

Tales of the End: A Study of the Book of Revelation

Session 18: Revelation Interpretation History, Part 2

Book: *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting The Book of Revelation* by Arthur Wainwright, 2001.

The Apocalypse as a Chart of History: Joachim of Fiore

- Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135-1202) made one of the most distinctive of all contributions to the study of the book.
- An immediate result of his work was the rapid spread of the practice of treating the Apocalypse as a detailed **prediction** of the course of history.
- A later result was the wide-spread revival of the expectation of a **future** millennium.
- Basic to Joachim's thought is the theory of **three** ages.
 - The first age (or "status," as he called it) was under the **Jewish** law and lasted until Christ's first advent.
 - The second age is under the gospel, and it lasts until Joachim's own time.
 - The third age is characterized by freedom of the **Spirit**.
- Although Joachim retained the outward form of Augustine's teaching about the millennium, he in fact paved the way for a renewal of Chiliasm.
- By drastically revising Augustine's account of the millennium, Joachim opened the door for the reemergence of **Chiliasm**.
- His detailed historical interpretation set a pattern for commentators.
- His description of Islam and its adherents as prominent forces of evil gave support to both the Crusaders and later Christian opponents of Islam.
- He was not hostile to the **papacy**, but his identification of Antichrist with a usurping pope gave strength to antipapal interpretations.
- Like many other church – and world – historical interpreters, Joachim assumed that the events predicted in the Apocalypse were reaching a climax in his own **time**.

The Growth of Historical Interpretations

- From the fourteenth century onward the church-historical method dominated the interpretation of the **Apocalypse**.
- Opposition to the papacy came to a head with the Protestant Reformation, and from then on antipapal interpretations were a matter of course for Protestant apologists.
- Writer after writer identified the papacy with one or more of the beasts.
- **Futurism** appeared in those nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms of millenarianism that believed the Apocalypse to consist mainly of predictions about the last days.
- **Preterism** had a clear connection with the historical criticism of the eighteenth and subsequent centuries that attempted to understand the Apocalypse in the light of the experiences and expectations of early Christians.

The Revival of Millenarianism: Chiliasm In A New Dress

- By asserting that the millennium would not begin in its fullness until the third age, Joachim challenged Augustine's contention that it began with Christ's first advent.
- The growth of Chiliasm was opposed by Lutheranism.

- In England **Joseph Mede** (1586-1638), argued that the millennium was to come within a hundred years.
- It will begin with the judgment of the Antichrist and the conversion of the Jews and will continue until the resurrection and judgment of the dead is completed.
- **Synchronism** indicates that different passages in the Apocalypse refer to concurrent events.
- For example, the **1,260** days are mentioned in different places (Rev. 11:2-3; 12:6, 14; 13:5), and in each place they allude to the same period of history, the 1,260 years extending from the rise of the papacy to its overthrow.
- This principle of synchronisms extends to the overall pattern of the Apocalypse.
- In Protestant circles millenarianism had come to stay.
- By the end of the seventeenth century it was well established in **England**.
- These interpretations maintained the antipapal emphasis of Protestant commentaries in the previous century.
- During the Middle Ages the Antichrist had often been identified with a **Jew** from the tribe of Dan, and interpretations of the Apocalypse had fostered hostility to Jews.
- Christians paid attention to biblical predictions of the restoration of Jerusalem.
- In the seventeenth century this concern for the **Jews** came to the forefront of apocalyptic hope.
- The Apocalypse does not contain a clear statement of these expectations.
- These interpretations, which supported a belief in the **conversion** of the Jews and their restoration to Palestine, assumed a growing prominence in millenarian thought.

Postmillennialism

- One of the best known versions of millenarian thought is **post**-millennialism.
- This theory asserts Christ will not appear visibly until the thousand years have ended and the resurrection before the millennium will be spiritual, not physical.
- It is normally used to describe theories that expect the thousand years to begin in the future.
- Postmillennialists expect the millennium to be a period of **growth** and prosperity for the church and do not think that it will begin with a spectacular supernatural event.
- Postmillennialism had many supporters in the nineteenth century.
- It has obvious attractions for advocates of **evangelism** and missionary work.
- In some of its forms a desire for social change accompanied the concern for evangelism.
- Postmillennialism is congenial to both the missionary movement and the cause of **social** justice.
- Typical postmillennialism expected the millennium to begin in the future.

The New Futurism

- Premillennialists, all of whom expected Christ to return at the beginning of the millennium, also treated the book as a prediction of the course of history.
- Another variation of Futurism has become greatly popular in the twentieth century.
- It is known as **Dispensationalism**.
- **Dispensationalism** believes God's activity in history is divided into seven dispensations.
- Its champion was John Nelson **Darby** (1800-1882), a clergyman of the Anglican Church of Ireland, who broke away to become one of the leaders of the Plymouth Brethren.

- Great emphasis was laid by Darby on the Jewish people's role in the divine plan.
- He argued that they were symbolized by the 144,000 of Revelation 7 and the woman of Revelation 12.
- His most distinctive teaching is about the **rapture** described in **I Thessalonians 4:17**.
- Christians who are still alive will be caught up into **heaven** to meet the Lord.
- Most interpreters have assumed that this event coincides with the resurrection at the last day, but Darby argued that it will occur before the final resurrection.
- The Plymouth Brethren, to whom Darby belonged, did not become a large denomination, but Darby's teachings have had a wide currency.
- Members of many churches accepted his **theory**, and during the twentieth century it reached new heights of popularity.
- C.I. **Scofield**, in his notes to the Scofield Bible, first published in 1909, preserved the general pattern of Darby's interpretation.
- Dispensationalism grew in popularity during the second half of the twentieth century.
- A thorough presentation of the approach of this school to the Apocalypse is given by John F. Walvoord.
- "Our generation," Walvoord observes, "may well be the last before **Christ** returns to remove believers from the earth."
- In the second half of the twentieth century, the most popular statement of the Dispensationalist viewpoint has been that of Hal **Lindsey**, whose works have sold millions of copies.
- Like Scofield, Lindsey explains the letters to the seven churches as prophecies of periods of history, extending from the time of the apostles to the present day.
- The Apocalypse as interpreted by Lindsey is a book for the nuclear age.
- The Left **Behind** books and movies popularized the Hal Lindsey's dispensationalist viewpoint.