

Newsletter April 2019

Last month, we completed a two-year series of Newsletters, which contained a commentary on the entire book of Revelation. In this and next month's newsletters, we shall closely examine two different systems of Bible interpretation and how they have led to the two different basic interpretations of the Revelation that was evidenced in our earlier commentary. Over the years, scholars have sought to organize Scripture into formal intervals of time based upon how God dealt with sinful mankind during those periods. This has resulted in two major but quite different systems of overall Bible interpretation that are still in common use today. An early group of scholars adopted a system known as Covenantalism, while others much later adopted a system known as Dispensationalism. Although a systematic study of the Scriptures can be quite useful, we must always allow the biblical text to speak for itself, and not attempt to bend it to fit an external system. Both of these systems have their strong points and weaknesses inasmuch as they both are to some extent an external system of study being applied to the Bible. In this first newsletter, we shall limit our discussion to Covenantalism, while leaving a similar critique of Dispensationalism to next month's newsletter.

A covenant in the Biblical sense is seen as an irrevocable agreement or promise made by God with mankind. Consequently, a newer covenant does not replace or displace an older one, but enhances and builds upon earlier ones. In that sense, all of the covenants earlier entered into by God with mankind from Adam onward is viewed as applicable to every age – including the Christian era. Covenantalists view all of Scripture as one vast period of time, beginning with Adam, then progressing forward through various specific covenants that God made with men in the Old Testament and concluding with the New Covenant established in Jesus Christ. The formal covenantal analysis of Scripture is based solely upon what is viewed as direct proclamations of God found within formal covenants recorded in Scripture, and this is Covenantalism's strongest attribute. Those generally accepted covenants are as follows:

- **Covenant of Redemption*** Ge. 1:26,27 – a covenant internal to the triune Godhead providing for the redemption of mankind through the election of a redeemed race chosen before the foundation of the earth.
- **Adamic Covenant** Ge.3:15 – a covenant based upon man's obedient works in which disobedience was punishable by death.
- **Noachian Covenant** Ge.8:20-9:17 – The beginnings of human government. A reaffirmation through Noah of a continuation of the created order of the universe within which the earth would never again be destroyed by water – symbolized by a rainbow.
- **Abrahamic Covenant** Ge.12,15,17 – Abram was called by God and promised a land, a people, and a seed – symbolized by the ritual of circumcision.
- **Mosaic Covenant** Ex.19-24 – Israel established as God's chosen people; seen as an expansion of the Abrahamic covenant. The institution of national law established within Ten Commandments. The Ceremonial Law also established, which pointed to the necessity of redemption through a mediator.
- **Moabite Covenant**** De.29:1 – The covenant with Moab is viewed as God's beforehand embrace of uncircumcised Gentiles by grace through faith. (cf. Ro.10:6-8).
- **Levitical Covenant**** Ne.13:29; Mal.2:8; Je.13:21 – a priestly covenant made apart from the Mosaic covenant, which is detailed in the book of Leviticus.
- **Davidic Covenant** 2Sa.7:16 – a covenant God made with King David that He would build him a house and a lineage, through which his throne would be established forever through a coming Messiah.

- **New Covenant** He.8:8 – The long anticipated Messiah arrives and establishes a New Covenant in his own blood. This New Covenant is presented and verified in the books of the New Testament.
 - * There is no specific Scripture wherein this covenant is recorded; it is merely implied. Moreover, this supposed covenant was not made between God and man, but within the Godhead. For that reason, not all Covenantalists accept this as one of the covenants belonging in this list.
 - ** Some Covenantalists view the Moabite and Levitical covenants as essentially being one and the same and/or discount them both as being superfluous to this list.

Covenantalists generally propose and accept an allegorical interpretation of Scriptural text in accordance with what they refer to as an “analogy of faith” – essentially believing that all Scripture must be strictly interpreted in the light of all other Scripture. This approach leads them at times to reject the plain meaning of Scripture text in its clear local context, in favor of allegorizing its meaning to comply with systemic Covenantalism. For instance, “Israel” when it is found in the Old Testament Scriptures is commonly allegorized by Covenantalists as being a “spiritual Israel” – unless an objective Jewish national context is very specific. Israel is viewed as the Church in its infancy, which later grew into full maturity in Christ through the New Covenant. This leads the Covenantalist to accept a “replacement theology” in which all the blessings God had earlier promised to Israel, as the “old covenant assembly,” have now been transferred to the “new-covenant assembly,” the Church. When this purported transfer was completed, Israel as a unique Jewish entity was relegated to the trash-heap of history, as God cast them aside and erased them out of his memory forever. This radical assumption has led to the growth of a racist antisemitism within many Covenantal churches.

We note that the above list of covenants makes no mention of a Millennial Age. Covenantalists are divided into two different camps regarding their common denial of a future millennial age on earth. The first denies that a millennial age exists at all, while the second asserts that it is but a metaphor for the present church age. The first category is referred to as Amillennialism and the second as Post-Millennialism. Of the two, Amillennialism (i.e. “no millennium”) is the most prevalent view held within this present age.

Amillennialists envision Jesus Christ returning to earth one day in judgment, thus ending all future activity on earth as the eternal ages immediately begin. They argue that there will be no thousand-year reign of Jesus Christ on earth. In doing so, however, they must somehow account for the “thousand years” that are clearly mentioned six times in Revelation Chapter 20. All Amillennialist interpretations discount the “thousand years” stated in Revelation as being a metaphorical term that only designates a very long length of time. They often put forth the verse in the Old Testament wherein it is stated that the LORD owns the cattle on a thousand hills (cf. Ps.50:10) to defend this assumption. Arguably, there are more than a thousand hills on the earth with cattle on them. The question then arises, “who owns the cattle on the other hills?” Nevertheless, the verse of this Psalm of praise fits into the context of hyperbole often utilized within poetry – all very legitimately. However, that poetic context is totally absent in the prophetic book of Revelation wherein John is speaking of literal prophetic events.

Many Amillennialists also argue that the “thousand years” is only mentioned in a “few obscure verses” in Chapter 20 of an equally obscure book of Revelation – as if that makes it less important. However, we find that it is actually mentioned six times in just six verses in that chapter so that we cannot easily ignore its significance (cf. Re.20:2–7). If we merely take the words of Chapter 20 in context, we discover that the reason the Millennium is not mentioned other than here is that the thousand-year reign chronologically fits in following the end of the final outpouring of God’s wrath upon the earth in the great and terrible Day of the Lord.

We find that Covenantalists deny a literal future-prophetic view of the Revelation altogether, holding instead to what is referred to as the “historist view.” They state that most all of the events contained in the Revelation are not future-prophetic, but have in fact been fulfilled within all or various periods of human history. A typical application is to ascribe the text to various events that took place during the Maccabean era prior to the incarnation of Christ. The Maccabees, a traditionalist sect of Judaism, had organized a successful revolt against Hellenist Jews who ruled Jerusalem at that time. In this view, the Antichrist is assumed to have been Antiochus IV Epiphanies, the mad ruler of the Seleucid Empire that occupied Palestine between the years 175 to 164 BC.

As another example, a monk, in AD 1202, arbitrarily assigned a day-year principle to the 1260 days of Revelation 11:3, such that the last 3 ½ years of Daniel's seventieth week was applied to a period beginning with the apostles and ending in his own time. Others have similarly tried to make the events of the Revelation fit into more contemporary time frames. It must be noted, however, that it becomes necessary to stretch both historical fact and Scriptural text to make all the puzzle pieces fit convincingly into any of these historicist schemes. That fact accounts for the rather large number of interpretations based upon the historicist view. It is difficult for one to believe that John's highly detailed account was merely intended to be a recapitulation of the past; especially so in the light of Revelation 1:19, wherein John was told to write about things that were obviously yet to occur in his far future.

Preterism is a very specific form of the historicist view, commonly found in today's Presbyterianism. "Preterism" is derived from the Latin word *praeter*, which denotes something that is past or beyond. The preterist is a historicist who believes that the events of judgment recorded in the Revelation have already been fulfilled during the Roman and Apostolic era. They view the second coming of Christ as having taken place in A.D. 70 at the time of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Roman armies. Moreover, the great tribulation period, which Jesus spoke of in Matthew 24:21, is viewed as the severe persecution of Christians, including the decapitation of the Apostle Paul, which took place under the emperor Nero, whom they envision as having been the Antichrist. The preterist cites various Scriptural texts in support of this view, which we shall now examine.

The first text is the very first verse of Revelation: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must **shortly** come to pass; and he sent and signified *it* by his angel unto his servant John" (Re.1:1; Emphasis added). The argument made is that 1900-plus years could hardly be considered a "short time." In Matthew 24:36 Jesus said that no one knew the "day and hour" of his return. Preterists say that He did not mention the year inasmuch as his return would occur within the lifetimes of the immediate generation of his disciples. This view is further supported by misinterpreting Matthew 16:28 and Matthew 24:34 in a similar manner. A more convincing verse commonly used to support the preterist view is found in Matthew 10:23 wherein Jesus said to his disciples as He sent them out, "But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, ***Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come***" (emphasis added). Revelation 1:3 is also referred to as supporting this view inasmuch as it reads, "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for ***the time is at hand***" (emphasis added).

We must realize that there are many serious problems with this interpretation. First of all, we observe that Jesus' return in AD 70 must have been but a "spiritual return" (as they themselves claim). This notion is in direct conflict with Acts 1:11, where it is said that Jesus will return in "like manner" as he ascended. Jesus ascended in the flesh, whereas in the preterist view He returned only in spirit. The Olivet discourse, commonly considered prophetic regarding yet future events recorded in the Revelation, must therefore be all about the first-century destruction of Jerusalem and nothing more.

As to Nero being the Antichrist, his reign and persecution was limited to the Roman Empire, more specifically a region around Rome, not the entire earth. He issued no mark restricting the trade of goods (cf. Re.13:16,17). As to his personal character, he was a weak, insane, and ineffectual man who took his own life in AD 68 **prior** to the destruction of Jerusalem. Therefore, he was not at all characteristic of the Antichrist that is referred to in the book of Revelation. As terrible as the siege and destruction of Jerusalem was, it has not been the worse period of tribulation in the history of the earth, as Jesus emphatically stated that the future tribulation period would be (cf. Mt.24:21). Arguably, the massive suffering in World War II that ended in the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan was exceedingly more devastating than was the siege and destruction of Jerusalem.

As to the specific texts mentioned above, let us begin by examining Revelation 1:1. "Shortly" in this verse is *tachos* in the Greek. Its primary meaning is "a brief period of time." It can be translated as "quickly," "speedily," or "shortly" as we find it here. It does not specify when this short period of time begins. It could begin immediately or thousands of years in the future, but when it does begin, events within it must rapidly occur to fit within that brief period.

Regarding verse 10:23 recorded in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus was merely telling his disciples that He would be rejoining them before they had gone over all of the cities of Israel in the immediate context of this verse. Obviously, all of the cities of Israel had been visited by the disciples long before Jerusalem was destroyed

in AD 70, and in fact, the Gospel had spread out into Samaria, and it was even carried toward the ends of the earth as the Apostle Paul reached far-flung Gentile populations throughout the Roman Empire (cf. Ac.1:7,8). As to the day and hour, Jesus was merely telling them that the precise time was not to be known. There will be many strong indications that that day is approaching, although the precise time regarding the day and hour will not be known even when it is immediately pending.

As to the generation Jesus spoke of, in Matthew 16:28, He was likely referring to the revelation that Peter, James and John saw when He was transfigured on the mountain top, and they saw Him as the Eternal King (cf. Mt.17:1,2). In Matthew 24:34, Jesus was not referring to the life span of his immediate disciples, but in context, He was speaking of those who would begin to see the predictive signs of which He had just spoken being fulfilled in rapid succession.

Because preterism denies the “blessed hope” of Jesus’ future return to the earth for his elect (cf. Tit.2:13), some historists only partially accept that position. In this modified preterist view, Jesus’ return in AD 70 is considered to have been but a spiritual return – a prophetic precursor to his second advent that is yet future. Partial preterists commonly believe in a second advent of Christ and a general resurrection and judgment of all men at the end of days. Similar to full preterists, they do not believe that Jesus will call down to earth to transport his Church out of harm’s way (i.e. the rapture; cf. 1Th.4:13-18) prior to his return to execute divine judgment upon the earth’s reprobate population that will remain on earth. They also do not believe in the coming of a literal Antichrist in the last days, whom Jesus will ultimately destroy (cf. 2Th.2:2-9; 1Jn.2:18). Nor do they believe in a future millennial age or the redemption of Israel in the last days.

This leads us to a discussion of the “spiritualist view,” also referred to as the “idealist view,” which states that the events recorded in Revelation have no literal context at all, but merely point out the significance of various idealistic Christian principles and attitudes. The severe judgments clearly stated in the Revelation are viewed to serve as warnings to point out serious consequences for Christians who deviate from the faith, while other texts near the end of the document are to serve as encouragement for them. This view obviously necessitates radically allegorizing the text. This is generally the view of most Covenantalists as well as the view of religious scholars in many liberal main-line denominations who render the entire book of the Revelation as poetic allegory rather than predictive prophecy. This view is also held by many preterists who consider the primary purpose of the Revelation as having been fulfilled in the past. It must be noted that radically allegorizing the prophecies in the book of revelation out of their prophetic context could be used to justify almost any sort of religious bent, no matter how extreme it may be.

Still other historists view the Revelation as a prophetic history of the Church. These commonly believe that the Church will ultimately convert the earth for Christ; He will then return in the end-times to claim it and rule as its head. This Post-millennial position is founded upon the belief that the preaching of the Gospel by men of the church will eventually convert all mankind and thus usher in a “Christian” age at the culmination of which Christ will return to lay claim to his completed kingdom. This position is still prevalent within Roman Catholicism and many of the Reformed Faith who still hold to a “high view” of the temporal church. Post-millennialists consider the “thousand years,” mentioned in Revelation as a mere metaphoric length of time in which Jesus has ruled on earth through his Church. That metaphoric analogy is quite necessary inasmuch as nearly two thousand years have already transpired since Jesus’ ascension, and He has not yet returned to take over the reigns of the church. Therefore, this supposed “kingdom age” of the church in which Jesus rules spiritually is already much longer than a thousand years.

However, many Post-millennialists have now come to the realization that the church on earth will not be able to convert the entire world, inasmuch as the total and obstinate depravity of man has been so obviously revealed in two world wars and more recently in semi-organized terrorism. They, therefore, have most often been forced to digress to the extent that they accept the Amillennial mindset. Even so, many today have a very high view of the temporal church to the extent that they are blinded to the realities of world conditions. With the influence of humanism being so widespread today, many still cling to a post-millennial viewpoint in practice if not in doctrine – especially when world affairs seem to be on the mend for a short time.

This completes our brief critique of Covenantalism. Next month, we shall take up a similar discussion of Dispensationalism, which is favored and generally utilized by this author. Nevertheless, it is not without its own faults and shortcomings as we shall discover. © Arthur J. Smith April 2019