

Revelation Revisited

Does Historicism Clarify? Historical Perspectives

By David Clover

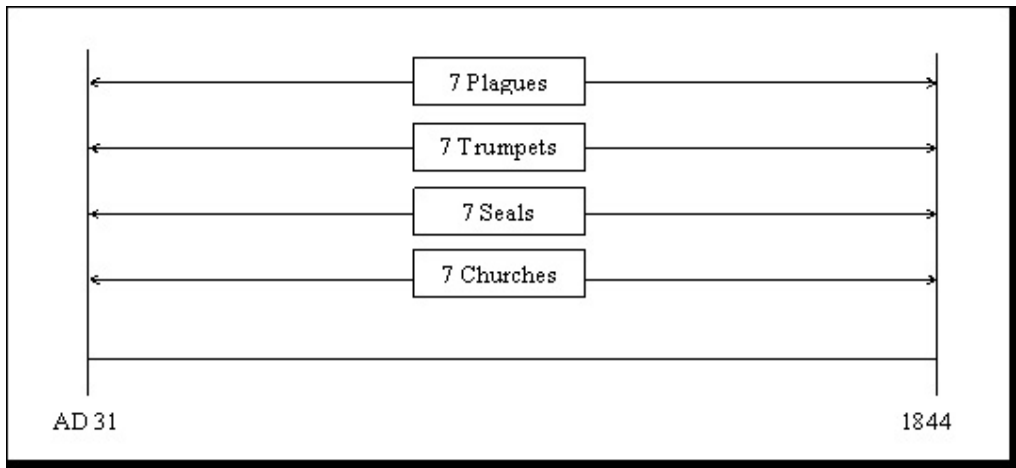
[We welcome this new author to this publication. David Clover has been a student of prophecy since his teens and has made in-depth studies into the book of Revelation. In this article he logically tackles the growing questions that the *historicist* method of interpretation raises. He ends with a persuasive plea to lay aside Biblical investigative techniques that are tainted too heavily with man's methods.]

Most Adventists today approach the unraveling of Revelation's mysteries armed with the Historicist method of interpreting apocalyptic prophecy. We come by this approach naturally enough, since it's the primary interpretive principle that we were raised with. By and large, we all sat at the feet of Uriah Smith, who himself learned this method from great Christian scholars of earlier ages, including such notables as Isaac Newton. We learned that this was *the correct way* to view this magnificent book.

The Historicist view is that the major story lines of Revelation point backward to events that are already past. The Historicist gains comfort in being able to see how God has lead out in the affairs of men and of nations. Perhaps the greatest work based on this view is the 4-volume work *Horae Apocalypticae*, by Edward B. Elliot, first published in 1844.

Since this was the dominant method of apocalyptic interpretation among Protestants in the 19th century, William Miller and the other founders of Adventism inherited this view. The reason for their affinity for it is clear enough. William Miller taught that the next event on the prophetic horizon was the Second Coming of Jesus. Therefore, all the other events of Revelation must already have taken place. The Historicist view seemed to confirm his personal expectations.

William Miller was remarkably consistent in his view. Not only did he hold that the 7 churches, the 7 seals and the 7 trumpets were all representations of historical events that had occurred between 31 AD and 1844, but he also held that **the 7 plagues** had also occurred, and could be seen in historical events. His view can be pictured as this:



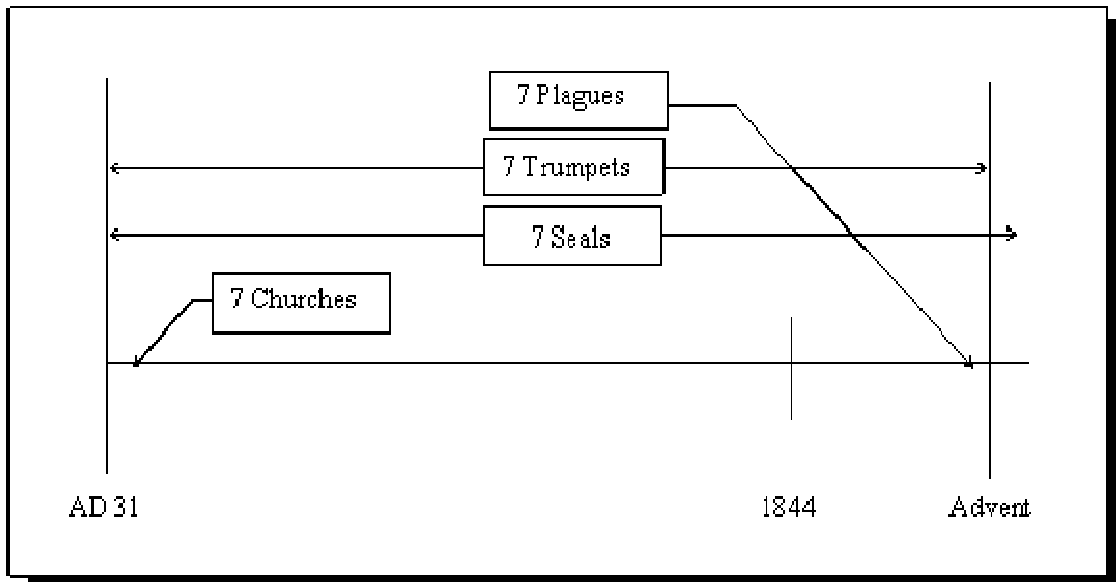
No Adventist alive today would agree with William Miller on this view. Shortly after Jesus “failed” to appear in 1844, Adventist scholars and theologians modified the above view. After studying them in full, it was seen that the 7 last plagues were in fact yet ahead of us, and would directly precede the 2nd coming of Jesus. Ellen White confirmed this view.

For us this may seem like a very minor adjustment. But to reach this conclusion, our forefathers had *to set aside* their principal principle of interpreting Revelation. They could no longer say that one method - the Historicist - could be used to understand all of Revelation. Instead, we had moved into a new phase of interpretation. We now had to study the literal meaning of the words to see if they had future application. If the meaning could not be seen as being literal and future, then it was assumed that the message applied to times that were behind us, and the Historicist method was utilized to determine that application.

At the time that our position on the 7 last plagues was reevaluated, we could see no logical future application of the Seals and the Trumpets, so they were left locked in the Historicist mold.

Valid questions have been raised about the applicability of the Historicist method to the pastoral messages given to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. Not only are the messages couched in different language than the rest of the book, but they also lack the deliberate numeric sequencing that is utilized in the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues. Furthermore, Jesus’ statements in Rev 1:19 and Rev 4:1 clearly separate these messages from the “prophecy” portion of Revelation. This has led many to view the messages to the 7 churches primarily as wise spiritual council, first to the seven literal churches to whom they were addressed, and secondarily to all of us.

Allowing for this adjustment in our schema, our modified Historicist view of Revelation would now look like this:



...leaving only the Seals and Trumpets in the Historical mode.

Further revisions of the above may become necessary, as many Adventists presently studying Revelation are concluding that the 7 trumpets are **also** end time events, and that they will take place in order prior to the 7 last plagues. Such investigation naturally leads to the question, what about the Seals? And perhaps more importantly, what about the Historicist method of interpretation?

And so the questions must be asked. Was there ever a valid reason to believe that the meaning of Revelation could be determined by searching history? Should we view prophecy as a flashlight that only works when we point it behind us? Does the Bible itself tell us that the meaning of prophecy is to be derived by looking back through history to find events that seem to match the prophetic parable?

Actually, the answer to all these questions is “no”. Plain and simple. Again and again, God tells us that the purpose of prophecy is to enable us to know **in advance** when things are going to happen. Jesus said in Matthew 24: 32-33 “Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; even so you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door.”^[1] It is God’s ability to tell us what is going to happen **in advance** that gives us confidence in His ability to guide us through these events. It is a sign of his Divinity. Isaiah recognized this when he taunted the false gods, “Declare the things that are going to come afterward, That we may know that you are gods.” (Isaiah 41:23) And Revelation itself declares its mission statement: “to show to His bondservants, the things which must shortly take place.” (Rev. 1:1)

Now, if the purpose of the book of Revelation is to show us “the things that must soon take place”, shouldn’t it point forward instead of backward? Yes, you may say, but what if it *was* pointing forward (at the time it was given) to those things that are now behind us? The Bible is

full of examples of already-fulfilled prophecies.

If that were the case, shouldn't the contemporary Christians - at the relevant times of history - have been able to say with certainty, "Well, the second seal is over, the third one ought to be opened any day now"? Evidence shows this was not the case. The noted historian Eugen Weber points out in his book *Apocalypses* that when the Goths attacked Rome in 410, the Christians stated; "From Adam all the years have passed... and now comes the day of Judgment."^[2] He further notes that when later in the same century the Vandals invaded, calculations were produced to show the world would end in the year 500, and that the name of the Vandal king added up to 666. While the contemporary Christians saw these as momentous events, they linked that significance not to the fulfillment of the first, second, or third trumpet, but to their mistaken expectation that these events heralded the soon return of Jesus.

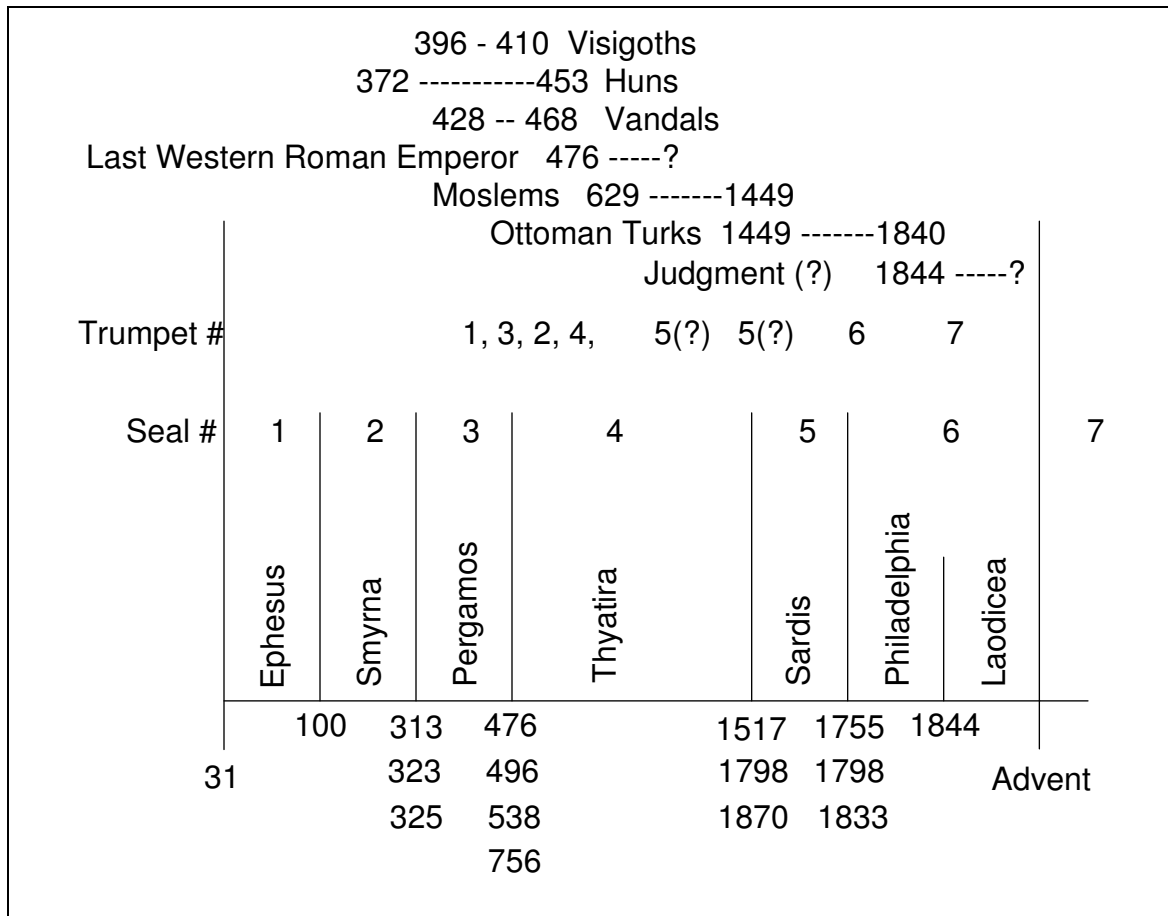
Why did many hundreds of years have to pass before we could look back and see the significance of these events, and see in them the fulfillment of prophecy that was lost upon those who lived through them?

[Yes it is true that Fromm and others make a case for people in all ages making applications from the text of Revelation to the events in which they found themselves. But in retrospect, most of those applications were in error. At no time was there a universal understanding that a particular Church, Seal, Trumpet or Plague event had occurred, which has not subsequently been questioned or set aside completely.]

Many prophecies were recorded in the Bible, many of which were fulfilled in Biblical times. Often the fulfillments were anticipated. Usually they were understood to have taken place. The basic presumption of Historicism - that a prophecy can be fulfilled, but its fulfillment not be perceived or understood for hundreds of years - cannot be supported from scripture. So to use Historicism as the *default* hermeneutic for interpreting Revelation's prophecies is untenable.

Not surprisingly, Historicism has proven to be a very tricky methodology. By definition, facts have been chosen to fit, and in some cases even our own scholars resorted to distortions and/or omissions in order to make historical "facts" fit the prophetic mold. Though countless scholars have agreed to the validity of the Historicist method, that unanimity has never produced a consensus opinion on what is meant by specific passages. Hundreds - if not thousands - of changes have been made in the Historicist Model as time has stretched out more and more.

Let's look a little closer at the Historicist view of the Churches, Seals, and Trumpets:



The closer you look the more complex things get! You'll notice the string of dates at the bottom of the graph. Each of these is suggested as a possible start or stop date for the events listed. In fact, since we are in most cases dealing with subjective (rather than objective) interpretations, the SDA Bible Commentary leaves a large amount of leeway for various interpretations. Peter referred to the "sure word of prophecy." What we have above is the "unsure" word! We are unsure about almost all the dates! The following statement from Volume 7 of the SDA Bible Commentary, p. 753, on the close of the Pergamos period, is typical of these discussions: "Any one of various events might serve as an acceptable boundary marker for the close of this period. The deposition of the last Roman emperor in 476 marks it as one such date. The conversion, in 496, of the Frankish king Clovis, the first Germanic ruler to embrace Roman Christianity and to ally himself with the interests of the church in the conquest of other Germanic peoples, is another. In 538 Justinian's decree of 533, according the pope plenary ecclesiastical power in East and West, began to become effective.... Gregory the Great[']s (590-604)... reign as pope might be considered another such boundary.... The year of 756 marks the beginning of papal territorial rule...."[\[3\]](#) If one event serves just as well as the other, how can we even contend that the prophecy has a unique meaning, and that unique meaning has been fulfilled?

The 5th seal, we contend, ends in 1755, the year of the Lisbon earthquake. The 5th seal speaks of martyrs. I wish that we could conclude that there will be no more martyrs in God's cause because the period of martyrdom is past, but I'm afraid this is not the case.

In the case of the trumpets, you'll note that the 3rd comes before the 2nd! That's right! The Huns, lead by Attila disappeared from history's radar screen in 453 AD when Attila died. The Vandals "vandalized" Rome for two weeks in the year 455 AD. And yet we say that the Vandals are the 2nd trumpet and the Huns are the 3rd.

The 5th and 6th trumpet are so complex that the SDA Bible commentary spends considerable time on them and then concludes: "It should be made clear, however, that commentators and theologians in general have been greatly divided over the meaning of the 5th and 6th trumpets." (Vol.7, p.796) On the one hand we want to use the description of the locust to describe the spread of the Moslem religion starting in about 629 AD. On the other hand, we want to use the 5 months (150 prophetic days = 150 literal years) to describe the 150 year struggle between the Ottoman Turks and the Greek Empire represented by Constantinople, which took place between 1299 and 1449. It clearly can not apply to both.

We have generally adhered to the interpretation of the 6th trumpet as originally exposted by Josiah Litch, who declared that the "hour, day, month, and year" were to be understood as 391 years, 15 days. These, he believed, started with the Battle of Bapheum on July 27, 1299, and would extend to August 11, 1840, upon which date he expected the Ottoman Empire to be overthrown. On that very day, an emissary arrived in Alexandria with the terms of the London Convention, in which Britain, Austria, Prussia and Russia agreed to enforce an agreement between the Ottoman Turks and the upstart country of Egypt. Josiah Litch declared the prophecy to be fulfilled, and many were said to be converted. (This understanding of the 6th trumpet is recorded in *The Great Controversy*.)

Several years later, however, Josiah Litch retracted his statements, declaring that he was in error, and stating that we must look to some future fulfillment of this prophecy. Clearly, the Ottoman Empire was not overthrown - in fact, it continued until WW1. There are other problems with this prophecy as well. In calculating his ending date of August 11, Josiah Litch failed to take into account the 10 day shift that took place when the Gregorian calendar was instituted in 1752. His target date should have been August 21. More telling however is the "hour, day, month, and year" spoken of in Revelation 9:15. The Bible does not speak of this as a **period** of time. Instead, it is pinpointed **as an exact moment** in time. These angels were prepared for the very moment of their release.

Given all these problems – problems with the meaning of the time period, problems with the calculation of the event, problems with the failure of the Turkish empire to expire as predicted – we should not be surprised to find that it's true meaning and fulfillment are other than what we have traditionally taught.

As can be seen from this brief review, there are many unresolved difficulties in the Historicist view of Revelation when the details are examined. In fact, however, the biggest problems are seen when we try to back away from the details to view the comprehensive picture. Remember the game played in the first couple of years of school, where a group of objects are shown, and

you have to pick out the one that doesn't fit? Let's play that game now.

The 7 Churches fill the time from 31 AD until the return of Jesus. They are said to trace the story of the true followers of Jesus throughout history. Nice and neat. Every thing fits.

The 7 Seals are said to trace the spiritual environment the church would find itself in. Certainly this can be said of the first 5 Seals. The 6th, however, is said to depict the 2nd coming, and the 7th is a 1/2-hour "quite time" in heaven, apparently after the Second Coming. Something in this picture doesn't square up with the rest of the elements. This half-hour of silence doesn't fit in with the purported meaning of the rest of the Seals. Why is it grouped with them? And while we're asking questions, why is the story of the 144,000 told here instead of in the story of the 7 Churches, where the true church is said to be traced?

The 7 Trumpets are said to trace the political events that would impact the church. So we see attacks on the Roman Empire, the rise of the Moslem powers, ... and the Judgment? Oops! Not a good fit! Why are these seven "trumpets" strung together? What is the common thread? Shouldn't a correct understanding of the 7 Trumpets allow us to make sense of this? And if we are tracing political events that would have impact on the church, where is the rise of Soviet Russia or the persecution in Red China?

A weaver can't see all the problems in his work from up close. He needs to step back and look at the entire tapestry. Likewise, as we step back from the details of interpreting each of these elements, we see problems with the overall picture that weren't apparent close up.

What other "broad-view" problems does our Historicist view create? Several.

- We have made Revelation seem dry, uninteresting, and unrelated to our daily lives. After all, if it's a mere recitation of dusty history, where is the relevance?
- We have made it so complex, that the average person feels that this is a book for the experts. It certainly isn't for the average person.
- We've cut it up into so many pieces that we have destroyed the flow of the story. We've forgotten that the major elements of Revelation were given "in their order."[\[4\]](#)
- We have let our system of interpretation tell us what the words mean, rather than looking for meaning within the Bible-based context of the words themselves.
- Jesus used language that indicated world-spanning events. "All the world", "Hated by all nations", etc. Clearly the end of the world will affect the whole world. Our interpretation of Revelation's prophecies focuses on localized, parochial events instead.

I believe that the time has come to revisit Revelation, and to reopen our investigation into its mysteries, laying aside our indoctrination, our presumptions, and our prejudices. Let's ask God what He wants to show us. In particular, we need to be willing to look very seriously at those portions of the book that were previously thought to be too "impossible" to be literal. Knowledge in the natural world and scientific communities has advanced tremendously in the past 100 years. Can that explosion of knowledge impact our understanding of this book? I believe so.

It is interesting to note that Ellen White wrote almost nothing about the Seals and Trumpets of

Revelation. Why? Is it possible she was not allowed the understanding of the truths that we may be allowed to uncover? Are we not closer to the consummation of these events than she? Shouldn't we realize that we have a responsibility to study these issues for ourselves - to do our own original research? Shouldn't we wonder what Ellen White meant when she wrote: "Solemn events before us are yet to transpire. Trumpet after trumpet is to be sounded; vial after vial poured out one after another upon the inhabitants of the earth"?[5]

Often we are urged to remain loyal to "Historical Adventism", as if there is value or merit in being an automaton that merely memorizes and recites the doctrines and positions that we inherited. We do **no** honor to the memory of our Adventist pioneers by such aping. They were men and women that studied deeply, and had the courage to go where Bible truths directed. Should we – their heirs – do less? Shouldn't our guiding question be, "Where is the truth?" not "Where is the path?"

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References:

[1] All scripture quotes are from the The New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update, (La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation) 1996.

[2] Apocalypses, p.34, Vintage Canada, 1999.

[3] The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Vol. 7, p 753, Review & Herald Publishing Assoc., Hagerstown, MD, 1980.

[4] Testimonies to the Church, Volume 8, p 302.

[5] *Selected Messages*, Volume 3, p. 426.