

# Through the Bible - Revelation

*Past or Future?* by Troy Warner & Tyler Warner

## *Introduction*

Twenty-five percent of the Bible is predictive prophecy. Much of that has already been fulfilled, but there still remains a significant amount of Scripture that is yet to be realized. Not all believers are in agreement about what portions of Scripture remain to be fulfilled. At the center of this controversy is the New Testament book of Revelation. The debate centers around what the proper method for interpreting Revelation should be. On one side we have Preterism, and on the other, Futurism.

## *Preterism*

Kenneth Gentry, a leading Preterist, says, “The word ‘preterist’ is based on the Latin term *praeteritus*, which means “gone by,” or past. Preterism holds that the tribulation prophecies occur in the first century, thus in our past.”<sup>1</sup> Preterism is the belief that the Bible’s prophecies in Revelation and similar passages have already been fulfilled. Though the prophecies were in the future when John wrote and when his original audience read them, they are now in our past. Preterists believe that the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was the fulfillment of Matthew 24 and the majority of the book of Revelation. Some “Partial Preterists” still look for a bodily return of Christ, but most do not.

While Preterists claim to study the Bible with the usual evangelical grammatical-historical method, they are reticent to consistently use a literal interpretation. They do not believe that the figurative language and symbolism of Revelation refer to literal realities, but to spiritual concepts and ideas. Some, like Hank Hanegraaff, have gone so far as to encourage “imaginative leaps” of interpretation.<sup>2</sup> For the Preterist, the Bible’s promises of a “soon” fulfillment could not possibly refer to such a long time as the Church has experienced. This has also led them to postulate alternate early dates for the book of Revelation in order to affirm their view. Traditionally, Revelation was written in the 90’s A.D., which obviously would eliminate the Preterist view from contention – a date before 70 A.D. must be proposed, therefore.

## *Futurism*

The Futurist believes “that the book of Revelation has to do with the future of the world—not what was future to John and is now past or present to us, but what was future to John and is *still* future to us.”<sup>3</sup> When the futurist approaches chapters 4-19 of the book of

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<sup>1</sup> Ice, Thomas, and Kenneth L. Gentry. *The Great Tribulation, Past or Future?: Two Evangelicals Debate the Question*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Hitchcock, Mark, and Thomas Ice. *Breaking the Apocalypse Code: Setting the Record Straight about the End times*. Costa Mesa, CA: Word for Today, 2007. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Patterson, Paige. *New American Commentary – Volume 39: Revelation*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman,

Revelation they believe they are reading what will happen in the days just prior to the second coming of Christ. Futurism's understanding of the book of Revelation is the exact opposite of how the preterist looks at this book.

The Futurist employs the grammatical-historical method of interpreting the book of Revelation. This is the same method that is claimed to be used by the proponents of Preterism. However, while Futurists agree that figurative language should not be pressed beyond its meaning, they believe that Revelation's figurative language speaks of a literal reality, not just spiritualized application. This reaches from a belief in a literal people of Israel, with literal promises to be fulfilled, all the way to a belief in a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ and a literal resurrection. Futurists have no trouble accepting the traditional date of Revelation.

### *Comparison & Conclusion*

So which view is correct? While we of course acknowledge that Preterists have a genuine faith, their method of interpretation is fundamentally flawed. First, Preterism hinges largely upon an early date for Revelation. All of church history and abundant documentary evidence all place Revelation around 95 A.D., which makes Preterism a non-starter.

Although the rhetoric of interpretation from both Preterists and Futurists sounds very similar, in reality differences are insuperable. The Preterist has little faith to discover any literal truth through the figurative language of Revelation. For the Futurist, the purpose of figures of speech and symbols is to discover what literal meaning is being described. The task of understanding these figures of speech is not nearly as difficult as the Preterist claim. A disciplined, comprehensive knowledge of Scripture goes a long way to explain much of what John said in his Apocalypse.

Lastly, there are the theological issues. Preterism allows its interpretive method of one portion of Scripture to overtake other, more obvious parts. For example, the Lord could not have used any stronger language or imagery to affirm that He would not forsake the promises made to Abraham for his descendants. The Preterist who reads the book of Revelation as already fulfilled must conclude that God is done with the nation of Israel, something Paul warned us never to do (Romans 9-11). When God spoke literally, He promised to never abandon Israel – can we use figurative language to overturn that promise? The Futurist's simpler approach does not identify the references to Israel as any other group than Israel. This issue along with others drives us to conclude, along with solid support from Church history, that the book of Revelation describes future events and realities, not bygone centuries.