



“La Bête de la Mer” (The Beast of the Sea) from the *Tapisserie de l'Apocalypse*, a medieval tapestry in Angers, France, this detail of which shows John, the Dragon, and the Beast of the Sea.

The *historicist* school of interpretation claims that Revelation depicts history from the first century until the end of time. Martin Luther, who had grave reservations about Revelation as a canonical book, subscribed to historicist ideas in his later years and found resources for an anti-Catholic message in the book. (Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer, did not think that Revelation should be in the Canon, and John Calvin ignored it.) In the United States, historicism has lost market share to *futurism* among lay audiences, and it has lost ground to *preterist* interpretations among scholars. The historicist claim is bold: Revelation predicts events accurately and specifically right down to concrete dates on the calendar (such as 313, 538, 1565, 1798). Changes in the dating scheme put the histori-

cist paradigm at risk. Historicists have indeed paid a penalty for changing its map of events. C. Marvin Pate writes that “failed attempts to locate the fulfillment of Revelation in the course of circumstances of history has doomed it to continual revision as time passed and, ultimately, to obscurity.” To such observers, historicism is not only in *crisis*. It is worn-out.

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The Sabbath School Quarterly for the first quarter of 2019 does not acknowledge any crisis, and it is unabashed in its claims on behalf of historicism. The following appears in the introduction on the Sabbath School Net website (ssnet.org):

A careful reading of Revelation’s prophecies (like those of Daniel) shows that the historicist method of prophetic interpretation

is the correct way to understand the prophecies' intended fulfillment, because they follow the flow of history, from the prophet's time to the end of the world. This method illustrates how we should make every effort to derive meaning from the text itself, rather than imposing a predetermined interpretation upon it.

I sense a contradiction in this statement. If the makers of the study guide truly believe that “we should make every effort to derive meaning from the text itself, rather than imposing a predetermined interpretation upon it,” there is no need to affix an *-ism* to the method. Let the text carry the weight of the interpretation. Do not burden the text with interpretations that it may not be able to carry. The historicist commitment falls short of the assertion made above. Some claims do not rise from the text; they would be implausible apart from the *-ism* and the “predetermined interpretation.” As I have perused the lessons, I have come away stunned at the audacity of the lesson makers. Claims are made that cannot be derived from the text of Revelation, *at least not the way the lessons present it*. They are salvaged by “the historicist method of prophetic interpretation.” Since little effort is invested in showing the merit of specifics and dates on exegetical and historical grounds—sometimes next to nothing, sometimes nothing—the reason for the paucity of evidence might be that 1) the lesson makers rely on prior interpretations without pointing us to them; 2) they don't care; 3) they don't expect us to care. The latter may be a safe bet. I have a hunch that several groups at my university will be studying other things than Revelation this quarter.

I will now comment on two specifics.

1. Where to Draw the Lines

First, the Quarterly asserts that the seven churches represent definite periods in history, and it proposes a clear-cut timeline.

The spiritual conditions in the seven churches coincide with the spiritual conditions of God's church in different historical periods. The seven

messages are intended to provide, from Heaven's perspective, a panoramic survey of the spiritual state of Christianity from the first century to the end of the world.

As the chart below shows, the time period proposed in 2019 differs somewhat from the hugely influential and long-lasting ideas in Uriah Smith's historicist scheme. While any change comes with a risk, perhaps we should be surprised that so little has been altered. A matter of note is that Thyatira gets a full 1,260 years in Smith's interpretation; it gets two hundred years less in the 2019 proposal. I was unable to find the dates 1565 and 1740 in Smith's interpretation. These dates are asserted in the study guide with very little evidence to back them up.

HISTORICISM AND THE SEVEN COMMUNITIES		
Church	Proposed Dates	
	URIAH SMITH	LESSON QUARTERLY 2019
Ephesus	31 – 100 AD	31 – 100 AD
Smyrna	100 – 323	100 – 313
Pergamum	323 – 538	313 – 538
Thyatira	538 – 1798	538 – 1565
Sardis	1798 – 1833 (?)	1565 – 1740
Philadelphia	1833 – 1844	1740 – 1844
Laodicea	1844 – present	1844 – present

I worry about several things on this chart, but here is just one concern in relation to Thyatira. In John's text, the report card on this church is mostly good. She is commended for “love, faithfulness, service, and endurance.” Jesus adds that “your last works are greater than the first,” suggesting a trajectory from good to better (Rev. 2:19). Yes, there is “that woman Jezebel,” but she is not the whole story (2:20). This church gets 1,260 years in Uriah Smith and more than one thousand years in the Quarterly. If the Thyatira text in Revelation is intended to cover more than one thousand years of history, it wields an exceedingly broad brush. Included in this sweep will be the Great Schism in 1054, the Crusades of 1095, the decimation of the Eastern Church in 1453 under the Ottoman conquest,

and the Reformation in its various manifestations, beginning in 1517. Is this what historicism does to real history, in a broad, one-size-fits-all sweep? The Quarterly says this about Thyatira:

Tradition replaced the Bible, a human priesthood and sacred relics replaced Christ's priesthood, and works were regarded as the means of salvation. Those who did not accept these corrupting influences were persecuted and even killed.

These elements are found in the period mentioned. Are these elements what John (or Jesus) had in mind in the vision on Patmos? Is this what we ought to say? Is it enough?

The Quarterly puts the suture line between Thyatira and Sardis at the year 1565, but it does not make the date reverberate with historical significance. Philadelphia gets only eleven years in Smith's scheme, a proposal that will seem risky in the extreme even to people who may be favorably disposed toward historicism.

2. The "Ten Years"

Believers in Smyrna are told that "the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction" (2:10). To Smyrna is allotted the period from 100 AD to 313 AD, or 323 AD, if we follow Uriah Smith. Here, for reasons that are not self-evident, the Quarterly commits to a specific event and precise dates.

The "ten days" mentioned in Revelation 2:10 point to the ten years of the Diocletian persecution from A.D. 303 until A.D. 313, when Constantine the Great issued the Edict of Milan, which granted Christians religious freedom.

The assertion is not tentative; there is no caveat or alternative option. It follows from this that the editors of the Quarterly have decided to make most or all the

time elements in Revelation conform to the "Year-Day Principle." Ten years it will be. But was it *ten* years? The so-called "Diocletian persecution" was pushed by Galerius, the emperor's co-regent in the East because he was truly anti-Christian, and the "Christian problem" was most evident in that part of the empire. Historians estimate that perhaps 20 percent of the population were Christians at that time, meaning that they represented a real challenge. In the West, the persecution sputtered, and it had already petered out in 305. That year Diocletian did what no emperor (except Nerva, perhaps) had done before him: he resigned, and he made his fellow Augustus, Maxminian, resign with him. Diocletian had at the time been very ill, but he recovered, and he returned to Split on the Adriatic Coast where he took up horticulture.

Persecution continued in the East, and many Christians were killed, but persecution ended in formal terms with Galerius' Edict of Toleration in 311.

By that time Galerius was already dead. The arch-persecutor (Galerius) had admitted failure. Prisoners were released and churches re-opened. We are at this point eight years into the period of persecution, and the worst is over. Then came the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, with its promise of religious liberty. This is the ten-year mark in the historicist interpretation. And then, in the words of W. H. C. Frend, comes the following piece of bad news. "Within four years (317), the universal freedom of conscience proclaimed at Milan had been abrogated, and the state had become a persecutor once more, only this time in favor of Christian orthodoxy." Where do we put this in the prophetic scheme?

Questions

I will end my reflection with some questions.

1. Non-historicist readers of Revelation think that the historicist school is in crisis. Should we acknowledge this and, if we continue along the historicist path, try to win over the doubters? Mere assertions will not suffice.

The Sabbath School Quarterly for the first quarter of 2019 does not acknowledge any crisis, and it is unabashed in its claims on behalf of historicism.

2. Is the historicist view communally sustainable at a time when there is scant knowledge of actual history in our communities? The cognitive gap—and the cognitive dissonance—cannot be ignored. The literacy level about history is low. Is the strategy to close the gap by assertions or by genuine knowledge?

3. Will the historicist bent of the Quarterly confirm what has long been the problem in our relation to Revelation: we understand it, but we only understand it vicariously? By “vicarious,” I mean that we have a few scholars, some evangelists, and a few pastors who understand the book for us. We cannot on our own reproduce what they tell us is there; we depend on their expertise; we trust them; most of us are in no position to do what is required without such help.

4. Does the text of Revelation invite the kind of interpretation endorsed in the Quarterly, with ten years for the “Diocletian persecution” and more than a thousand years for Thyatira as test cases?

5. Will the 2019 version of historicism carry the day for the next generation of Seventh-day Adventists, in the United States, in Europe, and in the rest of the world?

I plan to return to these questions in another “timeout” later in the series. Before I close, I would like to share something I read in a wonderful book by Robert Markus, entitled *The End of Ancient Christianity* (1990) and then a thought from Peter Brown’s little book, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (1995). To begin, Markus says that the foremost characteristic of Christianity from the second century onwards was not increasing worldliness but increasing *other-worldliness*. This is most explicit in the monastic movement, one strand of which had a profound influence on Augustine (354–430). The allure of the city

and the pull of the desert competed for the upper hand among devout believers, and the desert won. Again, the problem was not worldliness but withdrawal from the world. Markus calls it an “ascetic invasion.” When the dust settled, other-worldliness won even as the monastic movement rejoined the city. Alasdair MacIntyre, quoted by Robert Markus, calls the transformation an “epistemological excision” in which the secular world all but disappears.

In this world of great paradox, society was massively “Christianized,” with Augustine as one of the most influential voices. Augustine was an ascetic, too, but he was not as intensely ascetic as contemporaries like Pelagius and Jerome. Markus attributes to Augustine the promotion of “Christian mediocrity,” a tempered spiritual state that

sought a realistic equilibrium between body and spirit, city and desert, aspiration and achievement. Throughout, Markus seeks to do justice to the complexity of history. Eastern Christianity differs from the West. North Africa differs from Italy. Italy differs from Gaul (France). Northern Gaul differs from the more developed south. The complexity is irreduc-

ible and not easily captured by an *-ism*. And yet there is a trend, and it is this: “the elimination . . . from Christian discourse of a whole sphere which we may call ‘secular.’”

Peter Brown is the world’s foremost expert on this period, now renamed Late Antiquity, a period extending well into what historians used to call the Middle Ages. What Markus calls the embrace of “Christian mediocrity” in Augustine is still a more austere version of the Christian life than had been the case in prior times. Augustine raises the bar for what it means to be a Christian. But what if the project fails? What, indeed, if “Christianization” is doomed to be an ambiguous notion in the best of times? For this possibility, Augustine has a Plan B. “A myth of the ‘decline of the Church’ began to circulate, especially in Latin ascetic circles.” Brown continues:

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The notion, of course, had always lain to hand, and was used by Christian preachers, such as Origen and Chrysostom, in order to rebuke their congregations for having degenerated from the high standard of an earlier age. But the notion of “the decline of the Church” became, now, a major explanatory device for the entire present state of Christianity.

The historicist view of history resembles Augustine’s Plan B. Once upon a time, in the first century, the Church was truly Christian. Then decline set in. To Brown and Markus, however, the world is becoming more Christian all along, although the contest continues over what it means to be Christian. (Does a Christian attend the games at the Circus? Does he or she watch NFL games on TV?) Markus calls the excision of the secular world in the Christianity of Late Antiquity a crisis, and he finds telling words for it.

Such a crisis occurs when established traditions have become sterile and are seen to lead intellectually to a dead end; when the use of hitherto accepted ways of thought “begins to have the effect of disclosing new inadequacies, hitherto unrecognized incoherences, and new problems for the solution of which there seem to be insufficient or no resources within the established fabric of belief.” Such a crisis is resolved by the adoption of a “new and conceptually enriched scheme” which can simultaneously deal with the sterility and incoherence produced by its predecessor, account for the previous difficulty in doing so, and carry out these tasks “in a way which exhibits some fundamental continuity of the new

conceptual and theoretical structures with the shared beliefs in terms of which the tradition of enquiry had been defined up to that point.” [Items in quotation marks are from MacIntyre.]

I apologize for this lengthy timeout, but I mean to be constructive. Is historicism in crisis, as scholars doubtful of its merits believe? Is there, as I have suggested in the foregoing, a discrepancy between the text of Revelation and some historicist interpretations, another discrepancy

between historicism and actual history, and yet another discrepancy between historicism and the audience—you and me? I told my sister the other day that historicism in its current form (the *Quarterly*) describes history the way I describe the Alps from an airplane on a cloudy day, my plane flying not only high above the ground but also high above the clouds. Perhaps Markus’ view of the crisis at *The End of Ancient Christianity* could be a template for the next step? He spots the crisis, and his proposed

remedy is not rejection but adjustment and renewal.

I would be pessimistic about the prospect for change if not for the fact that the historicists in my neck of the theological woods are fond of the message to the church at Laodicea. This church says of itself that “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing” (3:17). Let a discussion about the future of historicism begin by reading that text aloud.

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