

Schools of Prophetic Interpretation

It is essential to recognize that Christian understanding of Israel in Bible prophecy is affected by the four differing “schools” [V 3, N 1, p 122](#) of prophetic interpretation. These four major “schools” of prophetic interpretation have their own history and are built on contrasting presuppositions. They deserve to be heard.

Historical-critical School. Modern liberal, progressive scholars follow the historical-critical method of interpretation. It is of fairly recent origin, having been in full flowering only for about one hundred years. These scholars dominate most of the universities around the world. Historical-critical research is based on principles and presuppositions of the historical-critical method. This method is under serious attack from some biblical scholars who have worked within the method for years and have become very disenchanted with it and from scholars who have been trained in the method but turned against it.³

This does not mean that the method is no longer used. It remains the major method of biblical study in a secular sense.

At present there are many additional or alternative approaches that are used or proposed in various attempts to move beyond historical criticism. Among them are such methods as structuralism, narrative methods, dialectical hermeneutic, total interpretation, close reading method, deconstructive method, reader oriented criticism, and so on. Each one of them has its own presuppositions and procedures that deserve very careful analysis and reaction. In spite of all of these alternative or supplemental approaches, the historical-critical method remains by and large still dominant in modern liberal scholarship.

One of the major principles of the historical-critical method is that of analogy, that is, that history is moved by cause and effect relationships in which no supernatural causes are allowed. Analogy also means that the past has to be understood on the basis of the present. It has been freely admitted that “... the principle of analogy is incompatible with Christian belief”⁵ as it has been functioning into the present. “Often the procedure of historical[critical] biblical criticism has required first the removal of all claims of revelation, and then imposed upon all testimony the *a priori* claim that divine disclosure is impossible,” writes Thomas C. Oden of Drew University. These methodological procedures reveal that the historical-critical method is a secular methodology in which the [V 3, N 1, p 123](#) new spirit of human autonomy permeates all aspects of modern culture—the sciences, philosophy, theology, and so on.

For the historical-critic of today there is no significant predictive element in biblical prophecy. If there is any predictive aspect left, it is one of short-range prediction only in which the ancient prophet speaks about what is contemporary with his own time or later than the historical circumstances which he reflects.⁹ The short-range predictive element is not derived from a supernatural revelation. The function of the prophet is not to predict (foretelling) but to proclaim (forthtelling). G. Ernest Wright states it succinctly, “The prophet thus had messages for his own people in his own day.”

This view of modern liberalism (here used as a descriptive not pejorative term), or historical-criticism, allows at best a kind of prognostication that is based on the superior insights of a human writer but not on divine, supernatural revelation or inspiration in which actual information is

passed from God to the prophet. There is no divinely given prophecy in the sense of a sure prediction about the near or distant future.

Many careful students of the Bible have come to conclude correctly that the historical-critical interpretation of prophecy is a *reinterpretation* of what the biblical text actually says and claims for itself. The historical-critical method does not take the biblical text at face value. It treats it on the basis of modern presuppositions of how a writer/editor of the biblical book should be evaluated in view of modern perspectives and philosophical deductions. This method does not lead to faith but serves to secularize belief systems.

Preterist School. A second major view of prophetic interpretation is known as preterism. Preterism is a method of prophetic interpretation which recognizes genuine predictive prophecy in the Bible. However, it holds as a basic premise that all prophecies about the future that were ever made have been fulfilled in the past by the end of the first century A.D.

As regards the books of Daniel and Revelation the preterist school holds that these books found their fulfillment in the New Testament period and the very early history of the Christian church till about A.D. 100.

The preterist position is deeply indebted to the Spanish Jesuit [V 3, N 1, p 124](#) scholar Luis de Alcazar (1554–1613), who projected the Antichrist back into the distant past by identifying him with the Roman emperor Nero.

Major aspects of the preterist view were in the course of time incorporated into the historical-critical method of prophetic interpretation and other aspects were absorbed into the futurist method of interpretation. Preterism does not command many followers today. But it was quite widely supported in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Historicist School. The third school of prophetic interpretation is known as historicism. It is the oldest school of prophetic interpretation of the four known at present. It may be described as the continuous historical method of prophetic interpretation because it understands biblical prophecy to be continuous and consecutive as regards the predicted sequences of empires and events in the books of Daniel and Revelation. The prophecies are seen to unroll in historical fulfillment from the time of the biblical writer to the eschaton, the end of the world and the new creation, without a break or a gap in the prophetic view.

Historicism takes the biblical picture of prophetic prediction, regardless of short-range or long-range prediction, at face value. It follows the biblical picture of divine revelation to humans (viz. prophets) in which God actually foretold what would happen in the near or distant, even very distant, future. The historicist school of interpretation cannot exist without the acceptance of the biblical claim that God has absolute foreknowledge of history and that He has made known ahead of time what would take place in the future.

Historicism accepts the biblical emphasis of conditional prophecy as regards the ancient covenant people Israel. The prophecies about Israel are to be fulfilled to literal Israel as long as, and only if, Israel remains obedient to the covenant given her by God. If Israel should fail to keep the covenant, then God would not be able to automatically fulfill the promises He had made to them in the past. God would remain loyal to His promises but they would be fulfilled to those who would be faithful to Him. This faithful remnant people of God is not restricted to ethnic descendants of Abraham.

Historicism has been the time-honored method of interpretation for the majority of Bible believers from the beginning of [V 3, N 1, p 125](#) Christianity well into the beginning of the twentieth century. Historicism, however, has found significant competitors in the three other methods of interpretation, particularly futurism in contemporary evangelical Christianity in the second half of the twentieth century.

It has been said that futurism is “knocking at our door,” the door of historicism, urging to be received. Its aim is to modify, challenge, and, if possible, to replace the historicist method of prophetic interpretation which has so profoundly shaped Christianity at large and Protestantism in the last centuries.

Futurist School. The fourth major school of prophetic interpretation is known as futurism. It has become a major part of modern dispensationalism. Futurism has deep roots in the Counter-Reformation through the Spanish Jesuit scholar Francisco Ribera (1537–1591).

Ribera put prophetic fulfillment into the future. “In 1590, Ribera published a commentary on the Revelation as a counter-interpretation to the prevailing [historicist] view among Protestants which identified the Papacy with the Antichrist. Ribera applied all of Revelation but the earliest chapters to the end time rather than to the history of the Church. Antichrist would be a single evil person who would be received by the Jews and would rebuild Jerusalem ... and rule the world for three and a half years.”

Ribera was subsequently supported by Robert Cardinal Bellarmine (1542–1621), who opposed the year-day principle and identified the “little horn” of the book of Daniel, usually identified with the Papacy, with the Seleucid king Antiochus IV of the second century BC who persecuted the Jews (see 1 Maccabees).

Among the early Protestant futurists were such major figures as S. R. Maitland, James H. Todd and William Burgh. They explicitly stated in the 1820s and 1830s that they followed Ribera. From then on futurism was quickly adopted into the system of dispensationalism which developed from the 1830s onward.

Present-day Futurist Beliefs. Present-day futurism sees the establishment of the State of Israel as a direct fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Leon J. Wood, a prominent dispensational-futurist writer states, “The clearest sign of Christ’s return is the modern state of Israel.”²³ The widely read Hal Lindsey writes, “The [V 3, N 1, p 126](#) most important prophetic sign to herald the era of Christ’s return” and “one of the most important events of our age” is the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Dispensationalists and futurists also see the reunification of Jerusalem on June 6, 1967, as a direct sign of fulfillment of prophecy.

There is an expected rebuilding of a temple in Jerusalem which in the view of many is to take place in the middle of the seven-year tribulation period. Any visitor in Jerusalem today can go to a particular place and inspect temple utensils that are made ready for this temple to be built.

Futurism holds that in the final millennial dispensation another temple will be built, the millennial temple, in which Jews will literally sacrifice animals again but not in an expiatory way. They will be “memorials of the one complete sacrifice of Christ.”

In futurism there is the widely anticipated “secret rapture” of all true believers which is to take place before the great tribulation.²⁹ No believer has to go through the dreadful tribulation.

In historicism believers will go through the tribulation of “the time of trouble” unharmed and specially protected by God’s mighty arm; in futurism believers will be raptured into heaven at the

beginning of the tribulation. Only unbelievers will experience the great tribulation in the end of time in the view of dispensational-futurism.

Main Concept in Futurist Interpretation. In contrast to “historicism” “futurism” is based on the literalistic method of dispensationalist interpretation.³¹ It should be clearly understood that in futurism prophetic fulfillment is based on the concept that all promises made to ancient Israel are unconditional and, therefore, must be literally fulfilled to “natural Israel.” This literalism demands that the prophetic and apocalyptic portions of Scripture relate primarily to the future, that is, after the end of the present Church age or dispensation which represents a gap or parenthesis in prophecy. This so-called “church age” is considered outside the biblical view of prophecy.³³ Furthermore, the Bible is interpreted in such a way that the claim is substantiated by dispensational-futurists that neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament has anything to do with the Church. The Bible, it is claimed, does not know of a Church or the time it will occupy. With the alleged biblical [V 3, N 1, p 127](#) silence of the Church dispensation every unfulfilled prophecy about and relating to ancient Israel is projected into the future, because the Church is not perceived to be the legitimate heir to any of the promises made by God in the past.

In futurism prophetic fulfillment is to come in the future and is to center around Israel as a nation, the Middle East, including the coming of a future Antichrist and the False Prophet. A significant role is assigned to Russia,³⁵ and a literal battle of Armageddon which will take place in Palestine, and so on.

Origin of Dispensationalism. Futurism is linked up with dispensationalism. “Modern dispensationalism” is rooted in the teachings of John N. Darby (1800–1882), a trained lawyer who became a prolific writer with more than 53 volumes, each averaging some 400 pages.³⁹ Darby was one of the early leaders of the Plymouth Brethren Movement in England. In 1845 he broke away over the issues of ecclesiology and prophecy to form the “Exclusive Brethren,” also known as “Darbyists.”

The second key impulse for dispensationalism came from Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1843–1921), a lawyer and legislator from Kansas, who produced the notes for the original Scofield Reference Bible. It was first published in 1909 and has seen a more recent revision in 1967. This Bible with its extensive notes has been a major force to popularize dispensationalism.

There are other key names that shaped dispensationalism in more recent times. Among them are Lewis Sperry Chafer, and more recently Arno C. Gaebelein, H. A. Ironside, Charles Caldwell Ryrie, J. Dwight Pentecost, Leon J. Wood and, of course, John F. Walvoord, the President Emeritus of Dallas Theological Seminary.

In recent years the book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, authored by Hal Lindsey, claimed to have been translated into over 30 languages, sold over 30 million copies in its first ten years of publication.⁴³ Written for the laity, this book has brought unprecedented popularity to dispensational-futurism.

The majority of popular radio and TV preachers around the world belong to the dispensational-futurist camp of prophetic interpretation. The dispensational-futurist approach is dominant among conservative Christians of many different Protestant churches on all continents.

[V 3, N 1, p 128](#) Modern dispensationalism holds tenaciously that the history from creation through the millennial kingdom to come is divided into seven different dispensations. They form

a key part of the dispensational-futurist hermeneutic of biblical interpretation in general and the literalistic prophetic interpretation for which it stands.⁴⁶¹

¹ Gerhard F. Hasel, [“Israel in Bible Prophecy,”](#) *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 3, no. 1 (1992): 121–128.