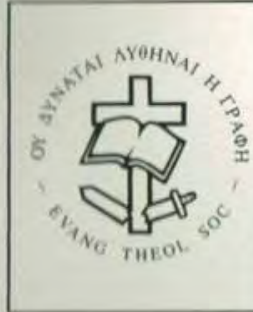


Reprint of an article by John Noë



Journal of the EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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THE EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY
(organized 1949)

PURPOSE

"To foster conservative Biblical scholarship by providing a medium for the oral exchange and written expression of thought and research in the general field of the theological disciplines as centered in the Scriptures."

Constitution, Art. II

DOCTRINAL BASIS

"The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs. God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory."

BACKGROUND

This article was recommended for publication in *JETS* by Grant R. Osborn, Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and author of *Revelation* (Baker Academic, 2002, part of the "Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament" series), after he (as Respondent to the group), the author, and approximately twenty Stone-Campbell adherents discussed this approach to the book of Revelation during an afternoon Group Study session on the topic of eschatology at the 56th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in San Antonio, Texas, November, 2004.

Most of the article's contents are taken from the author's doctoral dissertation titled, "The Superiority of Preterism: An Evaluation of the Four Major Evangelical Views of the Return of Christ" (Trinity Theological Seminary and the University of Liverpool, 2003) in which the author advocates a complete synthesis of the eschatological views of preterism, premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism.

This proposed preterist-idealist solution to the problem of conflicting and confusing end-time views is being further developed for presentation and outworking in forthcoming books and articles from this author.

AN EXEGETICAL BASIS FOR A PRETERIST-IDEALIST UNDERSTANDING OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

JOHN NOË*

When attempting to arrive at a proper understanding of the Bible's last book, four foundational questions must be addressed: (1) When was this book most likely written? (2) How do we handle its time statements? (3) When was or will it be fulfilled? (4) What is its relevance for us today? Over the course of church history, four major evangelical eschatological views have evolved. Each answers these four questions differently.

In Part I of this article I will present each view, along with some criticism from proponents of the other views. The four views are the preterist view, the premillennial view, the amillennial view, and the postmillennial view. In Part II, I will evaluate their different understandings and conclude by offering a synthesis.

I. A PRESENTATION OF VIEWS

1. *The preterist view.* Most preterists¹ believe that the Book of Revelation speaks to particular circumstances and events that were fulfilled within the lifetime of the book's original first-century audience and that there is nothing in it about our future. Rather, it was concerned fully and exclusively with the first century and not with subsequent periods. This view places its date of writing prior to AD 70—most likely, between AD 63 and 68—and its soon-fulfillment in AD 70 in conjunction with Christ's divine visitation, coming, and return in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

J. Stuart Russell, a nineteenth-century preterist author, portrayed the Book of Revelation as being concerned "primarily and principally with events with which its first readers only were immediately interested . . . events all shortly to come to pass."² He believed that "the Apocalypse is nothing else than a transfigured form of the prophecy on the Mount of Olives. . . . expanded, allegorised, and . . . dramatised. . . . First and chiefly the Parousia. . . ."³ In other words, and in the opinion of most preterists, the Book of Revelation is only another version of Christ's Olivet Discourse, since

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¹ The term "preterists" means "full preterists" in contrast to "partial preterists."

² J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia* (Grand Rapids: Baker; from the 1887 edition issued by T. Fisher Unwin, 1983) 364 (his quote from Catholic Thoughts on the Bible and Theology, chap. xxxv, p. 361).

³ Ibid. 374-75.

"the subject of both is the same great catastrophe, viz. The Parousia, and the events accompanying it⁴. . . an event which He [Jesus] declared would happen before the passing away of the existing generation, and which some of the disciples would live to witness."⁵

Preterists further point out that Revelation's 3 1/2-year period ("42 months," "1,260 days," and "time, times, half time"; Rev 11:2, 3; 12:6, 14; 13:5) corresponds with the exact time frame of the worst tribulation in Jewish history, the AD 66–70 Jewish-Roman War. It culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and forever ended biblical Judaism and the old covenant, animal sacrifice system—just as Christ had perfectly predicted (Matthew 23–24).

Another tie-in is the symbol of Babylon in Revelation 18. Preterists maintain that this Babylon represents first-century Jerusalem and is not a symbol for Rome, New York City, or any city anywhere, as is commonly assumed. They believe its identity can be clearly seen by the hermeneutical principle of letting "Scripture interpret Scripture" and can be aptly demonstrated with four simple syllogisms:⁶

Major premise #1: Three times this Babylon is called "O great city" (Rev 18:9, 16, 19)

Minor premise #1: "The great city" is "where also their Lord was crucified" (Rev 11:8)

Conclusion: Jerusalem is Revelation's Babylon

Major premise #2: Babylon was guilty of "the blood of the prophets" (Rev 17:6; 18:24)

Minor premise #2: According to Jesus and Paul, only Jerusalem killed the prophets (Matt 23:34–35; Luke 13:33; 1 Thess 2:15–16)

Conclusion: Jerusalem is Revelation's Babylon

Major premise #3: John's people are commanded, "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues" (Rev 18:4)

Minor premise #3: The only city Jesus ever commanded his followers to flee from is Jerusalem—when they saw two specific signs (Matt 24:15–16; Luke 21:20–21). Eusebius recorded that this departure happened and no Christians were trapped and destroyed in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70⁷

Conclusion: Jerusalem is Revelation's Babylon

⁴ Ibid. 379.

⁵ Ibid. 535. Also, see preterist Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Apocalypses* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 6.

⁶ For more see Don K. Preston, *Who Is This Babylon* (Ardmore, OK: n.p., n.d.) 208–10. Also see N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2 (London: SPCK, 1996) 323, 354.

⁷ Eusebius, *Eccles. Hist.* Book III, V, in NPNF 1.138.

Major premise #4: This Babylon would be destroyed (Rev 18:2, 8, 10, 11, 17, 19–23)

Minor premise #4: The only city Jesus said would be destroyed was Jerusalem—it would be "left to you desolate" (Matt 23:38) with "not one stone . . . left on another" (Matt 24:2)

Conclusion: Jerusalem is Revelation's Babylon

Amillennialist Donald Guthrie suggests that "the symbol of Babylon was chosen because it stood for the oppressors of God's people."⁸ *In first-century Jerusalem, apostate Judaism was persecuting God's emerging church.*

But amillennialist Stanley W. Paher protests that "this conclusion suffers on many grounds."⁹ First, he accuses preterists of "play[ing] down the importance of historical backgrounds, such as Jewish writings contemporary with and immediately previous" to John's writing that "with one accord" see "Babylon as . . . Rome."¹⁰ Second, he reports that "all church writers," including Tertullian, Jerome, and Augustine, "associated Babylon with Rome," and that this belief was "the unchallenged position of the *ekklesia* for the next twelve centuries."¹¹ Third, he stipulates that Rome was "the hub of the world's economic systems" of that day and only this Rome meets Revelation 18's commercial and luxury descriptions.¹² Fourth, while he recognizes that Revelation 11:8–9 "is the trump card for early date advocates,"¹³ he labels as an "inconsistent hermeneutic" the taking of Sodom and Egypt figuratively, as the text says, but then "shift[ing] gears to make the 'great city . . . where also their Lord was crucified' refer to a literal location, historic Jerusalem."¹⁴ Fifth, regarding "the blood of the prophets," he claims that "this proof . . . is inconclusive" and that this blood "was the blood of New Testament prophets"¹⁵—i.e. "beginning in AD 64, Babylon-Rome also was a city of [this] bloodshed."¹⁶ He concludes that a "reinvented Babylon as Jerusalem" is "a conclusion obviously historically unjustifiable." Yet Paher does not explain how Rome might fit the above third and fourth syllogisms. He also seems to equivocate by saying that "the 'great city' is worldwide in scope, and not confined to one locality."¹⁷

⁸ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981) 816.

⁹ Stanley W. Paher, *The Book of Revelation's Mystery Babylon Rome, A.D. 95* (Reno, NV: Nevada Publications, 2003) 15.

¹⁰ Ibid. 67.

¹¹ Ibid. 97.

¹² Ibid. 110–13. Another argument for Revelation's Babylon being Rome is the "Babylon" used in 1 Peter 5:13, from where Peter wrote his epistle. Since second-century church tradition held that Peter was in Rome at the end of his life, some therefore link these two cities. But many commentaries disagree with this equation. See *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, *Adam Clarke's Commentary*, and *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*.

¹³ Paher, *Book of Revelation's Mystery* 159.

¹⁴ Ibid. 160.

¹⁵ Ibid. 174.

¹⁶ Ibid. 195.

¹⁷ Ibid. 98.

Preterists additionally buttress their view by literally honoring the time statements in Revelation's first and last chapter. Like bookends, these are seen as setting the historical context for the soon and now-past fulfillment of the *whole* of the prophecy:

- "what must soon [shortly] take place" (Rev 1:1; 22:6 KJV)
- "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy . . . who hear it and take to heart [obey] what is written in it" (Rev 1:3; 22:7 KJV)
- "the time is near [at hand]" (Rev 1:3; 22:10 KJV)
- "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book" (Rev 22:10; note: Daniel was told to "close up and seal the words" of his book "until the time of the end" [Dan 12:4]; in Revelation, that time is now "near" or "at hand")
- "Behold, I am coming soon!" (Rev 22:7, 12)
- "Yes, I am coming soon." (Rev 22:20)

Postmillennialist and partial preterist Gary DeMar opines that "these passages and many others like them tell us that a significant eschatological event was to occur in the lifetime of those who heard and read the prophecies."¹⁸ So preterists argue that these full context-embracing phrases demand fulfillment of the *whole* prophecy within a very short time and certainly within the lifetime of the book's original recipients. This includes the consummation and glorious coming/return of Christ in finality. All is claimed to have occurred within two to seven years, depending upon the exact date of this book's writing.

Thus, Russell counseled, "To regard it as a revelation of the distant future when it expressly declares that it treats of things which must shortly come to pass; and to look for its fulfillment in mediaeval or modern history, when it affirms that the time is at hand, is to ignore its plainest teaching, and to ensure misconception and failure."¹⁹ He further stated that "the interpreter who does not apprehend and hold fast this guiding principle is incapable of understanding the words of this prophecy, and will infallibly lose himself and bewilder others in a labyrinth of conjecture and vain speculation."²⁰

Hence, preterists maintain that Revelation only becomes difficult, if not impossible, to understand when it is lifted out of its self-declared, first-century time context and when its signs and symbols are not allowed to be interpreted by the principle of letting "Scripture interpret Scripture." Thus, modern-day preterist Max R. King proclaims that "there is nothing . . . more to be fulfilled. God's work through Christ is finished. It is full, complete and everlasting."²¹ But many disagree.

¹⁸ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991) 23.

¹⁹ Russell, *The Parousia* 374.

²⁰ Ibid. 531-32.

²¹ Max R. King, *The Cross and the Parousia of Christ* (Warren, OH: Writing and Research Ministry, The Parkman Road Church of Christ, 1987) 669.

J. Barton Payne, for one, rejects the preterist limiting of "the range of the book's applicability to the 1st Christian century." He argues that "this is a position which, when held with consistency, denies all modern relevance to John's predictions."²² Likewise, Michael Wilcock derides the preterist view as "veiled language events of John's own time, and nothing more."²³ Premillennialist Grant R. Osborne raises another valid criticism when he assails preterism "because it limits the universal language of the book (all 'peoples, languages, tribes, and nations') to the Jewish people" and "since final judgment and the end of the world did not come . . . [in AD 70]."²⁴

2. *The premillennial view.* Dispensational premillennialism is known for its insistence that the words of prophecy be interpreted "literally whenever this does not lead to absurdity." Therefore, they maintain a "futuristic interpretation" of Revelation.²⁵ But historic premillennialists "combine the futurist and preterist views," stipulating that it had a "message for John's own day and that it [also] represents the consummation of redemptive history."²⁶

Since most premillennialists date the writing of this book "around AD 95,"²⁷ they believe its focus is not on a contemporary fulfillment at all, but "on the last period(s) of world history"²⁸ and "speaks of the personal return of Christ to earth."²⁹ They declare that this view "best accords with the principle of literal interpretation."³⁰ Based upon Rev 1:19, they trifurcate the prophecy as "the past vision of the glorified Christ (chap. 1, esp. vv. 11-18) . . . the present condition of the churches (chaps. 2-3) . . . and as the third part, the future happenings (chaps. 4-22)."³¹ Amillennialist Robert H. Mounce rightly protests, however, that "the major weakness with this position is that it leaves the book without any particular significance for those to whom it is addressed" and, consequently, "it would be little comfort for a first-century believer facing persecution."³²

Historic premillennialist George Eldon Ladd readily admits that "the interpretation of this book has been the most difficult and confusing of all the books of the New Testament."³³ Prime examples are Revelation's time statements in both its first and last chapters. Although they utilize simple words like "soon," "at hand," "near," "quickly," and "shortly," most premillennialist

²² J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 593.

²³ Michael Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975) 23.

²⁴ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) 20.

²⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 97.

²⁶ Ibid. 98.

²⁷ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7* (Chicago: Moody, 1992) 20.

²⁸ Ibid. 32.

²⁹ Ibid. 34.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. 115.

³² Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 28.

³³ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974; rev. ed., 1993) 670.

writers interpret them figuratively. 2 Peter 3:8 is frequently cited as justification. Or, as dispensationalist Robert L. Thomas explains, these words are "descriptive of the speed with which the events will be carried out once they have begun . . . in 'rapid-fire' sequence or 'speedily.'" ³⁴ He also maintains that "when measuring time, Scripture has a different standard from ours."³⁵

Not surprisingly, then, fellow dispensationalist Ed Hindson teaches that "there are no specific time indicators of when . . . [the prophecies] will be fulfilled."³⁶ But he confuses the issue by adding that "the only indication of time is the phrase 'the time is at hand' (Greek, *kairos engus*). This may be translated 'near' or 'soon.' Taken with the phrase 'come to pass shortly' (Greek, *en tachei*, 'soon') in verse 1, the reader is left expecting the imminent return of Christ."³⁷

Postmillennialist and partial preterist DeMar sarcastically quips that "this is surprising since this line of argument is most often put forth by those who insist on a literal interpretation of Scripture."³⁸ DeMar condemns this treatment of the time statements because it "calls into question the reliability of the Bible and makes nonsense of clear statements of Scripture."³⁹

Amillennialist Mounce simply concedes that "it is true that history has shown that 'the things which must shortly come to pass' (1:1) have taken longer than John expected."⁴⁰ But Payne counters that "since the Book of Revelation was written prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the time texts make perfect sense."⁴¹

Most dispensational premillennialists affix the rapture of the church to the start of chapter four and claim that the following chapters through twenty deal with the "Jewish period of the Tribulation." They cite the fact that the word "church" is used many times in Revelation 1–3, but not at all in Revelation 4–20, and therefore deduce that the church has been raptured. Ladd terms this reasoning "a tenuous inference, not a declaration of inspired Scripture."⁴² He sees no pretribulational rapture in Revelation but only the "description of the second coming of Christ . . . in chapter 19; and the Rapture of the Church is altogether omitted."⁴³ Hence, for Ladd, "there is only one coming of Christ, and it takes place at the end of the Tribulation,"⁴⁴ which he places in Revelation 8–16.⁴⁵

Like the preterists, classic dispensationalist John F. MacArthur agrees "the afflictions of Christ . . . in Matthew 24 closely parallel the dreadful

³⁴ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7* 54–55.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 55–56.

³⁶ Ed Hindson, *Approaching Armageddon: The World Prepares for War With God* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1997) 36.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ DeMar, *Last Days Madness* 214.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 215.

⁴⁰ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* 243.

⁴¹ Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* 592.

⁴² George Eldon Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 98.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 75.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 102.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 75.

judgments described in Revelation 7–19" and are in "the same eschatological era signified by the last of seventy prophetic 'weeks' referred to in Daniel 9:25–27."⁴⁶ But for him, the fulfillment is all yet future and none of it past.

Also typical of this futurist view is Larry Spargimino's assessment of the role of modern technology. He proclaims that "for the first time in the history of the world, the prophecies of the Book of Revelation can now be fulfilled, and that everything is in place for the fulfillment of this Tribulation scenario."⁴⁷ Likewise, John H. Sailhamer chimes in that "the book of Revelation is about the final cataclysmic event that will yet transpire on the earth. . . . the Antichrist. . . [and] the Final Judgment."⁴⁸

But postmillennial Keith A. Mathison retorts that these interpretations are "highly disputed."⁴⁹ DeMar challenges that "nothing in the book of Revelation . . . mentions the Antichrist" nor his "making a covenant with the Jews and then breaking it."⁵⁰

3. The amillennial view. While amillennialist Jerry Newcombe believes the Bible's last book describes "how the world will end,"⁵¹ fellow proponent Anthony A. Hoekema thinks that "neither an exclusively preterist nor an exclusively futurist view of this book does full justice to it." He sees a continuation of the "already-not yet tension" that "runs through the entire book." He highlights the following verses as some of the references that apply to the Second Coming: Rev 1:7; 19:11–16; 22:7, 12, 20.⁵²

Hoekema describes his amillennialist interpretation of Revelation as follows:

First, there are references to events, people, and places of the time when the book of Revelation was written. Second, the principles, commendations, and warnings contained in these letters have value for the church of all time. These two observations, in fact, provide a clue for the interpretation of the entire book. Since the book of Revelation was addressed to the church of the first century A.D., its message had reference to events occurring at that time and was therefore meaningful for the Christians of that day. But since the book was also intended for the church through the ages, its message is still relevant for us today . . . [until] the final judgement at the end of history.⁵³

Guthrie makes note that "Christians clearly do not escape from persecution in this book." He too equates the Revelation with Jesus' Olivet discourse and

⁴⁶ John F. MacArthur, *The Second Coming: Signs of Christ's Return and the End of the Age* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999) 84. For a preterist fulfillment of Daniel's seventy weeks, see John Noë, *Beyond the End Times* (Bradford, PA: International Preterist Association, 1999) 71–89.

⁴⁷ Larry Spargimino, *The Anti-Prophecies: The Challenge of Preterism* (Oklahoma City: Hearthstone, 2000) 23.

⁴⁸ John H. Sailhamer, *Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 71.

⁴⁹ Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1999) 177.

⁵⁰ DeMar, *Last Days Madness* 174.

⁵¹ Jerry Newcombe, *Coming Again But When?* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1999) 297.

⁵² Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 69.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 223–24.

finds that "all the signs mentioned by Jesus in the Matthew 24 = Mark 13 discourse recur among the woes of the Apocalypse." He posits that "clearly the interpretation adopted will affect the question whether the tribulation itself can be considered a sign of the parousia."⁵⁴

Regarding the date of its writing, amillennialist R. C. Sproul leans toward postmillennialist Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.'s "excellent work." Sproul speculates that "if he [Gentry] is correct in arguing for a date prior to AD 70, then sweeping revisions must be made in our understanding of this book's content and focus."⁵⁵

Two hermeneutical approaches to the book of Revelation are employed among amillennialists: the historicist and the idealist interpretations. As Dennis E. Johnson documents, both span the time "between the ascension of Christ and his return at the end of history, although they differ on . . . what they symbolize." Notably, these two approaches are in contrast to the preterist and premillennial views which "agree that the visions concentrate on a more limited time period preceding Christ's second coming."⁵⁶

a. *Historicist interpretation.* This interpretation was "favored by the reformers." It "sees in the Revelation a prophecy of the history of the church." But as Ladd indicates, "this method can be millenarian . . . nonmillenarian . . . or postmillenarian."⁵⁷ According to Mounce, this "historical" theory was created around the 12th century by medieval theologians who were followers of Joachim and were growing concerned about abuses in the Church.⁵⁸

Thus, historicists see Revelation as depicting specific and identifiable historical events, institutions, movements, and periods that transpire in a chronological sequence throughout the entire church age. These began in the first century, have continued through the centuries, and will eventually lead up to the Lord's return. Preterist Milton S. Terry, however, complained that while historicism "presumed that the Book of Revelation contains detailed predictions of the Roman papacy, the wars of modern Europe, and the fortunes of Napoleon,"⁵⁹ he found "nowhere in the prophecies of this book a prediction of Turkish armies, or papal bulls, or the German Reformation of the sixteenth century," as has been claimed by some historicists.⁶⁰

The primary methodology applied by historicists is the "year-equals-a-day principle" ("year-day theory"). Symbolically, they insist, one day in prophecy is equivalent to one year in actual history. This is based on the precedent of Ezek 4:6 and Dan 9:24–27. The 1,260 days of Rev 12:6 are seen as years of tribulation and applied to the long reign of the papacy. Accordingly, these days

⁵⁴ Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* 815.

⁵⁵ R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 203.

⁵⁶ Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001) 352.

⁵⁷ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* 672.

⁵⁸ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* 25.

⁵⁹ Terry, *Biblical Apocalypses* 3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 6.

began as early as AD 533 with the decree issued by the eastern Emperor, Justinian, to make the bishop of Rome head of all the holy Churches. They lasted until 1793, during the time of the French Revolution (1789–1799) and the beginning of the end of papal power in France, or until the defeat of papal troops by Napoleon around 1800.

Using this historicist interpretation, many sixteenth-century Reformers "found in the Antichrist a prophecy of the Papacy."⁶¹ Hence, the original form of the Westminster Confession of Faith taught a Vatican and papal fulfillment of the harlot and second beast of Revelation 11, 12, and 13 and 17.⁶² This was later removed. Given this level of prominence, it seems surprising that Luther "dealt with the doctrine of 'last things' in only fragmented ways. Calvin, too, gave it only passing attention. Noteworthy among his voluminous writings is the absence of a commentary on the book of Revelation."⁶³ But as Ladd points out, historicism "so dominated Protestant study of prophetic truth for three centuries that it has frequently been called 'the Protestant' interpretation."⁶⁴

Today, *Halley's Bible Handbook* presents an historicist interpretation and provides examples that could have been fulfillments. For instance, Halley suggests that the rise of Islam in the seventh century AD might be the fulfillment of the fifth trumpet judgment of Rev 9:1–11 with its unleashing of "horrible Monsters, with complex appearance of Locusts, Horses, Scorpions, Lions, and Humans."⁶⁵

But Ladd is not impressed. He recounts that "a major difficulty with this view is that no consensus has been achieved as to what the outline of history foreseen in the Revelation really is."⁶⁶ Likewise, Johnson urges caution as he notes that "historicists have not agreed on which events or time periods to identify with each vision."⁶⁷ He sees these disagreements as "symptomatic of an interpretative approach that lacks appropriate controls to rein in the interpreter's imagination." He further objects that "a symbolic agenda for the specific events of history for centuries and millennia to come virtually seals up the meaning of the book to John's first hearers . . . transforming the book . . . into . . . [a] (veiled book), at least for the seven churches to whom it was first sent."⁶⁸

Perhaps historicism's most famous advocate was William Miller. During historicism's heyday in the early 1800s, Miller made his predictions of Christ's return in 1843 and 1844. Classic dispensationalist Thomas Ice points out that "this kind of date-setting helped destroy confidence in the system."⁶⁹

⁶¹ Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* 32.

⁶² Westminster Confession of Faith, Ch. 25, sect. 6; Ch. 1, sect. 6.

⁶³ Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 518–19.

⁶⁴ Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* 32.

⁶⁵ Henry H. Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1940) 716–18.

⁶⁶ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* 672.

⁶⁷ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* 354.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 355.

⁶⁹ Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, gen. eds., *When the Trumpet Sounds* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995) 15.

But Terry is more adamant. He insists that the year-day theory has "no valid support."⁷⁰ He remarks, "[W]hy should we ignore the statements of the Jewish historian [Josephus], and search in the pages of Gibbon, or in the annals of modern Europe, to find the fulfillment of prophecies which were so signally fulfilled before the end of the Jewish age?"⁷¹ Amillennialist Leon Morris also criticizes the theory because it "largely ignore[d] the world outside western Europe."⁷² Yet amazingly, this theory "prevailed up until approximately 1820, when all possible termination periods for the 1,260 years expired without any historical fulfillment."⁷³

Marvin C. Pate summarized the current status of this interpretative theory thus:

While the historicist approach once was widespread, today, for all practical purposes, it has passed from the scene. Its failed attempts to locate the fulfillment of Revelation in the course of the circumstances of history has doomed it to continual revision as time passed and, ultimately, to obscurity (a situation, one might add, if Jesus tarries, that contemporary doomsday prophets may eventually find themselves in!).⁷⁴

Thus few people today give this theory any credence. There is one major exception—the Seventh-Day Adventists, who are premillennial. They utilize not only Revelation's 1,260 days, but also Daniel's 1,290, 1,335, and 2,300 days as well, as part of their year-day theory. With all these numbers fitting into their equations, they see us today living in between the 6th and 7th seals and trumpets, and with the seven plagues all yet future.⁷⁵

b. *Idealist interpretation.* Idealism is the other symbolic form of interpreting the book of Revelation that is most often associated with the amillennialist position. In its pure form, idealism does not tie the prophecies to any particular post-NT event. Instead, it sees them as "basic principles on which God acts throughout history."⁷⁶ Thus, these principles relate to people of every generation.

Erickson describes it this way, "the idealist or symbolic interpretation dehistoricizes these events, making them purely symbolic of truths that are timeless in character."⁷⁷ They are "timeless . . . truths about the nature of reality or human existence that either are continuously present or continually recur."⁷⁸

⁷⁰ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999) 294.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 360.

⁷² Leon Morris, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 19.

⁷³ Grant R. Jeffrey, *Triumphant Return: The Coming of the Kingdom of God* (Toronto: Frontier Research Publications, 2001) 42.

⁷⁴ Marvin C. Pate, gen. ed., *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 110.

⁷⁵ Seminars Unlimited, "Revelation Seminars" (Keene, TX), attended July/August 2001, in Indianapolis, IN.

⁷⁶ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* 28.

⁷⁷ Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology* 98.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 30.

Hence, idealist G. K. Beale characterizes Revelation as "a symbolic portrayal of the conflict between good and evil, between the forces of God and of Satan. . . a timeless depiction of this struggle." But he also disclaims that "the problem with this alternative is that . . . [it] does not depict any final consummation to history . . . [and] it identifies none of the book's symbols with particular historical events." This is the opposite of the problem faced by the preterist and historicist views. Beale advocates what he calls an "eclecticism" approach coupling idealism's "transtemporal" applicability with "a final consummation"⁷⁹ and "an Antichrist who comes at the end of history."⁸⁰

Like historicists, however, amillennialists also "differ on the relationship of the visions to what they symbolize and to each other." Johnson, for one, believes that these visions symbolize "abstract trends or forces that may find expression in a variety of historical particulars without being limited to one."⁸¹ These particulars include insights into both "behind-the-scenes heavenly sources and at other times . . . of their visible, earthly outworking in the experience of churches, countries, and cultures."⁸²

Hence, idealism agrees with preterism in that John's visions revealed "dynamics and developments . . . of the first-century." It also agrees with historicism that "the visions symbolized the conditions confronting the church throughout the entire church age." And, it agrees with futurism in that the forces of evil are "far from defeated."⁸³ Idealism's all-encompassing embrace is possible because this interpretative approach does not limit itself to only one historical reality, as do the other views. Therefore, Johnson concludes that Revelation speaks of "forces and trends that would long outlive and far transcend ancient Rome, issues that confront twenty-first-century Christians just as they confronted our first-century counterparts."⁸⁴

Ladd seems to characterize idealism in a positive light as "the assurance to suffering saints of God's final triumph without the prediction of concrete events either in the past or future."⁸⁵ Yet he objects in that "the genre of apocalyptic literature always used apocalyptic symbolism to describe events in history; and we must expect the Apocalypse to share at least this feature with other books of its character."⁸⁶

Morris acknowledges that idealism's strength is that it "secures its [Revelation's] relevance for all periods of the church's history." But he flags as a major liability "its refusal to see a firm historical anchorage."⁸⁷ Amillennialist

⁷⁹ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 48.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 691.

⁸¹ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* 352.

⁸² *Ibid.* 360.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 361.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 362.

⁸⁵ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* 672.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 672–73. Also see, Thomas, *Revelation* 1–7 35.

⁸⁷ Morris, *Revelation* 20.

Merrill C. Tenney contends that while idealism "does contain much that is true. Its flaw is not so much in what it affirms as in what it denies."⁸⁸

But dispensationalist Jeffrey strongly disagrees with this timelessness approach. He blasts its interpretation of Revelation's visions and prophecies "as mere allegories and figures of speech" which does "not expect any . . . to be literally fulfilled." This is done, he assumes, "to avoid the clear predictions of Christ coming."⁸⁹

c. *Partial-preterist interpretation.* Most, if not all, amillennialists subscribe to a partial-preterist understanding in varying degrees. Many think that a "large proportion of Revelation's visions were fulfilled in the early Christian centuries" with only chapters "20–22 . . . still present or future."⁹⁰ The fulfilled parts are then applied idealistically as principles for our lives and world today. Guthrie's amillennialist take, on the other hand, sees chapters 1–6 in "an historical application." But chapters 7–22 he assigns "alone . . . to the future winding up of human history."⁹¹ As a group, however, amillennialists generally oppose full preterism and contend that "those who adopt the view that the whole book is no more than a tract for its own time dismiss the prophetic element of a future parousia."⁹²

4. *The postmillennial view.* Like amillennialists, postmillennialists take a partial-preterist approach, envisioning that "a large portion of the book consists of a prophecy that was fulfilled in the first century." Hence, Mathison charges that the idealist, historicist, and futurist approaches do "not do justice to" and/or are "ignoring" the numerous time references and descriptions in the text.⁹³ Gary North argues that since Revelation was written prior to AD 70, "the Great Tribulation is not ahead of us; it is long behind us" and that "all 'futurism'—dispensationalism, most contemporary non-dispensational premillennialism, and the more popular forms of amillennialism—is dead wrong."⁹⁴

Mathison, like amillennialist R. C. Sproul, credits fellow postmillennialist Gentry with "documenting in exhaustive detail the dating of the Book of Revelation: before AD 70." He suggests that Gentry's dating evidence "has removed the most significant criticism of the preterist . . . interpretation."⁹⁵ Gentry has decided that "a date in either AD 65 or early 66 would seem most suitable."⁹⁶ DeMar defends a date "around AD 64–65" and, therefore, stresses that "we should be looking for a first-century application."⁹⁷

⁸⁸ Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1957, 2001) 143.

⁸⁹ Jeffrey, *Triumphant Return* 34.

⁹⁰ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* 358.

⁹¹ Ibid. 817.

⁹² Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* 816.

⁹³ Mathison, *Postmillennialism* 140.

⁹⁴ Gary North, *Rapture Fever* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1993) 45.

⁹⁵ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992) xxxv–xxxvi.

⁹⁶ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell* (Atlanta: American Vision, 1998) 336.

⁹⁷ DeMar, *Last Days Madness* 198.

DeMar also stresses that "the prophetic key" is "determining the time frame from the time texts." Hence, he dismisses "distant futurist interpretations as untenable."⁹⁸ He admonishes that "there is no need to be ambiguous about the meaning of 'near,' 'shortly,' and 'quickly.'" He chides dispensationalists' manipulations of these words and insists that the "translators chose these English words because they convey the proper meaning of their Greek counterparts." He further delineates that "if these words meant something else, then translators would have used the appropriate words." He concludes that "these time markers indicate that the events depicted . . . were to happen without delay" and that "these time indicators" are to be "taken literally." Thus the events they depict "are history, fulfilled prophecy."⁹⁹ But, DeMar charges that when biblical scholars adopted a futuristic view, they must resort to "reinterpreting and relativizing the time texts and, thus, obscuring the plain teaching of the Bible."¹⁰⁰

Gentry maintains that the time statements in Rev 1:1, 3 and repeated in Rev 22:6, 10 are "the text-bracketing temporal indicators" and "cannot lightly be dismissed."¹⁰¹ In his opinion, "original relevance . . . is the lock and the time-texts the key to opening the door of Revelation." He, too, asks, "What terms *could* John have used to speak of contemporary expectation other than those that are, in fact, found in Revelation 1:1, 3; 22:6, 10 and other places?"¹⁰²

But Gentry and DeMar are partial preterists. So Gentry sees chapters 6 through 19 as portraying "the judgment of Israel in cyclical fashion."¹⁰³ And while he notes that the "forty-two months" [Rev 11:2] or "1260 days" [v. 3] "indicates the period of the Jewish War with Rome,"¹⁰⁴ he also observes that "the Book of Revelation really does not speak to postmillennialism until its *last three chapters*. There, it holds forth the postmillennial hope of an expanding and dominating kingdom of Christ."¹⁰⁵

DeMar adds that "Revelation depicts a temporal judgment upon a nation that had 'crucified the Lord of glory' (1 Corinthians 2:8). . . . This is why Revelation could describe the coming conflagration as 'near.' . . . The force of these words is decisive . . . they were to begin with the people to whom the book was written and not thousands of years in the future."¹⁰⁶ But he ponders "if the Bible can be interpreted so 'soon' can mean 'late,' and 'near' can mean 'distant,' and 'shortly' can mean 'delayed,' and *vice versa*, then the Bible can mean anything and nothing." He dutifully asks, "Can we trust a God whose words can mean their opposite?"¹⁰⁷

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness* (3d ed.; Atlanta: American Vision, 1997) 373–74.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 466.

¹⁰¹ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion* 163–64.

¹⁰² Ibid. 164.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 401.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 408.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 421.

¹⁰⁶ DeMar, *Last Days Madness* 215.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 215–16.

Although postmillennialists believe that chapters up through 19 were fulfilled in AD 70 and chapter 20, at least the first part, describes the present time as more and more people are coming into the millennial kingdom and under the rule and reign of Christ, they differ on the meaning of chapters 21 and 22. Postmillennialist Marcellus J. Kik explains that some believe these realities are partially present in "the Church of God upon earth" but await consummation in the "Consummated Kingdom." However, Kik calls this "an error." He asserts that "the Bride, the Church, and the Holy Jerusalem are one and the same thing." It is not "heaven," "a material city," and not "the consummated state."¹⁰⁸ Other postmillennialists subscribe to Isaiah's (Isa 65:17–20; 66:22) "new heavens and a new earth" as beginning in history, but separate Revelation's "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21:1) as yet future and beyond history.

Mathison posits another dichotomizing scheme. He teaches that the language of "New Heavens and a New Earth . . . can be used as a description of ongoing change in the existing state of affairs (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15), but it is also used to describe the state of affairs after the final judgment (2 Pet 3:13). In other words, there is an . . . 'already' . . . 'not yet' fulfilled."¹⁰⁹ So he believes that "the new heaven and new earth [of Revelation 21–22] is not wholly future. . . . But neither is it wholly present . . . until the Second Coming."¹¹⁰

Kik, to the contrary, argues that the earth and the heaven that fled way in Rev 20:11 teach "us the end and annihilation of the material earth and heaven" which "have been contaminated by the sin of man." He depicts this verse as "one of the clearest statements in Scripture of the non-eternity of the earth and the heavens."¹¹¹

Gentry acknowledges these disagreements in postmillennial ranks, but suggests that "there is ample evidence . . . of a refashioning of the earth for the eternal abode of the saints."¹¹² His "key passage" is 2 Peter 3, which he admits "has been the source of a good deal of confusion." Some think 2 Peter 3's "a new heaven and a new earth" refers to "the present era introduced by the destruction of Jerusalem, others apply it to the consummate new heavens and new earth."¹¹³ In his comments on Revelation, however, he claims that "the New Creation/Jerusalem of Revelation 21–22 began in the first century" and "stretches out into eternity in its ultimate consummation."¹¹⁴

Postmillennialists do, however, agree with premillennialists, and against amillennialists, that the events of Revelation 20 chronologically follow those of chapter 19. But postmillennialists do not view the rider on the white horse as being Jesus' Second Coming. Rather, they see this as Jesus riding victoriously over his enemies with the sword coming out of his mouth which is

¹⁰⁸ Marcellus J. Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971) 243.

¹⁰⁹ Mathison, *Postmillennialism* 87.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* 157.

¹¹¹ Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory* 254.

¹¹² Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion* 298.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* 301.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* 418–19.

"the Gospel as preached by His followers" during the church age.¹¹⁵ Stanley J. Grenz explains that this passage is seen by postmillennialists as depicting "a process that occurs in history and not the Second Coming, [hence] the golden age precedes, rather than follows, the Lord's return."¹¹⁶

II. AN EVALUATION OF VIEWS

1. *Assessing the dating evidence.* The preterist interpretation is criticized and discredited by those who date the writing of the book of Revelation in circa AD 95 or 96.¹¹⁷ This date is termed "the late date." And as Mathison correctly affirms, "such a date would effectively rule out a preterist interpretation."¹¹⁸ Jeffrey charges that preterists only adhere to the early date (pre-AD 70) because they "are forced by the needs of their theory."¹¹⁹ But Sproul effectively argues that "if Revelation was written before AD 70, then a case could be made that it describes chiefly those events leading up to Jerusalem's fall."¹²⁰

While the majority of scholars have subscribed to the late date, a sizeable and growing minority has found the evidence for the early date more abundant, credible, and compelling. North proposes that "Gentry demolished it [the late-date theory] in *Before Jerusalem Fell*." He also reports that "so far, there has been no detailed published refutation."¹²¹ In his book, Gentry documents the evidence for both the early and late dates—i.e. during Nero's reign c. AD 63–68 versus during Domitian's reign c. AD 95, respectively. He also lists numerous scholars who have favored the early date.¹²² Among those are Louis de Alcasar, F. F. Bruce, Rudolf Bultmann, Adam Clark, Alfred Ederheim, George Edmondson, F. W. Farrar, David Hill, J. B. Lightfoot, Sir Isaac Newton, Bishop Thomas Newton, John A. T. Robinson, J. Stuart Russell, Philip Schaff, Moses Stuart, Milton Terry, and Cornelius Vanderwaal.

Notably, Philip Schaff, who wrote *History of the Christian Church* in eight volumes, and in the preface to his revised edition, admits that "on two points I have changed my opinion—the second Roman captivity of Paul . . . and the date of the Apocalypse (which I now assign, with the majority of modern critics, to the year 68 or 69 instead of 95, as before)."¹²³

The major piece of evidence cited by the popular late-date theorists is the "witness of Irenaeus"¹²⁴ (AD 130–202), who wrote around AD 180–190. Sproul

¹¹⁵ Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory* 250.

¹¹⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992) 73.

¹¹⁷ Thomas, *Revelation* 1–7 20.

¹¹⁸ Mathison, *Postmillennialism* 142.

¹¹⁹ Jeffrey, *Triumphant Return* 43.

¹²⁰ Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* 132.

¹²¹ Gary North, in Foreword to Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion* xxxvi. For more early date arguments see Foy E. Wallace, Jr., *The Book of Revelation* (Fort Worth, TX: Foy E. Wallace Jr. Publications, 1966) 14–46.

¹²² Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 30–38.

¹²³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910 [3d revision]) vi, also 420, 834n.

¹²⁴ Charles L. Holman, *Till Jesus Comes: Origins of Christian Apocalyptic Expectation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996) 139.

terms Irenaeus's second-hand testimony in his famous work *Against Heresies* as "the chief argument for a late date."¹²⁵ Beale emphasizes its importance by conceding that "the earlier date may be right, but the internal evidence is not sufficient to outweigh the firm tradition stemming from Irenaeus."¹²⁶ Irenaeus's questionable passage is rendered thusly:

We will not, however, incur the risk of pronouncing positively as to the name of the Antichrist; for if it were necessary that his name should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been announced by him who beheld the apocalyptic vision. For that was seen no very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign.¹²⁷

Terry elaborates that while the evidence for the late date rests "on the sole testimony of Irenaeus, who wrote a hundred years after that date," his "words admit of two different meanings."¹²⁸ DeMar explains that "a study of this passage [actually only one sentence] makes it difficult to know whether he was saying that John 'was seen . . . toward the end of Domitian's reign,' that he was still alive in AD 95, or that the 'apocalyptic vision . . . was seen . . . toward the end of Domitian's reign.'" DeMar counsels that "the grammatical construction of the . . . text" makes it impossible to be "dogmatic one way or the other."¹²⁹

Sproul spells out the difficulty this way: "Is the antecedent of *that* (in the final sentence) the vision or is it John, the one who saw the vision? Is Irenaeus saying that John's *vision* took place during the reign of Domitian (which would date the Book of Revelation after the destruction of Jerusalem)? Or is Irenaeus saying simply that John, who lived into the reign of Domitian, was seen at that late time?" Sproul admits that these words of Irenaeus "contain a certain ambiguity." As a result, "this precludes them from being used as definite proof for dating the Apocalypse during the reign of Domitian."¹³⁰ Hence, Mathison concludes that Irenaeus's statement is "inconclusive at best."¹³¹ But Paher contests this. He believes Irenaeus's statement is clear and compelling evidence for the late date and takes exception to early date advocates trying to "neutralize Irenaeus' statement."¹³² He argues that "by the rule of antecedents, the 'that' has to refer to the nearest noun which is the last word of the previous sentence, 'vision.'¹³³

Another problem with Irenaeus is the credibility of his witness. In addition to his quote being quite "ambiguous" and its meaning highly disputed,¹³⁴ he

¹²⁵ Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* 141.

¹²⁶ Beale, *The Book of Revelation* 27.

¹²⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in ANF 1.559–60 (5.30.3).

¹²⁸ Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 137; Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 65.

¹²⁹ Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of the Left Behind Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001) 62.

¹³⁰ Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* 143. Another complicating factor is that Nero's middle name was Domitius—Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus. Nero Caesar was his adopted name.

¹³¹ Mathison, *Postmillennialism* 142–43.

¹³² Paher, *The Book of Revelation's Mystery Babylon Rome, A.D. 95* 72.

¹³³ *Ibid.* 71.

¹³⁴ Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 136.

said nothing about the date of the writing of Revelation and even claimed that Jesus' earthly ministry lasted approximately fifteen years and that he lived to be almost fifty years old.¹³⁵ Consequently, Gentry concludes that "a careful scrutiny of the Irenaeus evidence for a late date for Revelation tends to render any confident employment of him suspect. The difficulties with Irenaeus in this matter are many and varied, whether or not his witness is accepted as credible. A bold 'thus saith Irenaeus,' cannot be conclusive of the matter."¹³⁶

I agree with Gentry and many other reputable scholars who have seriously studied this dating issue that "a date in either AD 65 or early 66 would seem most suitable."¹³⁷ Other arguments for this early date also seem superior, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to those advanced for the late date.¹³⁸ Gentry further understands that "the multiple statements as to the imminent expectation of radical upheaval in Revelation are more understandable in the 60s than in the 90s. These expectations were of the persecution of the Church, the destruction of the Temple and Israel, and of upheaval at Rome—chaos unparalleled in the events of the AD 90s."¹³⁹ Payne agrees with Gentry that "the internal evidence, which is drawn from the predictions contained in the book itself, is more suited to the days of Nero" [AD 64–68].¹⁴⁰ But Paher objects and rebuts that "the unified testimony" of the Church for "the first three centuries and into the fourth" had John exiled on Patmos "late in the first century."¹⁴¹ He further argues that the late date better "harmonizes" with Revelation's portrayal of the "social and religious climate"¹⁴² and "the condition of the seven churches."¹⁴³

Osborne takes a more cautious course. After reviewing the historical details regarding emperor worship, persecution of Christians, and the background of the seven churches, he concedes that "good arguments can be made for an origin under either Nero or Domitian." Yet he sides with "a date in the mid-90s under Domitian" as having "better evidence."¹⁴⁴ Likewise, Beale favors the late date but admits "there are no single arguments that point clearly to the early or late date."¹⁴⁵ As we have seen, other scholars have decided otherwise. Gentry, for one, counters that "a solid case for a Neronian

¹³⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.22.5.

¹³⁶ Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 67.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* 336.

¹³⁸ For good analyses of the dating evidence for both the early and late date but favoring the pre-AD 70 date see: Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell*, *passim*; Wallace, *The Book of Revelation* 15–46; Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 135–40 and *Biblical Apocalypics* 256–60. For a countering analysis favoring the late date see Morris, *Revelation* 35–41; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* 15–21; Jeffrey, *Triumphant Return* 78–99; and Beale, *The Book of Revelation* 4–27.

¹³⁹ Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 335.

¹⁴⁰ Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* 592.

¹⁴¹ Paher, *The Book of Revelation's Mystery Babylon Rome, A.D. 95* 76.

¹⁴² *Ibid.* 95.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* 152.

¹⁴⁴ Osborne, *Revelation* 6–9.

¹⁴⁵ Beale, *The Book of Revelation* 4.

date for Revelation can be set forth from the available evidences, both internal and external."¹⁴⁶

Of the two types of dating evidence, scholars have generally recognized internal evidence as preferable and taking precedence over external evidence. John A. T. Robinson in his book *Redating the New Testament* points out that Revelation, along with all NT books, says nothing about the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. He terms this omission as "one of the oddest facts" and questions why this event "is never once mentioned as a past fact" by any NT book, even though it is "predicted" and "would appear to be the single most datable and climatic event of the period."¹⁴⁷ This omission propelled Robinson's redating study. His hypothesis and eventual conclusion was that "the whole of the New Testament was written before 70." He places the writing of Revelation in AD 68.¹⁴⁸ Admittedly, Robinson's argument is an argument from silence. But those who claim that Revelation was written in AD 95–96 do have major difficulties explaining this fact.

Henry C. Sheldon even charges that "Irenaeus . . . misconceived the time of John's exile, and that the Apocalypse was written between the Neronian persecution and the fall of Jerusalem."¹⁴⁹ In further support, Terry acknowledges that "no critic of any note has ever claimed that the later date is required by any internal evidence."¹⁵⁰ He cites as "a most weighty argument for the early date . . . the mention of the temple, court, and city in chapters xi, 1–3" and the "further designation, in verse 8, of that city" as being "where also their Lord was crucified"¹⁵¹—i.e. first-century Jerusalem. But Paher counters that "a literal temple in Jerusalem . . . did not have to be in existence to validate the vision."¹⁵² He references Ezekiel "who recorded the [his] vision of the new temple and city 14 years after the destruction of the physical one in 586 BC (40:1–48:35)."¹⁵³

Nevertheless, the early date also has external evidence. In recalling the Syriac version of the Bible, which dates back to at least AD 464¹⁵⁴ and possibly back to second century,¹⁵⁵ James M. MacDonald reported, "this book is entitled 'The Revelation which was made by God to John the evangelist on the island of Patmos, into which he was thrown by Nero Caesar.'"¹⁵⁶

In my opinion, the weight of dating evidence greatly favors a pre-AD-70 writing. Therefore, as Sproul has suggested, this clears the way for an AD 70 fulfillment.

¹⁴⁶ Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 336.

¹⁴⁷ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 13.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 10, 352.

¹⁴⁹ Henry C. Sheldon, *History of the Christian Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988) 114.

¹⁵⁰ Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 138.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* 139.

¹⁵² Paher, *The Book of Revelation's Mystery Babylon Rome, A.D. 95* 155.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* 199.

¹⁵⁴ James Hastings, ed., *Hastings's Dictionary of the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1909, 1994) 910.

¹⁵⁵ Wallace, *The Book of Revelation* 27.

¹⁵⁶ James M. MacDonald, *The Life and Writings of St. John* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1880) 171.

2. *Honoring the time statements.* The concept of time is just as important in the book of Revelation as it is elsewhere in the NT. Hence, DeMar is correct when he clarifies that "the most important factor in determining when a prophecy is to be fulfilled is the time element."¹⁵⁷ Unfortunately, most commentators are committed futurists and, as Doug Wilson observes, they must "attempt to evade the first-century relevance of these verses. . . . One [way] is to undermine the meaning of the word *near* (or *at hand*) [Rev 1:3; 22:10] in much the same way they do with *shortly* in verse 1."¹⁵⁸ Not surprisingly, they then complain that Revelation's structure is "complex and difficult to determine."¹⁵⁹ This conclusion, however, is unwarranted when the book is left within the time context it places upon itself.

First and foremost, Revelation was addressed to seven real first-century churches (Rev 1:4; 2:1–3:22). Brent Kinman rightly deduces that this historical fact is "normally taken as evidence that John's message was for a contemporary audience."¹⁶⁰

Second, Revelation was given to reveal, and not to conceal, "what must soon take place" (Rev 1:1; 22:6). These words are the book's overarching time statement. They are contained in both Revelation's prologue and epilogue and encompass the *whole* of the prophecy. Therefore, one's interpretation of this book must begin by looking at the *whole* of the prophecy, or the "big picture," before exploring any of its parts.

Mounce, however, provides a classic equivocating example as he writes, "the most satisfying solution is to take the expression 'must soon take place' in a straightforward sense." So far so good, but then he adds a disclaimer: "remembering that in the prophetic outlook the end is always imminent."¹⁶¹ In other words, for Mounce the meaning of this time statement is meaningless. It can be stretched like a rubber band far out into the future. Thomas agrees with Mounce and joins his voice with the chorus assuring readers that "when measuring time, Scripture has a different standard from ours."¹⁶² But this type of manipulation simply puts an intolerable strain on the plain and natural meaning of commonly used and normally understood words.

Perhaps, David S. Clark's admonition is well worth heeding here. He cautions that "stretching language to the breaking point to make 'shortly' mean several thousands of years . . . [is] only trifling with words, and the Word of God."¹⁶³

Charles L. Feinberg offers a different take. He proposes that Rev 1:1 "gives no basis for the historical interpretation of the book. Events are seen here

¹⁵⁷ DeMar, *End Times Fiction* 55.

¹⁵⁸ Doug Wilson, *And It Came To Pass* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 1993) 90.

¹⁵⁹ Brent Kinman, *History, Design, and the End of Time* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000) 183.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 184.

¹⁶¹ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* 41.

¹⁶² Thomas, *Revelation 1–7* 56.

¹⁶³ David S. Clark, *The Message from Patmos: A Postmillennial Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 22.

from the perspective of the Lord and not from the human viewpoint."¹⁶⁴ But DeMar rightly retorts that "there is no passage that points us to viewing time 'from the perspective of God.'"¹⁶⁵ The fact is that this book was written to man "to show his servants what must soon take place" (Rev 1:1). Mounce's, Thomas's and Feinberg's comments are representative of those who have sought to interpret the relevant passages in Revelation related to time in a non-literal manner in order to find a meaning in keeping with their futuristic interpretation. Bruce Manning Metzger, on the other hand, is most direct and emphatic: "The word *soon* indicates that John intended his message for his own generation."¹⁶⁶

Another related contextual difficulty stumbled over by many interpreters is the claim that Rev 1:19 denotes "a straightforward chronological division of Revelation into three consecutive and mutually exclusive historical periods."¹⁶⁷ What is forgotten or ignored is that this verse, too, is part of the *whole* of the prophecy and located within this book's overall time-statement parameter. Therefore its future aspects are controlled by and consist as a part of the things that "must soon take place" (Rev 1:1; 22:6). This time parameter establishes both the context and structure for the entire book. And, as William W. Klein *et al.* state, "context is structure."¹⁶⁸

Regarding structural relevancy, Gentry elaborates that John in "writing to seven historical churches . . . expects those very churches to hear and understand (Rev 1:3; 22:10) the revelation (Rev 1:1) and to heed the things in it (Rev 1:3; 22:7), because of the nearness of the events (Rev 1:1, 3; 22:6, 10)." Gentry rightly terms this "original relevance," which he defines as "the lock and the time-texts the key to opening the door of Revelation." He also appropriately asks, "What terms could John have used to speak of contemporary expectation other than those that are, in fact, found in Revelation 1:1, 3; 22:6, 10 and other places?"¹⁶⁹ Unfortunately, Gentry, like other partial-preterist postmillennialists, later violates his own contextual structure, as we shall see.

Terry fittingly submits that "these simple words of time must be subjected to the most violent and unnatural treatment in order to make the statements of the writer compatible with the [distant future] exposition."¹⁷⁰ For instance, "shortly" [*en tachei*], "short," or "soon" [*tachos*] is consistent in its literal meaning everywhere else it is used in the NT (see, e.g., Rom 16:20; 1 Cor 4:19; 7:29; Phil 2:19; 2:24; 1 Tim 3:14; 2 Tim 4:9; Heb 13:23; 2 Pet 1:14; 3 John 14; Rev 1:1; 22:6). But Spargimino bemoans that "preterists try to argue that

this is the *only* meaning that it has." He postulates that "'shortly' could very well be a reference to a *portion* of the Book of Revelation."¹⁷¹ As we have seen, others propose that "shortly" really means that "once they begin, they unfold quickly."¹⁷²

Likewise, "quickly" has but one literal and consistent meaning everywhere it is used (see, e.g., John 11:29, 31; 13:27; Acts 22:18; Rev 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). "At hand" or "near" (*engus*) also has one literal meaning—i.e. close in relation to time or distance (see, e.g., Matt 26:18, 45–46; Luke 21:20; John 2:13; 6:4; 7:2, 6; 11:55; Rev 1:3; 22:10). Again, DeMar rightly reminds us that these words and phrases "are used hundreds of times in the New Testament, and they mean what they mean in everyday speech." In anticipation of a translation objection, he further adds "the translators chose these very clear English words to represent their Greek equivalents." In anticipation of another objection, he entreates that "nothing in the context of Revelation indicates that these words should have specialized and unique meanings."¹⁷³ Therefore, he properly concludes that there is "no justification to skip over two thousand years of church history to engage in speculative methods of interpretation."¹⁷⁴

In my opinion, the best hermeneutical principle to apply for understanding these words is comparing Scripture with Scripture. When we do, as DeMar has noted, "near," "quickly," and "shortly" are used in a *literal* sense in *every other New Testament passage where they occur*. Yet "in the Book of Revelation we are told that they should be interpreted *figuratively*." Again, DeMar ironically reminds us that "this line of argument is most often put forth by those who insist on a literal interpretation of Scripture."¹⁷⁵ But disregarding the plain and natural meaning of commonly used and understood words and advocating interpretation-by-exception approaches only "makes nonsense of clear statements of Scripture."¹⁷⁶ DeMar rightly and further warns that "based on the way 'quickly,' 'near,' and 'shortly' are used in Genesis through Revelation, any student of the Bible who does not interpret these time texts in the way the Bible uses them is in jeopardy of denying the integrity of the Bible."¹⁷⁷ The plain truth is, once again, "the plain meaning of the text is thrown out the window [is] to justify a *system* of theology."¹⁷⁸ In contrast, DeMar submits that "the force of these words is decisive."¹⁷⁹

Another factor often overlooked is that Revelation's first-century recipients were to obey the *whole* of its prophecy if they wanted to receive its blessing (Rev 1:3; 22:7). Therefore, the *whole* of this prophecy had to be "obeyable" in their lives, back then and there. Yet in spite of this and other plain and clear self-declarations that "a significant eschatological event was to occur in the

¹⁶⁴ Charles L. Feinberg, "Revelation," *Liberty Bible Commentary* (Lynchburg, VA: The Old-Time Gospel Hour, 1982) 2.790.

¹⁶⁵ DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 3d ed., 376.

¹⁶⁶ Bruce Manning Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 21.

¹⁶⁷ Beale, *The Book of Revelation* 161.

¹⁶⁸ William W. Klein *et al.*, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 163.

¹⁶⁹ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion* 164.

¹⁷⁰ Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 140.

¹⁷¹ Spargimino, *The Anti-Prophets* 139, 142.

¹⁷² Kinman, *History, Design, and the End of Time* 184.

¹⁷³ DeMar, *End Times Fiction* 56.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 58.

¹⁷⁵ DeMar, *Last Days Madness* 214.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 215.

¹⁷⁷ DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 3d ed., 390.

¹⁷⁸ DeMar, *Last Days Madness* 196.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 215.

lifetime of those who heard and read the prophecies,¹⁸⁰ debates over the meaning of its commonly used and normally understood words rage on in scholarly circles.¹⁸¹ As a result, many interpreters "in defiance of all grammatical laws, proceed to invent a non-natural method of interpretation, according to which 'near' becomes 'distant,' and 'quickly' means 'ages hence,' and 'at hand' signifies 'afar off.'"¹⁸²

But again DeMar is right in recognizing that "the first readers of the Revelation scroll would have immediately applied the prophecy to themselves. There is nothing to indicate a distant future interpretation."¹⁸³ And since Revelation was most likely written prior to AD 70 and its clear time statements bookend its entire contents, Johnson is also right in saying that the fulfillment of "Revelation is not about events and hostile forces remote from their [1st-century] struggle,"¹⁸⁴ but about "fulfillment . . . in the near future (to John's readers), which to us is the distant past."¹⁸⁵ Craig R. Koester concurs that Revelation "is primarily a book for its own time"¹⁸⁶ and "would have been clearest to those who lived in John's own time."¹⁸⁷ Mounce recommends that "it seems more reasonable to accept the Apocalypse on its own terms and understand John as the channel through whom God revealed 'what must soon take place' (1:1)."¹⁸⁸

The overriding contextual problem, however, which confronts all who take any type of a futurist position is how and where to bifurcate the book—part to the past and part to the future. Is it after chapter three, six, nineteen, or just anywhere? Since this book's time statements span the *whole* of the prophecy, it appears that its fulfillment is either all or nothing. Any bifurcation would appear to be arbitrary and a violation of the time-sensitive parameters the book places upon itself. Postmillennialist Gentry provides a classic example of this as he writes that "most of the prophecies before Revelation 20 find fulfillment in the fall of Jerusalem (AD 70)."¹⁸⁹ Of course, his "most of" phrase complicates bifurcation and fulfillment matters even further. The fact is that there is no textual or exegetical justification for dividing this book anywhere. Its fulfillment unity is self-imposed and must be honored.

Preterist King drives this unity point home by characterizing those who make "little or no attempt . . . to honor those clearly stated time restrictions" as taking "a *head-in-the-sand* course of action." He argues that "John leaves no room . . . for any division to be made of his message into two different, widely separated *eschatons*."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁰ DeMar, *Last Days Madness* 23.

¹⁸¹ See Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999) 107–19; 179, 182–86, 194–96.

¹⁸² Russell, *The Parousia* 534.

¹⁸³ DeMar, *End Times Fiction* 55.

¹⁸⁴ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* 23.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 359.

¹⁸⁶ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 26.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 27.

¹⁸⁸ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* 30.

¹⁸⁹ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion* 159.

¹⁹⁰ King, *The Cross and the Parousia* 350.

Another highly significant factor ignored or dismissed are the angel's words "do not seal up" (Rev 22:10). These words are in dramatic contrast to Daniel's time and prophecy. Daniel was told to "close and seal" the words of his prophecy because its fulfillment was some six hundred year away, at "the time of the end" (Dan 12:4, 9). But in John's day that time of the end was "at hand" (Rev 1:3; 22:10). Koester rightly discerns that "Revelation was an open book from the time it was written onward."¹⁹¹ Walhout fittingly adds that "everything in these visions is near. . . . If we fail to see these visions with John, it is the equivalent of sealing them up."¹⁹² Thus stretching the fulfillment of all or some of John's vision out for almost two thousand years away from his time is the equivalent of sealing them up.

While trifling with the time statements or assigning specialized meaning violates commonly accepted principles of hermeneutics and basic rules of grammar, some simply choose to ignore them completely.¹⁹³ Others go so far as to claim that "there are no specific time indicators" in the book of Revelation.¹⁹⁴ These devices are "tools of the trade" for all postponement, dichotomizing hermeneutics. They are necessitated. But taking fulfillment of any passage out of its self-imposed historical and time-sensitive context strips Revelation of its natural, plain, and intended meaning. All such approaches are weak and must be discarded.

What is needed for a proper understanding of this most abused book is a careful and honest exegesis—one that preserves the integrity and harmony of the *whole* of the prophecy and its associated events. Arbitrary divisions and anti-textual assertions have no part in this process. The simplest solution is to recognize that the *whole* of the prophecy was written, first and foremost, to first-century Christians. Its book-ending and content-bracketing time statements must be taken literally and plainly. They make perfect sense and bear witness to this book's unity and original audience relevancy. If this relevancy is not true, it is simply inexplicable why this book's original recipients were never informed of this fact, thus giving Revelation the character of deception rather than of revelation.

Russell succinctly summarized the importance of Revelation's time statements this way: "It may truly be said that the key has all the while hung by the door, plainly visible to every one who had eyes to see; yet men have tried to pick the lock, or force the door, or climb up some other way, rather than avail themselves of so simple and ready a way of admission as to use the key made and provided for them."¹⁹⁵

3. Recognizing fulfillment. The book of Revelation does not contain end-of-the-world predictions or events. Nor does it "deal with the consummation

¹⁹¹ Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* 202.

¹⁹² Edwin Walhout, *Revelation Down to Earth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 243.

¹⁹³ For example see *The New Testament and Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (New York: The Iversen Associates: Produced for Moody Monthly, 1971) 1057–61.

¹⁹⁴ Hindson, *Approaching Armageddon: The World Prepares for War With God* 36.

¹⁹⁵ Russell, *The Parousia* 367.

of history," as is commonly held.¹⁹⁶ Rather, it fully predicted and symbolically and accurately describes the events leading up to and including the fall of Jerusalem in a coming of the day of the Lord in AD 70. Appropriately, Johnson terms "suspect" any "interpretations of the visions that lie completely beyond the original readers' frame of reference."¹⁹⁷ The whole of the prophecy deals with things that "must [and did] soon take place" (Rev 1:1; cf. 22:6). But, as we will see, this fulfillment does not exhaust Revelation's meaning and relevance.

Revelation is also a fourth, but amplified, version of Jesus' Olivet Discourse. As Gentry correctly points out, "if, as it seems likely, Revelation is indeed John's exposition of the Olivet Discourse, we must remember that in the delivery of the Discourse, the Lord emphasized that it . . . was to occur in His generation (Matt 24:34),"¹⁹⁸ which it did. But, as we will see, it is more than just a fourth version.

First and foremost, the Book of Revelation does describe a local series of events that occurred in the past. Its blessings, judgments, and events describe realities very near to its writing and intended for its original audience. But just like the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, which were also local events, Revelation's fulfillment has universal applications and implications. Locally is just how God chose to implement and complete his plan of redemption.

In addition to the first-century relevancy of Revelation's time statements and the covenantal identity of its "a new heaven and a new earth" (not covered in this article),¹⁹⁹ two other connecting points must be re-emphasized: (1) the textual identification of Revelation's 3½-year period ("42 months," "1,260 days," and "time, times, half time"; Rev 11:2, 3; 12:6, 14; 13:5) with the AD 66–70 Jewish-Roman War; (2) the four textual syllogisms connecting Revelation's "Babylon" as being first-century Jerusalem. Despite Paher's objections, these textual points provide strong evidence in support of a pre-AD 70 date for the writing of Revelation and fulfillment in the time of Jesus' contemporaries. These events ended forever biblical Judaism, its age, and the old covenant system (Heb 8:13; 9:10). But there is more.

In addition, in this book we find a "divine visitation" and "divine judgments."²⁰⁰ Thus Carroll maintains that Revelation "lends urgency and dramatic power to the expectation of Jesus' parousia. This event . . . unfolds in the visions."²⁰¹ But the specific Greek word *parousia* is never used in

Revelation. So Carroll claims that the coming or comings promised in the letters to the seven churches (Revelation 2 and 3) "hint at a coming of Jesus to the church apart from his end-time parousia."²⁰² Paher is more emphatic. He sees "several comings of Christ in Revelation 2–3" until "the last of all comings" which he terms "the Lord's final return." He further differentiates between two comings: one coming in "Matthew 24:29–30, where Christ came on the clouds against one locality, Jerusalem of Judea;" and another coming in "Revelation 1:7 . . . a [future] worldwide judgment, where 'every eye,' the people of the earth, will see Him."²⁰³ Consequently, what this AD 70 coming of Christ was, or was not, is a matter of contention between full and partial preterists. R. C. Sproul, for one, acknowledges that it was "a parousia or coming of Christ . . . [but] not the parousia."²⁰⁴

Reluctantly, Ladd conceded about the preterist view that "there must be an element of truth in this approach for surely the Revelation was intended to speak to its own generation."²⁰⁵ Yet he criticized C. H. Dodd's realized eschatology for "emptying it [eschatology] of its futuristic content."²⁰⁶ I believe Ladd's criticism is equally valid for the modern-day preterist view of Revelation's prophecy, which brings us to our final section.

4. *Acknowledging ongoing relevance and timeless applications.* Many preterists employ a reductionistic hermeneutic claiming that the extent of Revelation's prophecy applies only to its fulfillment in the events leading up to and including AD 70. As Morris caustically notes, "the preterist view . . . starts with the situation of the church in the first century and ends there . . . making it meaningless for all subsequent readers."²⁰⁷ Johnson astutely adds that past fulfillment "leads some preterist interpreters to minimize the present and yet future applications of Revelation."²⁰⁸ Spargimino's criticism is more blunt: "Preterism, however, with its insistence that virtually all prophecy has been fulfilled, sees the future as a vast uncharted sea . . . we can virtually know nothing about the future. Is this how God operates?"²⁰⁹

Again, in my opinion, these criticisms are quite valid. Therefore, in this section I will propose that the book of Revelation is more than "a tract for its own times."²¹⁰ In other words, its prophecy was not exhausted in an AD 70 fulfillment. That preterist limitation is too restrictive. Furthermore, it contradicts what this book of prophecy says about itself. Mounce comes close to realizing a fuller meaning when he says about John "the author himself could without contradiction be preterist, historicist, futurist, and

¹⁹⁶ Kinman, *History, Design, and the End of Time* 183. For more see John Noë, "The Superiority of Preterism: An Evaluation [and Synthesis] of the Four Major Evangelical Views of the Return of Christ" (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Theological Seminary and the University of Liverpool, 2003) 210–12; *idem*, *Beyond the End Times* 41–70, 91–98.

¹⁹⁷ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* 20.

¹⁹⁸ Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 131.

¹⁹⁹ For more see Noë, "The Superiority of Preterism" 212–23; *idem*, *Beyond the End Times* 223–64.

²⁰⁰ Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* 814.

²⁰¹ John T. Carroll, *The Return of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000) 98–99.

²⁰² *Ibid.* 108.

²⁰³ Paher, *The Book of Revelation's Mystery Babylon Rome, A.D. 95* 147.

²⁰⁴ Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* 158. For more see Noë, "The Superiority of Preterism" 326–68; *idem*, *Beyond the End Times* 195–201.

²⁰⁵ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* 672.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 91.

²⁰⁷ Morris, *Revelation* 18–19.

²⁰⁸ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* 359.

²⁰⁹ Spargimino, *The Anti-Prophets* 236.

²¹⁰ Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* 816.

idealist."²¹¹ Kraybill, while taking "largely . . . a preterist view," wisely suggests that "the Word of God cannot be tethered to any one school of interpretation. In the end, I want parts of several methods of interpretation."²¹²

Klein *et al.* are also on track when they suggest "a combination of preterist and futurist interpretations emerges as best."²¹³ David S. Dockery advocates a similar synthetic approach:

Both the futurist and preterist views have their strengths and weaknesses. Instead of choosing only one or the other, a "both/and" approach that applies the strengths of each is a better option. . . . The preterist position by itself fails to understand that Revelation confronts the modern reader with promises, challenges, and choices that are similar, if not identical to those faced by the book's original readers. The futurist position by itself is prone to see Revelation as a crystal ball with a literal timetable of events that will happen in the future.²¹⁴

For these and other interpreters, it seems the signs, symbols, and content of Revelation are just too rich to be confined within one view or limited to only one time period or to one particular people. Even classic dispensationalist Spargimino acknowledges that "the Book of Revelation must not be limited in time or extent. Revelation abounds in universal statements that suggest fulfillments beyond the confines of the ancient Roman world."²¹⁵

Below are six exegetical insights supporting a universal and timeless *sensus plenior*—i.e. "a fuller sense . . . the possibility of more significance to . . . [a] passage than was consciously apparent to the original author."²¹⁶

First and foremost, once again, the *whole* of this prophecy, from first to last, was written to encourage its original audience. They were under severe persecution and in need of relief. The *whole* of it, therefore, is rooted, time restricted, and fulfilled in one, immediate, specific, and real coming of Christ in judgment in AD 70. As Russell acknowledges, "the coming of the Lord is its grand theme."²¹⁷ That contemporary and historical setting was Revelation's one and only fulfillment. At the same time, Klein *et al.* are right in application that "the historical meaning of the text must play a controlling role"²¹⁸ as we explore a *sensus plenior*.

Second, and in graphic fashion, John was also told to "eat" the little scroll and that he "must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings" (Rev 10:9–11). Clearly, as Osborne has pointed out,²¹⁹ these "peoples, nations, languages, and kings" are a different and broader group of recipients of this prophecy than John's original group, the area of the seven churches

(Rev 1:4, 11). Traditionally, however, commentators have tried to minimize the meaning of this dramatic symbolism. They contend it only meant a personal application for John. Suggested applications, along with my comments, include:

- *John must yet receive the rest of the prophecy (chapters 11–22).* But John was not going anywhere. He was there for the duration. This explanation is not only highly reductionistic, in comparison with the dramatic symbolism used it is superfluous and weak.
- *John would later travel through the area of the seven churches sharing this prophecy verbally (a book tour, of sorts).* But it was not necessary for John to travel about doing this. That was the purpose of sending the letters. They were to be read in the seven churches.
- *This was a commissioning for John.* But, as Beale properly notes, John "has been commissioned on at least two previous occasions (1:10–20 and 4:1–2),"²²⁰ and also in Rev 1:19.²²¹ Therefore, another commissioning would be unnecessary and redundant.

Third, similar expressions are found five other times in Rev 5:9; 7:9; 13:7; 14:6; and 17:15 (also see Rev 22:9 and Dan 4:1; 7:14). In Rev 5:9, for example, idealist Beale terms this a "phrase of universality,"²²² as it universalizes the application of Jesus' sacrifice.

Fourth, if this expression's use in Rev 10:11 is consistent with this book's other five uses, and we employ the hermeneutical principle of letting "Scripture interpret Scripture," then it must carry the same universalized meaning here as well. Beale acknowledges this "widening application"²²³ and affirms that its consistency of use is "an exegetical rationale" for "applying it [the *whole* prophecy] universally." Hence, these words refer "to all peoples throughout the world."²²⁴ Johnson specially notes that "kings" replaced "tribes" as the fourth element in the quartet.²²⁵ In Rev 1:6 and 5:10, believers are called "kings." Likewise, Walhout concludes that these graphic verses "expand the vision to a broader level . . . [to] what the entire Christian community as a whole experiences."²²⁶ He extrapolates it to "to all peoples and languages, to all nations and governments" and "as applying to the entire Christian community, the church."²²⁷ Because of this passage, Koester insists Revelation is "a message that pertains to every nation."²²⁸ Holman claims that this language means "wherever in the world the church exists"

²¹¹ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* 29.

²¹² J. Nelson Kraybill, "Apocalypse Now," *Christianity Today* 43/12 (October 25, 1999) 32.

²¹³ Klein *et al.*, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* 369.

²¹⁴ David S. Dockery, "Is Revelation Prophecy or History?" *Christianity Today* 43/12 (October 25, 1999) 86.

²¹⁵ Spargimino, *The Anti-Prophets* 160.

²¹⁶ Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 25.

²¹⁷ Russell, *The Parousia* 531.

²¹⁸ Klein *et al.*, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* 125.

²¹⁹ See again footnote 23.

²²⁰ Beale, *The Book of Revelation* 553. Also see Osborne, *Revelation* 401–5.

²²¹ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* 30.

²²² Beale, *The Book of Revelation* 91.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ *Ibid.* 45.

²²⁵ Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* 164.

²²⁶ Walhout, *Revelation Down to Earth* 110.

²²⁷ *Ibid.* 111.

²²⁸ Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* 103.

and is "suffering."²²⁹ "That the Apocalypse is concerned with the whole of humankind is evident."²³⁰ Thus a universalization and timeless application are the most natural way to understand a consistent use of this terminology.

Fifth, the relevance of Revelation's prophecy (its realities, principles, and portrayals) is not limited to a one-time, historic, and static eschatological fulfillment for its own day, which it was. This revelation goes beyond AD 70—but with its AD 70 fulfillment serving in a typological manner. This ongoing relevancy and timeless applications are part of the uniqueness of Revelation's prophecy and further differentiate it from Jesus' Olivet Discourse. However, these ongoing aspects resist predictability because John's prophesying "again" was general and no longer time-sensitive or place-specific. Instead, Revelation's imagery and visions now serve as a type for repeating patterns of Christ's ongoing involvement and activity in history and in individual lives. In other words, John's prophecy now transcends its fulfillment time and context into new historical and personal applications. Post-AD 70, this prophecy is not only timeless but multifaceted.

Universalized timelessness has long been the strength of the idealist (amillennial) interpretation of Revelation—even though idealists may have the end at the wrong end (at a future and unscriptural "end of time" versus the Scriptural "time of the end" in AD 70).²³¹ Joseph A. Seiss expounds this uniqueness this way: "It is an open book, and meant to be ever kept open to the view of the Church from that time forward to the end."²³² But in my opinion, an eschatologically reformed and preterist-idealist application would help us better understand how the rise and fall of empires, the history of nations, the lives of people, the comings and goings of groups, institutions, and other corporate bodies are controlled by God and Christ, as depicted in an ongoing sense in Revelation (see also Dan 2:21). This same ongoing dynamic should also include Christ's comings, appearances, and visitations contained therein. Hence, Morris is moving in the right direction when he states that "the word of John is concerned not with any one group of people . . . but with many. This has had striking fulfillment through the centuries."²³³ He is also correct in recognizing that "this secures its [Revelation's] relevance for all periods of the church's history."²³⁴

Hoekema acknowledges this dualistic significance thus: "Its message had reference to events occurring at the time and was therefore meaningful for the Christians of that day. But since the book was also intended for the church through the ages, its message is still relevant for us today."²³⁵ This ongoing relevancy also perfectly corresponds with God's redemptive grace

and purpose. While totally local in fulfillment, all are universal in goal, scope, and application. Seen in this manner, Revelation is truly a prophecy of "the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people" (Rev 14:6).

Sixth, there is no suggestion of a termination of these applications. The popular terminology of a "final/last judgment," a "final blessing," a "final coming," a "final day of the Lord," or a "final Antichrist" is non-scriptural, and, I submit, unscriptural. Therefore, in the prophecy of the book of Revelation, we moderns have real, ongoing blessings, warnings, comings, judgments, and interactions of Christ with which to be personally involved and concerned (Rev 1:3; 22:7, 14–19). Yet there is no antichrist therein. Rather, "many antichrists," who fit the descriptions found *only* in 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7, still roam the earth today and will in the future.

This relevancy realization is not a lesser reality or a second-rate option in comparison with solely past or mostly futuristic fulfillment views. In effect, it is more significant than any single view. Our recognition of Revelation's total fulfillment and total relevancy, here and now, in our lives should create a greater sense of responsibility, a greater motivation for obedience, and a greater desire to worship than the traditional deferment views—past or future. God through Christ continues to act in history and in the lives of his saints in an apocalyptically revealed and preterist-idealist manner.

III. CONCLUSION OF SYNTHESIS

"The revelation of Jesus Christ" (Rev 1:1) has a fuller significance and deeper character beyond its AD 70 eschatological fulfillment. Consequently, the preterist notion that it *only* applies to AD 70 when Christ supposedly came in "finality" is a weakness to be amended.²³⁶ It also applies to other historical, sociopolitical, community entities, corporate bodies, and individuals at different times and in different places throughout the world. The exact nature of these ongoing applications is, perhaps, a Deut 29:29 and certainly beyond the scope of this article, but fertile ground for future work.²³⁷

The idealists are right in that "the Apocalypse is thus a theological poem setting forth the ageless struggle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness."²³⁸ And in a preterist-idealist synthesis, the strength

²²⁹ Holman, *Till Jesus Comes* 142.

²³⁰ *Ibid.* 143.

²³¹ This is another key issue that has not been addressed in this article. For more, see Noë, "The Superiority of Preterism" 210–12, 219–23; *idem*, *Beyond the End Times* 41–70, 242–52.

²³² Joseph A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse: Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1987 [1900]) 24.

²³³ Morris, *Revelation* 140.

²³⁴ *Ibid.* 20.

²³⁵ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* 224.

²³⁶ On April 6, 2002, a public debate was held in New York City between two preterists and two amillennialists. The debate topic was "Did Jesus Come in Finality in A.D. 70?" The two preterists took the affirmative position. International Preterist Association, "Did Jesus Come in Finality in A.D. 70?" debate between Ed Stevens and Don Preston (preterists) and Gray George and Kevin Hartley (amillennialists) (Bayside, NYC, April 6, 2002, audio cassette).

²³⁷ Thomas writes that "attempts to combine two or more . . . approaches [idealist and futurist] . . . have produced hermeneutical confusion" (Thomas, *Revelation* 1–7 32.) He further maintains that the idealist approach is "deficient" because "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" (*ibid.* 35).

²³⁸ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* 28.

of idealism remains that it "secures its relevance for all periods of the church's history." But its major weakness—i.e. "its refusal to see a firm historical anchorage"²³⁹—is removed. That missing anchorage is supplied by Revelation's AD 70 fulfillment.

Nevertheless, I believe Morris is inaccurate when he claims that Revelation's visions "have in a sense been fulfilled many times over."²⁴⁰ In contrast, I submit the better understanding is one specific fulfillment, but many general applications. These universal and multifaceted applications, however, are just as real, relevant, and powerful for us today as fulfillment was for its original recipients. This relevancy also means that our failures to understand and obey all the words of this prophecy have resulted in many of us not receiving Revelation's promised earthly blessing (Rev 1:3; 22:7). Likewise, our subtracting from and/or adding to this prophecy subject us to its promised earthly plagues and loss of access to the tree of life and the holy city, here and now (Rev 22:18–19). These stated warnings and consequences must also be open-ended and ongoing in nature, otherwise they are toothless and irrelevant.

In conclusion, no single view of Revelation is adequate. But I believe a synthesis of the preterist and idealist views, and in this order, better encompasses the full and proper character of the book of Revelation than any one view in and of itself. With this perspective, and from AD 70 on, the book of Revelation truly is a "tract for all times."

²³⁹ Ibid. 20.

²⁴⁰ Morris, *Revelation* 23.

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