of the creedal orthodoxy of Christianity.” (Dr. Gentry usually refers to full preterism as hyper-preterism.) Concerning their faulty view of the resurrection, Dr. Gentry notes the following:

Fifth, there is a serious problem with the removal of the physical resurrection from systematic theology. Christ’s resurrection is expressly declared to be the paradigm of our own (1 Cor. 15:20ff). Yet we know that His was a physical, tangible resurrection (Luke 24:39, whereas ours is (supposedly) spiritual. What happens to the biblically defined analogy between Christ’ resurrection and ours in the hyper-preterist system?

If partial preterism is deemed untenable, then obviously the more extreme form will not be viable as well. However, we believe that when one ventures into extreme or full preterism, then they have moved away from orthodoxy into clear false teaching. Since full preterism believes that Christ’s only coming (i.e., the second coming) occurred in A.D. 70 and since the translation and resurrection of believers are clearly connected with that event in Scripture (i.e., 1 Cor. 15; 1 Thess. 4:13–17), then that means that their teaching is heretical.


For some strange reason, most do take the second coming passages as literal, historical future events.


Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977 [1911]).


Russell, *The Parousia*, “Preface to the New Edition,” no page numbers, but it is on the fifth page; see also pp. 165–69.


This is a well-known fact that has been documented on the following web site at “ourworld-top.cs.com/preteristabcs/id88.htm”. See also Edward E. Stevens, “Tribute To David Chilton” in *Kingdom Counsel* (Vol. 8, #2 and Vol. 9; Oct. 1996–Dec. 1997), pp. 17–18.


Don K. Preston, *Who Is This Babylon?* (no publishing information, 1999).


* Gentry, “Analysis of Hyper-Preterism,” p. 3.