

History: A Glimpse of What's to Come

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THEO3223 Systematic Theology II

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December 10, 2018

For whatever reason, I have been gifted with the ability to recognize, create, and replicate patterns. This can be used in almost every aspect of life, from technological algorithms and linguistics to astronomy and microevolution. Some patterns are steady and unchanging. Others are dependent on certain information in an “if this, then this” clause. Patterns are responsible for sparking my interest in biblical study and apocalyptic literature, for once I began to learn different interpretation techniques and types of context, I became overwhelmed with the patterns of the Word, and I still marvel today at how many messages a single verse or passage can convey. These “revelations,” as I have come to call them, have greatly increased my appreciation of the Bible as the Word of God, for no human or group of humans could willfully construct such a masterpiece. It also increases my understanding and interest in the mystery of the Logos: the Word become flesh. The method of interpretational study that I use to identify patterns in the Bible is called Christian historicism and should be eventually included in any person’s study of the Scriptures. With historicism, more messages are revealed with symbolism, parallelism, types, shadows, etc. It is an example of both-and theology and has been considered a norm since early Christianity. It is the message that history gives us a glimpse of what is to come.

Christian historicism is not to be confused with the New, Modern, Anthropological, or Hegelian historicisms, which are either heretical or apply historicism to things other than the Bible. Anthropological historicism is centered around the theory of evolution, and New, Modern, and Hegelian historicisms focus on self-actualization, self-awareness, and polytheism (Historicism). Christian historicism is instead historicism that is directed towards the Bible and, occasionally, other Christian apocryphal writings (Olson, 349). Henceforth, when I mention historicism, it is in reference to Christian historicism and not these other kinds. According to *The Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, historicism is defined as follows.

A term used to describe one of two types of theories of history. In the first type, historicism is the theory that all things can be best understood as the result of historical development; that is, a thing is what it is because of its history. In the second type, historicism is the belief that history progresses through unstoppable forces and that historians can predict future historical outcomes on the basis of observed patterns in the past (Stanley, 60).

“Historicism sees the symbols and images as codes for persons, entities and events contemporary with the apocalypticists” (Olson, 350). It also assesses the views of time:

For example, when the book of Revelation uses the image of the antichrist is it referring to someone or something that existed when the book was written...Or is it referring to an exclusively future person or entity? Or perhaps referring to a reality that was future when the book was written but appeared afterwards and is now, to contemporary readers, past or already present and no longer future? (Olson, 349-50).

Historicism became popular in the fourteenth century among Protestants, who saw Revelation “as a prefiguration in detail of the chief events affecting the Church and Christendom” (Turl, 141). Historicists believe that “the fulfillment of biblical prophecy has occurred throughout history and continues to occur; as opposed to other methods which limit the time-frame of prophecy-fulfillment to the past or to the future” (Dean). Historicism is valuable but, like anything, can be abused. Numerology, for example, is only useful when connected to the original Hebrew text—and even then may not apply to the entire Pentateuch. Some people have used numerology outside of this context to predict the Apocalypse or the rapture or the “end of the world,” which to this day have all proved untrue. A crucial part of historicism is understanding the concealment and revelation of the truth throughout history. Pope Pius XII described this as

“the various forms in which revealed truth has been clothed, forms that have succeeded one another in accordance with the different teachings and opinions that have arisen over the course of the centuries” (Dean). For example, the mystery of the rapture of the church; apostles seem to have understood it perfectly, yet layers of context stand in the way between their understanding and ours, mostly due to language and the passing of time. The neat aspect that historicism and the Bible share is that no truth ever contradicts itself. The Word of God can never contradict itself, we know, so when applying a historic theory to the Bible, it can only be correct if there is no contradiction when compared to the rest of the Scripture.

In a way, historicism consists partially of both-and theology. For example, when examining the prophecies of the coming of a savior in the Old Testament, it is not just referring to Christ’s birth, but, in their past, to Adam [the first man] and to Moses [who delivered Israel out from Egypt], and in their future, to the rapture of the church and to the establishment of Christ’s kingdom on earth—in which He physically comes down to earth again. Many theologians disagree about which “coming” the Scripture is referring to, but what if it is too all? Another example is the antichrist, whose symbolic parallels throughout history are, arguably, Pharaoh Thutmose III, King Nebuchadnezzar, Emperor Nero, Adolph Hitler, different popes, etc. In each case, the “antagonist” was a national ruler who was against either Israelites, Jews, Christians. Nero, Hitler, and the select popes were all thought to have been the antichrist at each respective present time, but they all died before all the prophecies concerning the antichrist and the end times were fulfilled. Yet, each instance resembles the future fulfillment. With the case of the coming of Christ, some prophecies have been fulfilled by the virgin birth, but some have not yet come to pass; yet the virgin birth, rapture of the church, and establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth all resemble each other in some way.

However, not everyone applies history to the Bible in the same way that historicists do. Some people—Preterists—believe that most or all apocryphal prophecy has already been fulfilled, “even if the fulfillment was future for the visionary [apocryphal author] and his first readers” (Olson, 350). Most modern preterists associate the apocalypse with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD (Turl, 141). From a historicist view, this was but a shadow of the still-future apocalypse, as are [again, arguably] the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Israel’s idolatry following King David’s death, the Crusades, and the World Wars. Preterists interpret the book of Daniel as “referring to events that happened from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC until the first century AD, while seeing the prophecies of Revelation as events that happened in the first century AD” (Preterism). Preterism emerged in the seventeenth century “during the Counter-Reformation” when Luis de Alcasar wrote the “first systematic preterist exposition of prophecy—*Vestigioarcani sensus in Apocalypsi*” to support the idea that the current pope was the antichrist (Preterism). “Full preterism differs from partial preterism in that full preterists believe that the destruction of Jerusalem fulfilled all eschatological or ‘end times’ events, including the resurrection of the dead and Jesus’ Second Coming, or Parousia, and the Final Judgement” (Preterism). The Preterist beliefs depend on the dating of the book of Revelation, since their beliefs are only “sound” if it was written before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, but theologians now estimate it was written around 95 AD (Preterism).

“Futurism is the mode of interpretation that assumes most or all of the symbols and images of biblical apocalyptic literature refer to realities still in the future” (Olson, 350). One proposal, which surfaced shortly before preterism, suggested that “the whole of the Apocalyptic Prophecy, (excepting perhaps the primary Vision and Letters to the Seven Churches,) to relate to things now future, viz. the things concerning Christ’s second Advent” (Turl, 141).

“Thus for a futurist the antichrist is yet to appear. For a preterist, the antichrist has already appeared and may be an office or a kind of person or political entity rather than a specific person. For a historicist, the antichrist was (for the seer of Revelation) the Roman emperor or simply Rome itself” (Olson, 350). Perhaps this statement is true regarding the Revelation, as some believe, and perhaps not. Either way, my view as a “historicist” is that the Roman emperor [Nero] was a shadow of the future antichrist. Thus, he “was” the antichrist in symbol only, but was not the fulfillment of all prophecies regarding the antichrist and Apocalypse. Perhaps my application of historicism is not entirely aligned with its definition; I am no expert on the subject. All I know is that historicism is what seems to most closely identify with my study and belief patterns.

When studying eschatology, or any part of the Bible for that matter, it is important to study every aspect possible so as to find the theory that is most soundly supported by the Word. We will never know everything about the Bible and there will always be controversies about things like eschatology, yet when we study it, we must endeavor to do it justice and to not take it lightly. There are too many patterns in the Bible, in history, and in our future for us to ignore. So, when you study for yourself, always remember that history gives us a glimpse of what is to come.

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