

The Historicist Method of Prophetic Interpretation

Its Validity and Limitations

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We need to ask first, Will history really repeat itself? Why and how? And what significance may this idea have for interpreting Bible prophecy? We are reminded of Israel's wisdom teaching: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun;" "That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is" (Eccl. 1:9; 3:15, NRSV). Here we learn that history indeed will repeat itself. Does this mean that the natural man can find out what the future holds? God has indeed made "everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put 'a sense of past and future' [Heb.: *Ólam*, "eternity"] into their minds" (Eccl. 3:11). Man alone can remember the past and expect a future, so that man can make some sense of the totality of history. He can seek to discern something of God's design for human existence, and thus enter into a philosophy and theology of history. The teacher adds, however, "yet he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end" (3:11). Man cannot predict the future work of God and its completion, for the simple reason that God is still working at it. He has made "everything suitable for its time" (3:11), meaning that God remains in charge of the course of human history. He alone guides humanity to His appointed goal, so that in the end man will "stand in awe before Him" (Eccl. 3:14). Mrs. E. G. White expressed her insight that a divine overruling power has been at work throughout the ages:

"Prophecy has traced the rise and progress of the world's great empires,— Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. With each of these, as with the nations of less power, history has repeated itself. Each has had its period of test; each has failed, its glory faded, its power departed (*PK* 535)."

Man's responsibility to choose his actions, bestowed upon him by his Creator, can never thwart the final outcome of God's plan for mankind: "All are by their own choice deciding their destiny, and God is overruling all for the accomplishment of His purposes" (*PK* 536). This was the meaning of Ezekiel's vision of the sapphire throne of the Eternal One, under which were wheels turning within wheels, representing the complicated play of human events that still remain under the control of Israel's covenant God (Ezek. 1:15-21, 26-28).

Apocalyptic Prophecy Reveals the Climax of History

The apocalyptic perspective of Israel's prophets reveals that the final judgment of God will bring to light what man has thought and done in relation to God and His covenant people. The essence of human history, however, always remains the same: the battle between good and evil, between God's rulership and that of Satan.

This primarily spiritual battle will increase in intensity and end in the global showdown between

God and Satan, as has been demonstrated in the days of Moses in Egypt and of Elijah on Mount Carmel. Each time of testing brought the total defeat of God's enemies. But these historic occurrences were given as *types* of the final test in salvation history, based on the principle that God and His kingdom of righteousness remain forever the same in nature (Ps. 96:10-13). Such a typological perspective is also the proclamation of Israel's prophets when they portray the earth's final, global battle for the City of God, while the faithful remnant people are gathered on Mount Zion, taking refuge in the sanctuary of God: see Joel 2:28-32; 3; Daniel 11:40-45; 12:1-3; Ezekiel 38-39.

This end-time scenario of the last religious-political war on the great Day of Israel's God is *redefined* by the apocalyptic teaching of Jesus in Matthew 24, is further developed by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2, and greatly enlarged by John in Revelation 12-20. But the essence of the moral conflict remains the same in both dispensations. The only advance that is made is that the God-centered war will be a Christ-centered war as the climax of salvation history.

All Salvation History is Structured Typologically

According to the NT, church history is in essence but the continuation and completion of Israel's salvation history. For Paul, the history of ancient Israel is a warning *type* or foreshadowing of church history (see 1 Cor. 10:1-11; vs 6 has in Greek: *typoi*). He therefore kept warning against a coming apostasy within the church (see Acts 20 :29-31; 2 Thess. 2). His warnings were based on his understanding of the book of Daniel, as his allusion to Dan. 11:31 in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 indicates.

The book of Revelation is built on the basis of this theological continuity of Israel and the apostolic church as the one covenant people of God. John's vision of Revelation 12 portrays Israel as the "woman" of God who gives birth to the promised Messiah (vv. 1, 5), and then the *same* woman continues to bring forth the Christian church and its remnant people (12:6, 14, 17). Here is placed before us the essential unity and theological continuity of Israel and the Church. The crucial point in prophetic application of Israel's symbols and images is then the cross and resurrection of Christ. Ancient Israel becomes the warning type for the Church as its advanced antitype that has inherited both Israel's blessings and curses and responsibilities.

Israel's lack of spiritual insight in understanding the messianic prophecies is repeated in the Christian Church regarding its lack of insight in understanding the nature of the Antichrist and the second advent of Jesus. Mrs. E.G. White explicitly warned also the Adventist church: "Satan is working that the history of the Jewish nation may be repeated in the experience of those who claim to believe present truth" (2 SM 111). She even predicted: "Many will stand in our pulpits with the torch of false prophecy on their hands, kindled from the hellish torch of Satan" (TM 409-10). Such shocking words should cause us to carefully reexamine our traditional interpretations of unfulfilled prophecies by means of the inspired principles of interpretation hidden in Scripture itself. We need to develop a Biblical hermeneutic, one that is consistently *Christocentric*, and not hang up on artificial classifications as preterist, historicist, futurist, or idealist! We need to learn thinking more in harmony with the apostles and with their new-covenant theology in our prophetic interpretations, instead of insisting on a literal application of old-covenant terminology, imagery, and geography.

Ellen White saw that the Jews had misapplied the messianic prophecies, because “pride obscured their vision. They interpreted prophecy in accordance with their selfish desires” (DA 30). Her clarion call for us is to become more Christ-centered in our interpretation of the unfulfilled prophecies (see TM 112-19). She counseled: “*Let Daniel speak, let the Revelation speak, and tell what is truth. But whatever phase of the subject is presented, uplift Jesus as the center of all hope, ‘the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright and morning Star’*” (TM 118). She adds this promise: “Those who eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of God will bring from the books of Daniel and Revelation truth that is inspired by the Holy Spirit” (TM 116). Her advice is: “Our own people need to have the light placed before them in clearer lines” (TM 117).

Why Salvation History Repeats Itself

John’s visions about the final conflict in Revelation 12-14 show how the last war of the “dragon” against the remnant people stands in basic continuity with his first assault against man in Paradise. The dragon is explicitly called “*that ancient serpent, the deceiver of the whole world*” (Rev. 12:9, NRSV). The last enemy of the church is thus the same as our first enemy in Paradise. History will therefore repeat itself!

“Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before” (Eccl. 3:15, NIV).

The devil remains the same deceiver and God remains the same in His righteous character. The issue therefore also remains the same: ultimate trust in the Word of God and in the testimony of Jesus Christ, His Son (Rev. 12:17; 14:12; Heb. 1:1-2).

Revelation stresses particularly that the final conflict will be the intensified war against the God of Israel and His true saints, the followers of the Lamb of God (see Rev. 14:1-5). The symbolic “beast” from the sea will receive a “fatal wound” after its tyrannical rule over the saints for “forty-two months,” but it will miraculously return from death as a resurrected beast, with new strength to persecute and execute the true witnesses of God, only to find its definitive judgment. This ironical imitation of the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus by the Antichrist power is the theme of Revelation 17, a much misunderstood chapter that sheds light and comfort for God’s people in the time of the end.

Revelation 17 indicates that the final conflict will be in essence a repetition of the past war against God’s people, only on a global scale and with a divine intervention that will suddenly cut short the time of tribulation for the saints by the glorious appearance of the Lord of lords and King of kings (Rev. 17:14). To indicate that the resurrected “beast” will be in character the same as the medieval beast from the sea that received a mortal wound, Inspiration has given its kingly head the number “eight,” while it remains the last of the seven heads (Rev. 17:11). Number 8 is the recognized symbol for resurrection, and for a new beginning.^[1] John predicts that the beast that received a death-blow would be “healed,” so that “in amazement the whole earth followed the beast” (Rev. 13:3). In this respect the Antichrist mimics the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Louis F. Were draws this profound conclusion: “As Jesus triumphed over His enemies and arose in glorious power to use that power to *save* His people, so this beast will emerge from its place of death to a position of even greater power, which it will seek to employ for the *destruction* of the people of God” (*The Woman and the Resurrected Beast*,

114). Ellen White surprised her contemporaries by the same understanding of Revelation 13: “The influence of Rome in the countries that once acknowledged her dominion, is still far from being destroyed. And *prophecy foretells a restoration of her power*” (GC 379, italics added). Thus prophecy predicts that history will be repeated, only on a larger scale than during the Middle Ages, and with a more dramatic ending.

Another example of the principle of an enlarging repetition of the great controversy in salvation history can be seen in *Revelation 20*. Here John portrays Satan at first in the “bottomless pit” or “abyss” for a thousand years, and then predicts his release and revived activity after the Millennium, followed by his definitive destruction (Rev. 20:1-3, 7-10). Such a description of Satan parallels exactly John’s earlier portrayal of the beast that rises from the “abyss” in order to renew its pernicious activity as the eighth head and then finally goes into perdition (Rev. 17:8, 11). Apocalyptic prophecy indeed confirms the principle of “history will be repeated,” although each subsequent time the battle is enlarged and intensified.

The Four Apocalyptic Riders Still Ride Together

A telling example of how history will repeat itself can be seen in John’s vision of the four horsemen in Revelation 6:1-8. Critical is the observation that the series of the “seals” in Rev. 6 further unfolds Jesus’ prophetic discourse of Matthew 24.^[2] Jesus had summarized briefly what would happen to His disciples during their mission in the world. He announced that wars, earthquakes, famines, persecutions, and apostasy would be part of the entire church age. This means that the seals forecast not only the endtime judgments but also the messianic judgments during the entire Christian period. In Israel’s past God had sent four judgments on His rebellious covenant people: *war, plague, famine, and death* (Lev. 26:23-26; Ezek. 14:12-14, 21). These judgments were never God’s final judgments, but served as preliminary judgments, to motivate His wayward people to return to God, just as the “lost son” in Jesus’ parable came to his senses during his lonesome misery (see Hos. 5:14; 6:1-3).

John is indebted to the Old Testament for his imagery of the heavenly cavalry. Zechariah described four horses with different colors in his visions (1:8-17; 6:1-8), for the purpose to gather all believing Israelites and Gentiles to Jerusalem and Mount Zion (Zech. 8:8, 20-23). In Revelation 6, each horseman is sent to join the previous riders sent, so that finally all four horses ride *together* on earth until the end of the church age. The purpose of the first rider, who is sent to proclaim the victorious gospel of Christ’s all-sufficient righteousness, aims at conquering the human heart for the risen Lord. The prime example of His conquest is His call to the persecutor Saul of Tarsus near Damascus, with the result that Saul surrendered to the living Messiah and became the fervent apostle Paul (see 1 Tim. 1:12-16).

Each time when the gospel is revived in history, as by the great reformers in the 16th century or by other true “Elijahs,” who fearlessly proclaimed the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus, the white horse with his bow is riding out again to win souls for the Lamb of God who has triumphed (see Rev. 6:9-11; cf. GC 204-05, 271, 594-5, 606).

The next three apocalyptic riders have authority to bring severe judgments on the earth: death, famine, the plague. These seals show an increased hardening of the unbelieving inhabitants of the earth, as they reject the gospel message of the white horseman by their apostasy and

persecution. "While there is historical progression, the seals reflect the experience of all who accept or reject the gospel of Christ. This means that history can be repeated and that the past can become the future again."^[3] Ellen White gave this dual application of the third and fourth seals:

"The same spirit is seen today that is represented in Revelation 6:6-8. *History is to be reenacted. That which has been will be again.* This spirit works to confuse and to perplex. Dissension will be seen in every nation, kindred, tongue, and people; and those who have not had a spirit to follow the light that God has given through His living oracles, through His appointed agencies, will become confused. Their judgment will reveal weakness. Disorder and strife and confusion will be seen in the church (Letter 65, 1898, quoted in *Symposium on Revelation*, 1:371-2, italics added)."

The rider on the white horse will go forth triumphantly once more with the threefold message of Revelation 14, so that the earth will be illuminated by the splendor of the everlasting gospel (Rev. 18:1). The apocalyptic seals thus picture first the resistance to the Christian witnesses to the gospel. But the *fifth seal* portrays the ultimate vindication of all those, who have been condemned and executed as true martyrs, because they faithfully witnessed to the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 6:9-11; cf. 20:4).

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References:

- [1] See L.F. Were, *The Woman and the Resurrected Beast. Why is the Seventh Head numbered Eight?* East Malvern, Vict., 1952. Reprinted by H.LaRondelle in 1983, chapter 12. Also E.W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture*. Reprint from 1894 by Kregel Publ., 1984, 196, 234. J.J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology*. Baker Book House, 1968, 122.
- [2] See my *How to Understand the End-Time Prophecies of the Bible*[=HUEP]. Sarasota : First Impr., 1997, ch. 14. Also *Light for the Last Days*. Pacific Press, 1999, ch. 3.
- [3] See HUEP, 128.