

Chapter Seven

The Historicist Viewpoint

Basic Premise: The Book of Revelation is a prophetic picture of the church history from the time of its writing to the end of the age. Historicists believe the events in Revelation are symbolic of historical events throughout the church age and they usually interpret Mystery Babylon and the Beast as being the apostate church with the Papacy as the Antichrist. Many also interpret the letters to the seven churches as descriptive of seven eras of church history.

A Historicist interpretation of the Book of Revelation was not possible during the post apostolic age as there was yet no span of church history to even consider such an approach. All indications are that those among the early church who accepted the book were content to adopt the allegorical hermeneutic and frankly confessed that they did not understand what it meant. There appears to be no record of any early church commentary interpreting the book prophetically, even though some of them quoted it or mentioned it from time to time. **It wasn't until a** twelfth century monastic scholar by the name of Joachim of Fiore who distinguished himself with the first known interpretive commentary of the Apocalypse. He believed he was at the end of a period of history and came up with what we would now **consider to be a rather peculiar interpretation which I won't bother you with here.** Look him up if you're interested.

The Historicist Viewpoint only became prominent a few hundred years later when it was championed by Martin Luther at the beginning of the Reformation during his power struggle with the Catholic Church. **Obviously he didn't align himself with Joachim's line of thinking as** Luther believed that it was he who was in the end-times and that the Papacy was the Antichrist, so he interpreted the Book of Revelation accordingly. In support of his understanding, Martin Luther had several woodcuts made illustrating the beast and the harlot with papal crowns which he put into his translation of the Bible as part of his propaganda campaign against the powers of Rome. A compilation of **Martin Luther's** Woodcuts is available in a book called The Luther Illustrated Bible by Stephan Fussel published by Taschen.

He was joined in his views by a number of early Protestant scholars among whom are the following: John Wycliffe, John Knox, William Tyndale, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Finney, Charles Spurgeon, and Matthew Henry. All of these men are to be commended for their work in extending the Gospel. All of them saw the evils of the Institutional Catholic Church but stumbled into assuming the end times was nigh and made more of the Papacy than what the Bible declares.

Some among those who hold to the Historicist viewpoint interpret the letters to the seven churches found in Revelation Chapters 2 and 3 as being prophetic of seven periods of church history. The seals and trumpets were thought to symbolize the fall of the Roman Empire and so on throughout history with the rest of Revelation. **Luther's** teaching on this theme has influenced much of Christendom to this day.

Martin Luther sparked into existence the Protestant Reformation and was soon joined by Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin and other notable characters who followed in their footsteps. At the height of his ministry with his passion and zeal for the truth, when he was concentrated on proclaiming the

revelation of faith and not works as the foundation of our salvation, he made a number of accomplishments which included the removal of the apocryphal books from the canon of Scripture.

However, a study of Martin Luther reveals that he had conflicting views on the Book of Revelation at different times of his life. Before he entered into his political power struggle with the ruling powers of the Catholic Church, he expressed some very radical ideas about the Apocalypse and he was not alone in his opinion. Initially the three reformers: Calvin, Zwingli and Luther, had nothing good to say about the writings of John of Patmos. John Calvin, who wrote exhaustive commentaries on the books of the Bible, never gave any time to Revelation, he simply ignored it, and is on record as summarily dismissing it with this comment: "The study of Revelation either finds a man mad, or leaves him that way". Ulrich Zwingli argued that Revelation should be rejected as **"it is not a book of the Bible"**. And Martin Luther, when he was filled with the revelation of salvation by faith and faith alone, declared that he could not **sense the Holy Spirit in the Apocalypse and commented that as far as he was concerned it was** "neither apostolic nor prophetic". Here is a translation of his comments:

Martin Luther's Preface to the Revelation of John (1522AD)

About this book of the Revelation of John, I leave everyone free to hold his own opinions. I would not have anyone bound to my opinion or judgment. I say what I feel. I miss more than one thing in this book, and it makes me consider it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic.

First and foremost, the apostles do not deal with visions, but prophesy in clear and plain words, as do Peter and Paul, and Christ in the gospel. For it befits the apostolic office to speak clearly of Christ and his deeds, without images and visions. Moreover there is no prophet in the Old Testament, to say nothing of the New, who deals so exclusively with visions and images. For myself, I think it approximates the Fourth Book of Esdras; I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it.

Moreover he seems to me to be going much too far when he commends his own book so highly -- indeed, more than any of the other sacred books do, though they are much more important -- and threatens that if anyone takes away anything from it, God will take away from him, etc. Again, they are supposed to be blessed who keep what is written in this book; and yet no one knows what that is, to say nothing of keeping it. This is just the same as if we did not have the book at all. And there are many far better books available for us to keep.

Many of the fathers also rejected this book a long time ago; although St. Jerome, to be sure, refers to it in exalted terms and says that it is above all praise and that there are as many mysteries in it as words. Still, Jerome cannot prove this at all, and his praise at numerous places is too generous.

*Finally, let everyone think of it as his own spirit leads him. My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. For me this is reason enough not to think highly of it: Christ is neither taught nor known in it. But to teach Christ, this is the thing which an apostle is bound above all else to do; as Christ says in **Acts 1, "You shall be my witnesses."** Therefore I stick to the books which present Christ to me clearly and purely.*

So what was it that happened that eventuated with the Book of Revelation being accepted into the canon, when it was at first totally rejected by the leaders of the Reformation? Surprisingly we find that it was in fact Martin Luther who became the leading advocate for the Apocalypse to be included among the inspired Scriptures. What follows are some interesting details from his life that explain what it was that brought him to that decision.

There is an uncomfortable and unfortunate dark side to Luther's life that is not often told, but a look at the letters he wrote in his latter years tell their own story. Look them up, they are freely available online. He began to lash out at all he disagreed with and ended up persecuting both Jews and Christians, in particular the House Church Movement of his day (Anabaptists, Mennonites and others) who believed in a believers baptism by immersion and consequently did not believe in infant baptism, nor the persecution of heretics, nor a hierarchy clergy laity system and would not submit to Luther's

authoritarianism which ended up being just as tyrannical as the Catholics had been. He really never **broke free from the institutional church's indulgence into political power**. Consequently, the reformation was not complete. The **following is an example of Martin Luther's targeted propaganda**:

“The person of the Antichrist is at the same time the Pope and the Turk. Every person consists of a body and a soul. So the spirit of the Antichrist is the Pope, his flesh is the Turk. The one has infested the Church spiritually, the other bodily. However, both come from the same lord, even the devil.

Whilst many would agree with his assessment of the spiritual influence behind both Islam (the Turk) and the Papacy, the fact of the matter is that The Antichrist is yet to come.

As mentioned above, later in his life, Luther began to believe he was living in the end of the age and he assumed that the Papacy was the embodiment of The Antichrist. This deception, brought on by his knowledge of their evil practices, led him away from continuing in the grace of God and he became embroiled in a political power struggle which resulted in much bloodshed. In so doing, he incorporated the Book of Revelation into his translation of the Bible along with 26 woodcut illustrations portraying the Papacy as the Antichrist, among them a depiction of the whore of Babylon with a papal crown and likewise the seven headed beast also with the papal crown, along with other pictures juxtaposing Christ with the Pope. He literally thought he was at war with the Antichrist. Instead of proclaiming the truth, he became so obsessed with fighting the power of the Catholic Church that he used Revelation as a weapon of propaganda and interpreted its symbols accordingly. He was entirely responsible for constructing the original Historicist interpretive viewpoint of the Apocalypse in his efforts to turn the people against the papal power.

Unfortunately, this was not the only deception that manifested in his life. The following excerpt from his treatise called *On The Jews and Their Lies* leaves us in no doubt as to the depth of the darkness Martin Luther had fallen into. With minor typographical corrections, what follows is the translation of part of his long treatise.

What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people? Since they live among us, we dare not tolerate their conduct, now that we are aware of their lying and reviling and blaspheming. If we do, we become sharers in their lies, cursing and blasphemy. Thus we cannot extinguish the unquenchable fire of divine wrath, of which the prophets speak, nor can we convert them. With prayer and the fear of God we must practice a sharp mercy to see whether we might save at least a few from the glowing flames. We dare not avenge ourselves. Vengeance a thousand times worse than we could wish them already has them by the throat. I shall give you my sincere advice:

First to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians, and do not condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of his Son and of his Christians. For whatever we tolerated in the past unknowingly and I myself was unaware of it will be pardoned by God. But if we, now that we are informed, were to protect and shield such a house for them, existing right before our very nose, in which they lie about, blaspheme, curse, vilify, and defame Christ and us (as was heard above), it would be the same as if we were doing all this and even worse ourselves, as we very well know.

Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. For they pursue in them the same aims as in their synagogues. Instead they might be lodged under a roof or in a barn, like the gypsies. This will bring home to them that they are not masters in our country, as they boast, but that they are living in exile and in captivity, as they incessantly wail and lament about us before God.

Third, I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them. (remainder omitted)

Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb. For they have justly forfeited the right to such an office by holding the poor captive with the saying of Moses (Deuteronomy 17 [:10 ff.]) in which he commands them to obey their teachers on penalty of death, although Moses clearly adds: **“what they teach you in accord with the law of the Lord.”** Those **villains ignore that. They wantonly employ the poor people’s obedience contrary to the law of the Lord** and infuse them with this poison, cursing, and blasphemy. In the same way the pope also held us **captive with the declaration in Matthew 16 {:18}, “You are Peter,” etc, inducing us to believe all the lies and deceptions that issued from his devilish mind. He did not teach in accord with the word of God, and therefore he forfeited the right to teach.**

Fifth, I advise that safe conduct on the highways be abolished completely for them. For they have no business in the countryside, since they are not lords, officials, tradesmen, or the like. Let them stay at home. (...remainder omitted).

Sixth, I advise that usury be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping. The reason for such a measure is that, as said above, they have no other means of earning a livelihood than usury, and by it they have stolen and robbed from us all they possess. Such money should now be used in no other way than the following: Whenever a Jew is sincerely converted, he should be handed one hundred, two hundred, or three hundred florins, as personal circumstances may suggest. With this he could set himself up in some occupation for the support of his poor wife and children, and the maintenance of the old or feeble. For **such evil gains are cursed if they are not put to use with God’s blessing in a good and worthy cause.**

Seventh, I commend putting a flail, an axe, a hoe, a spade, a distaff, or a spindle into the hands of young, and strong Jewesses and letting them earn their bread in the sweat of their brow, as was imposed on the children of Adam (Gen 3[:19]). For it is not fitting that they should let us accursed Goyim toil in the sweat of our faces while they, the holy people, idle away their time behind the stove, feasting and farting, and on top of all, boasting blasphemously of their lordship over the Christians by means of our sweat. No, one should toss out these lazy rogues by the seat of their pants.

But what will happen even if we do burn down the synagogues and forbid them publicly to praise **God, to pray, to teach, to utter God’s name? They will still keep doing it in secret.** If we know that they are doing this in secret, it is the same as if they were doing it publicly, for our knowledge of their secret doings and our toleration of them implies that they are not secret after all and thus our conscience is encumbered with it before God.

Accordingly, it must and dare not be considered a trifling matter but a most serious one to seek counsel against this and to save our souls from them, that is, from the devil and from eternal death.

My advice, as I said earlier, is:

First, that their synagogues be burned down, and that all who are able toss in sulphur and pitch; it would be good if someone could also throw in some hellfire. That would demonstrate to God our serious resolve and be evidence to all the world that it was in ignorance that we tolerated such houses, in which they have reviled God, our dear Creator and Father, and his Son most shamefully up till now but that we have now given them their due reward.

The Apostle John wrote, **“He who hates walks in darkness and does not know where he is going.”** (1 John 2:11). Martin Luther, despite his intelligence, came to that spiritual place where he no longer knew what he was doing or where he was going in his decision making as hatred took over his heart. He became greatly deceived and probably provoked by the stubbornness of the Jews who resisted and refused to submit to his illegitimate authority, Martin **Luther’s** wrath knew no bounds. And

consequently, he lost all discernment. There is more that he wrote against various Christian groups too, but enough is enough. Search for it online where there are untold writings of his available for all to see if you want to know more. The above paragraphs are but a tiny portion of a tirade of over 60,000 words he wrote against the Jews. Apparently Hitler used it as inspiration and justification for his rabid antisemitism.

As you can see, the latter years of Martin Luther's life show him to be completely derailed and his motives absolutely suspect. Without his political motivation we would not have had the Historicist Viewpoint and we may not have even had the Book of Revelation in the canon today.

In their exegesis of the Book of Revelation, the interpreters of this viewpoint during the last few centuries have followed the interpretive example of Luther by endeavouring to inject the events of their day into the chapters of the Apocalypse. This has resulted in as many as fifty different Historicist interpretations of the Book of Revelation. Thus the theory evolves depending on how the historical events are reconciled with the various symbols during the time and circumstances of the expositor. As time marches on, the Historicists are constantly faced with the problem of reconciling the visions with the unfolding events of history. At the time, their reasons may have seemed plausible, but the passing of time has revealed their postulations as nothing but the imaginations of men of God who misread the signs of their times. This misreading of the signs of the times seems to be the most common error among the Historicist interpretive predictions over the years, which is probably why it is falling out of favour, though it seems that a faction of this persuasion who have adopted a hybrid Futurist Historicist combination are still proclaiming their ideas, but I am not inclined to explore their premise any further.