



Session 1 ■ Special Interest Topic 1

Approaches to Understanding Revelation

There are four major approaches to understanding Revelation:

- Preterism
- Futurism
- Idealism
- Historicism

Preterism

Preterism suggests John wrote the Book of Revelation exclusively for his day. Preterists believe it offers no prophetic predictions of the future: it is simply a message from John to the Christian congregations of Asia Minor. If this is the case, we should study the Book of Revelation along the same lines as the rest of the New Testament books, drawing out truths that have ongoing relevance.

Comment

Certain parts of Revelation seem to fit a Preterist point of view. For example, the messages delivered to the seven churches in Asia Minor were surely the main focus in John's mind when he wrote to them. It is generally agreed, however, that the experiences of these first-century seven churches in Asia Minor can sometimes be seen in the larger church community today. They can also be seen as characteristics of certain times in church history. Yet the rest of the book seems to include material that stretches beyond the first century down to the end of earth's history.

Futurism

Futurism suggests the Book of Revelation (commencing at Revelation 4:1) almost solely focuses on the final crisis of earth's history. Rather than a message to the original audience, its relevance is primarily for the final generation. The popular theory of the Secret Rapture represents the major branch of Futurism. It also assumes that the Jewish nation living in the land of Israel today is still the focus of the prophecies in Revelation.

In approaching Revelation this way, a very literal approach is taken to the language and symbols of Revelation.

For example, the River Euphrates is literally the river still running through Middle Eastern countries today and the 144,000 coming from different Israelite tribes are literally Israelite people living at the end time.

Comment

This approach will be examined during the course of the seminar sessions.

Idealism

Idealism suggests the Book of Revelation is not primarily historical, futurist, or even a message to the churches during John's time. It sees Revelation as containing timeless truths in symbolic form—principles that apply to any time and place. The interpreter explores what the messages meant to the original readers and then applies those broad and timeless principles to our age.

Comment

If a link can be made between Revelation and what Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount of Olives, then the Idealist approach has missed the mark. The Idealist, along with the Preterist, does not uphold a belief in God giving a revelation of future events to John. If it can also be seen that John's writing of Revelation links up with and continues on from the prophecies in Daniel, we see again how this thinking misses the mark since these prophecies together do span the centuries of time.

Historicism

Historicism interprets Revelation as being of prophetic relevance to every generation of Christians from the days of John until Jesus returns.

Comment

This seminar presents Revelation through the Historicist's approach. The Historicism approach has fallen into disrepute at times because some have claimed, down through the centuries, that their day was the only time John had in mind. Frequently, the symbols in Revelation were interpreted using newspaper reports and history books, rather than the Bible. But to avoid falling into the trap most historicists have fallen into previously, this seminar uses the sermon Jesus gave from the Mount of Olives as its guide (see Matthew 24 and 25).

The foundation for understanding this seminar is in recognising Jesus' sermon as the background for many of the ideas that are developed further in Revelation. If this assumption is correct, few can deny that His sermon does cover the broad sweep of history from His days on earth until He returns to gather up His people. [*Special Interest Topic 3 highlights the relationship between the Olivet sermon and Revelation.*]

Jesus said that His message given in His sermon would become more relevant as time goes on, just as birth pains come upon a pregnant woman (see Matthew 24:8). By comprehending this, we can expect that the messages found in Revelation become more meaningful and relevant with the passing of time. They have given hope and encouragement to every generation of Christians, and especially for those who live during the closing hours of earth's history.

Further still, by showing how Revelation connects up with the Old Testament prophets, particularly Daniel, we have a strong case for supporting belief in the prophecies of this book, spanning across centuries of the Christian era.

Historicism offers a breadth of understanding not available with Preterism and Futurism. In this seminar, we will follow the approach of letting the text itself govern the interpretation. Understanding of the text must be governed by the intent of the author.

In summary...

Preterism, Futurism and Idealism all respond to evidence in the text. But as exclusive approaches, they force people to overlook other elements of the text. Historicism at its best opens us to follow the text wherever it leads. By using example texts, we can see the effect of these various methodologies.

Preterism

Revelation 1:4, KJV—"the seven churches which are in Asia" indicates the book had a serious message for the original readers (see Chapters 1:11; 2 & 3; 22:16). But it is also clear the book goes beyond the original setting to describe future events. In a positive sense, Preterism attempts to understand the

original purpose of Revelation. In a negative sense, Preterism is a closed-book approach that limits meaning to the time of the seven churches, which it addresses.

Futurism

Revelation 1:7, NIV—“He comes with the clouds” indicates a future, end-time focus (see Chapters 22:11–12, 19:11–16). Futurists assume the book is futuristic from chapter 4:1 onward but that is clearly not the case. This will be demonstrated in the seminar presentations.

Idealism

Revelation 1:3 NIV—“Blessed are those who hear” (with understanding) indicates that the book has a message for every reader or hearer, regardless of time and place (see Chapter 2:7). This is the positive foundation for Idealism, but Idealism goes too far if it denies the other two approaches.

Therefore we would suggest:

Each of these perspectives has a point but each can lead us to selective readings that impose our preferences on the whole book. The preferred method is one that takes the best of each of the three methodologies seriously and packages them into a comprehensive approach to the whole book. It allows Revelation to speak to the entire range of Christian history, from John’s time to Christ’s second coming.

The author drops a hint of this approach in the very first verse, where “things which must happen soon” is a clear allusion to Daniel 2:28, 45. Right there, John indicates that the model for his visions is from Daniel. Revelation, like Daniel, uses symbolism to project major moves in the course of history, from John’s day (Preterism) all the way to the end (Futurism).

Since not all of Daniel is a symbolic outline of history, we should not read all of Revelation that way either. The first eight verses are straightforward expressions of the main theme of the book (Christ’s qualifications and His mission). The best approach to Revelation gives careful attention to genre (distinctive literary forms and techniques), which help us to know whether we are in John’s day, the end of time or chasing a major sweep of history.

The clearest indication that John, the human author of Revelation, understood his work to follow the historicist pattern of Daniel is found in Revelation 1:1. The Greek words behind “what must...take place” and “made it known” in the NIV allude to Daniel 2:28 and 45 respectively (see the third Special Interest Topic for this session for a summary of how the author of Revelation alludes to the Old Testament rather than quoting it.) These allusions indicate to scholars of Revelation that the Model for the Book of Revelation was the Apocalyptic vision of Daniel 2. There the image in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream used a series of materials to symbolize a sequence of events from Daniel’s day to the end. Likewise the Book of Revelation will symbolize sequences of events that were yet future from John’s perspective. (The Greek verb behind “made it known” in Revelation 1:1 NIV). Such sequences are especially easy to see in Revelation 12.

Jesus himself offers a similar sequence of historical events from his day to the end in Luke 21, but without the apocalyptic symbols of Daniel and Revelation. For example Luke 21:7-19 speaks directly to the generation in front of Jesus and the experiences that they would have had in the decades that followed. Then Luke 21:20-23 speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem and the events leading up to it. Luke 21:24 describes the general condition of things in the world from the destruction of Jerusalem to the time of the end. Luke 21:25-26 describes the events (signs) preceding the second coming. And Luke 21:27 describes the second coming itself. This demonstrates that the historicist approach to the book of Revelation is grounded in Revelation 1:1 and follows directly from Luke 21.

Students may find helpful a work by G K Beale, the New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Book of Revelation, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999: 181-183.