

REVELATION: METHODS OF INTERPRETATION - Part 2

IDEALIST METHOD OF INTERPRETATION

The idealist method of interpretation is also sometimes called recapitulationism or iterism from the Latin verb, itero which means: to repeat - because idealist interpreters maintain that events described in the book of Revelation are repeated from time to time in the experience of the church from age to age.

Idealists interpret Revelation as a series of repeated symbolic pictures of the church's struggle during the interadvental period (from the first to the second advent of Christ at the consummation and final judgment).

Augustine (4th century theologian) is the earliest known idealist interpreter of the book of Revelation.

Idealism views the visions of Revelation as a portrayal of the church's cyclical struggle with evil throughout her entire history - and idealists believe that the book presents different images that provide different views and perspectives of the ongoing spiritual warfare and conflict between good and evil

Idealists believe that the scenes of Revelation depict principles of spiritual war, not specific events. They believe that these principles of spiritual war are operative throughout the church age and occur cyclically or repeatedly throughout her history.

The idealist method of interpretation regards the prophecies of Revelation as descriptive of spiritual conflicts and realities that are to be found in every age (including the present one) - versus those confined to a few years at the conclusion of the church age.

Those who embrace this view look upon the book of Revelation as containing a discussion of the forces that underlie and undergird events, not of the events themselves. In fact, they maintain that there are few or no references in Revelation to actual, historical happenings.

One of the proponents of the idealist method is William Milligan who summarized the idealist method of interpretation this way: **"We are not to look in the Apocalypse for specific events, but for an exhibition of the principles which govern the history both of the world and the Church."**

Therefore idealists don't wrestle with the subject of chronology or specific chronological events in Revelation, but instead see the book and its symbolism as a timeless aid written for persecuted Christians in any period of church history.

ILLUSTRATION

For example, the beast arising out of the sea in Revelation 13 is interpreted by idealists as any secular power antagonistic to the church of Christ wherever and whenever that antagonism and persecution arises.

Idealists see no continuity or chronological sequence in the book of Revelation. Therefore the seven seals in chapters 6-7 are not expected to be fulfilled first; followed in sequence by the seven trumpets in chapters 8 to 11; then followed by the bowl-plagues in chapters 15 and 16.

On the contrary, for the Idealist, the seals represent the entire course of history (as do the trumpets and the bowl-plagues). In other words, the seals, trumpets, and bowl-plagues all cover the entire course of history - only from a different view and perspective.

One author I read compared them to several series of pictures showing the same thing, but each one from differing viewpoints or vantage-points.

REPETITIVE CYCLES IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Proposition: The book of Revelation contains several, large sections which traverse the entire interadvental period (from Christ's first to His second coming) - each one concluding in the Consummation and Final Judgment

First, in chapters 6-8:1 - we have the vision of the seven seals

CYCLE #1 - THE SEVEN SEALS (Revelation 6:1 to 8:1)

Immediately following chapters 4 and 5 which beautifully describe the worship of the Lamb in heaven (who Alone is worthy to open the scroll) - in chapter 6 and following we have the vision of the seven seals:

The first four are the four horsemen in verses 1-8 in chapter 6 -
The fifth seal is the cry of the Martyrs recorded in vv 9-11 in chapter 6 -
and the sixth seal is the great earthquake in vv 12-17 in the same chapter

Then, after the interlude of chapter 7 which describes the sealing (and securing) of God's servants - and the bliss of the redeemed in heaven - a seventh and final seal is mysteriously described in v 1 of chapter 8 as:
"...silence in heaven for about half an hour"

But then, notice what contains no mystery whatsoever in this section - which are the unmistakable references to the Second Coming of Christ and to the Day of Final Judgment administered by the Lamb:

Notice chapter 6:14 which says, **"Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up..."**

Read Revelation 6:15-17

Then, in chapter 7, we're given a view of the aftermath of the Day of Final Judgment - by a picture of the Church Triumphant reveling in glory in the Lamb's abundant provision for their every need - as well as Christ's ability to remove everything from them that could cause want or unfulfilled desire

Read Revelation 7:16-17**SUMMARY**

So at the end of this section (of the Seven Seals in chapters 6-7) - we see this cycle concluding (at the end of the gospel age) - in the Consummation; the Final Judgment; and the Eternal State (in heaven) - so that's the first cycle: The vision of the seven seals

Second, in chapters 8-11, we have the vision of the seven trumpets

CYCLE #2 - THE SEVEN TRUMPETS (Revelation 8:2-11:19)

Here seven trumpets sound - all catastrophic and cataclysmic in nature:

Chapter 8:7 records the first trumpet - hail, fire and blood cast on earth - with one-third of trees and vegetation destroyed

Read Revelation 8:7

Chapter 8:8-9 records the second trumpet - a large burning mountain cast into the sea - with one-third of the sea, sea-creatures and ships destroyed

Read Revelation 8:8-9

Chapter 8:10-11 records the third trumpet - a large burning star falls on rivers and springs - and embitters one-third of them

Read Revelation 8:10-11

Chapter 8:12 records the fourth trumpet - and one-third of the sun, moon and stars are darkened at its sounding

Read Revelation 8:12

Then, in chapters 9-11 there are three more trumpets sounded by three more angels pronouncing **"Woes"** upon earth's inhabitants because of their horrific implications and escalating severity on rebellious humanity as the end approaches

But since my purpose this morning isn't yet to expound upon these things, let me draw your attention to how this large section concludes (as did the previous one) - by referring to the Consummation and Day of Final Judgment when Christ returns

Please turn ahead to Revelation chapter 11

Read Revelation 11:15-18

SUMMARY

What is this but the language of judgment and of God's wrath and rewards that will come - at the Consummation - in the great Day of Judgment!

This is what concludes the cycle of the soundings of the seven trumpets in Revelation chapters 8-11

Third, in chapters 12-14, we have the vision of the Woman, the Dragon, and the Male Child

CYCLE #3 - THE WOMAN, THE DRAGON, AND THE MALE CHILD (Revelation 12-14)

Now this vision begins with a fascinating picture of past, not future, events - namely, the First Advent of the Christ child born to the woman, Mary, and the dragon's malicious intent to destroy her offspring.

Among other things, this 12th chapter poses a formidable problem for some methods of interpretation - particularly the futurist and historicist methods

You'll recall from last time that both of those interpretive "schools" believe that chapters 4 and following (in the book of Revelation) - refer to events that will transpire and unfold in the future

However here we have a plain, straight-forward (but backward-looking) account of Christ's first advent - and of the intense, spiritual opposition to His birth by the **"dragon"** who is identified in v 9 as, **"the Devil and Satan"** - who is ultimately and finally defeated and **"overcome by the blood of the Lamb"**

Read Revelation 12:1-11

Q: So here's an obvious reference to the first advent of JX:

The Child is vigorously pursued by a powerful dragon - whose craft and power are great (in v 3) - and is symbolized by his **"seven heads and seven horns"**

Furthermore, in v 4, the dragon sought **"to devour the woman's Child as soon as it was born"** - and, had it not been for God's superintendence over the Child's birth by **"preparing a place where she and the child could flee into the wilderness"** (which Mary, Joseph and Jesus did by fleeing to Egypt when Herod sought the Child's life shortly after His birth)

Yet **"the male child born to rule all nations with a rod of iron"** in v 5 - is not destroyed by this **"great fiery red dragon,"** - but is exalted and elevated to reign upon **"the throne of God."**

And therefore, when we come to the end of this section (which concludes in chapter 14) - there is, for the third time, a description of the triumphant Second Advent of Christ - for the purpose of judgment

Read Revelation 14:14-16

SUMMARY

Here is **"One like the Son of Man"** (obviously a reference to King Jesus) - arriving on **"a white cloud"** and **"having on His head a golden crown, and in His hand a sharp sickle"** (for the purpose of reaping and executing judgment at harvest-time) - when there will be a separation of the chaff from the wheat - cutting down, as it were, the impenitent in judgment - by means of Christ's **"sharp sickle"**

So once again, as was the case in cycles 1 and 2, in this third cycle The Woman, the Dragon, and the Male Child, in Revelation 8-11, there's a traversing of the entire interadvental period (from Christ's first to His second coming) - concluding with references to the Final Consummation and to Christ's Second Coming in Judgment

THE ECLECTIC METHOD OF INTERPRETATION

The eclectic method of interpreting the book of Revelation is a blending or combining of the best elements of two or more of the four main methods of interpretation (Preterist, Futurist, Historicist and Idealist).

Observing weaknesses in all of these methods, many pastors, theologians and bible scholars have sought to integrate the strengths and advantages of the best of these various methods.

Rather than being limited to any one particular method, many have recognized and concluded that there are elements of truth in the different interpretive methods.

This blended or combined approach has the advantage of combining the best from each one of the interpretive methods.

Here are a few comments from several Christian scholars concerning the eclectic method of interpretation:

Dr. Leon Morris, The Revelation of St. John, pp 16-19

"It seems that elements from more than one of these views are required for a satisfactory understanding of Revelation."

Dr. Joel Beeke, Pastor, Author, and Seminary President

"The eclectic approach embraces the apparent strengths and rejects the apparent weaknesses of the other four approaches. This (eclectic) approach acknowledges that there are elements of truth in all of these approaches. Personally, I believe this is the best and safest approach to take."

Dr. Cornelis P. Venema, Pastor, Author and Seminary President

The eclectic approach interprets the book of Revelation in a way that aims to incorporate the strengths of each of the other main approaches. The eclectic approach acknowledges that there are elements of truth in all of the approaches. The strength of eclecticism is its ability to incorporate the primary emphases of the other approaches without the one-sidedness that often characterizes alternative views.