

Historicism a Faulty Approach to Prophecy

by Raymond C. Faircloth

Contrary to the Consistent Preterist view, Historicists understand that Jesus' return is yet future. However, it presents a great tribulation on Christians which stretches almost 2,000 years up to the present. Historicism views Bible prophecy as history in advance punctuated by prophetic 'way-marks.' Typically Historicism attempts to fit events of European history into the fulfilment of the Revelation. However, almost all the prophecies of the OT are concerning the Middle East. When examined carefully it can be seen that the Revelation is a mosaic of these OT prophecies and therefore is also concerning lands of the Middle East and not Europe. Generally Historicism relies on 'the year for a day' rule and often attempts to calculate the time of the return of Jesus. There are many variations of this view, but generally for Historicists it was the A.D. 70 Jerusalem event that fulfilled Jesus' Olivet prophecy and other Bible prophecies. Please see STUDY 2. Furthermore, most Historicists view *the last days* as having begun in 1799 when Napoleon captured the Roman Catholic pope of the time. The time scheme of Historicism is based on the following theory:

The 'Day for a Year' Theory

This theory states that in time-related prophecies *days* always mean *years*. The principle on which this theory is based comes only from the following two Scriptures:

- ❖ "By the number of the days that you spied out the land, 40 days, **a day for a year**, you will answer for your error **40 years**" (*Num. 14:34*).
- ❖ "390 days, **equal to the number of years** of their [*Israel's*] punishment...and you must carry the error of the house of Judah 40 days. **A day for a year...**" (*Ezek. 4:5, 6*).

However, this concept **applied only on these two occasions** and is, therefore, not a general principle to be applied to other time-related prophecies. The theory fails because both these events were literally fulfilled. In Numbers 14:34 forty years was the **period of the prophecy** and forty years **was the period of the wandering**. In Ezekiel 4:5, 390 years and 40 years were the **periods of the prophecies** and **their fulfilments**. Nothing in the Bible indicates that these texts should be used as a rule for the interpretation of timings.

Furthermore, appeal is made to *Daniel 9:24* where the relevant phrase is mistranslated as "70 weeks" when, in fact, it should be translated as "**70 sevens**" as in the NIV and the NLT. Seventy weeks equals 490 days which the historicists then convert to years on the basis of the day/year theory. However, the accurate translation of "**sevens**" **is meant to mean years** as indicated by the fact that the Jews had just experienced 70 years of captivity. So 70 "sevens" of years directly means 490 years and so there is no application of a day/year rule. So the day/year theory is generally rejected by modern scholars. ***If Daniel or John in Revelation had wanted to indicate 1,260 years there is no reason for them to have written 1,260 days.*** Furthermore, Historicists are very inconsistent in their application of this theory for time related prophecies. As examples: the prophecy in Genesis 7:4: "For in seven days, I will send rain on the earth for forty days and nights" and the prophecy in Jonah 3:4 "yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" are never interpreted by Historicists as referring to 7 years and 40 years. So 1,260 days in Daniel and Revelation should not be turned into 1,260 years so as to arrive at the conclusions given by Historicists regarding the return of Jesus. This is a very unnatural and arbitrary reading of plain statements and generally leads to the unscriptural practice of date-setting.

Historicism's 70th 'Seven'

1. To make the 70th *seven* terminate in the first century historicism is dependent on the idea that **Jesus' ministry lasted for exactly 3½ years** as the first half of the 70th *seven*. However, this would have to run to exactly 1,260 days in line with Daniel 9:27; yet the scriptural record does not provide sufficient information for this idea to be proved.
2. For the second half of the 70th 'seven' historicism requires that a further 3½ years ran from the time of Jesus' death until either *Steven's murder* or the conversion of **Cornelius** as the first of the Gentiles. However, there is no time-scale given for these events in the Scriptures. This is pure speculation.
3. Historicism generally presents the Covenant of Daniel 9:27 as being the New Covenant. However, in Daniel 9 the offering of sacrifices was brought to an end in the middle of the "seven." This means that the new covenant would have had to have **been inaugurated 3½ years before the death of Christ** at around the beginning of his ministry rather than at the end as the Scriptures show.

4. To make their version of the last half of the 70th *seven* a special time Historicists say that the **Gentiles** were intentionally **shut out of the new covenant** arrangement for a period of 3½ years. Yet when, after his resurrection, Jesus gave the great preaching commission: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations* [Gk. *ethnos*. This is elsewhere translated as Gentiles], *baptizing them...*” (Matt. 28:18) he gave no indication of any such exclusion of Gentiles. Even Jesus’ early ministry statement about being sent to “*the lost sheep of Israel*” (Matt. 10:5, 6) applied only to the occasion when he said it.
5. Daniel 9 describes the desolation of Jerusalem as occurring **before** the close of the 70 *sevens*. Yet Historicism presents a scenario of the A.D 70 destruction of Jerusalem which is about 33 years **after** the AD 36/37 supposed close of the 70 ‘sevens.’
6. From Daniel 9:24 the description of the six blessings **at the end** of the 70 *sevens* is one of **restoration**—not one of destruction for Jerusalem, as in A.D 70.
7. The description of what should result **at the end** of the 70 *sevens* is one of **desolation for the desolator** (Dan. 9:27). This did not happen to Titus in A.D 70.

NOTE: Although the Hebrew word *m’shomem* has the usual meaning of ‘desolated’ in the passive sense, in Daniel it has the **active sense** of ‘desolator’ because *poel m’shomen* (abomination of desolation) has this active meaning elsewhere in Daniel.

“Keep on the Watch”

Why does Jesus answer his disciples’ question of: ‘when?’ with the answer: “I will come when you do not expect me?” It is because he hints that it will be a delayed return. This caveat, “I will return unexpectedly” removes any thought of *the signs of the times* as way-marks through the tortuous passage of some 2,000 years.

The Great Tribulation Cannot Extend Over a Period of Two Thousand Years

This is because:

1. The Great tribulation is an event of much greater magnitude than simply being the tribulation than Christians have undergone in general through time.
2. The rapid-fire eschatological events as shown by the use of the Greek adverbs *tote* (then) seven times and *euthos* (immediately) in Matthew 24 preclude a Great Tribulation extended over 2,000 years.
3. Christians cannot be continually fleeing to the mountains and making sure that their flight is not in wintertime over 2,000 years.
4. Those days being “cut short” makes no sense over such an extremely protracted period.
 - ❖ “So also, when you see all these things you know that **he is near**, at the very gates” (*Matt. 24:33*).

A great difficulty for exponents of *the signs of the times* concept in Historicism is the verb **see** because all who see the *Parousia* will also “see all these things” **personally**. One of the often heard deceptive claims of the false christs would be: “The time is near” (Luke 21:8). Such claims would be continually heard during the period of “*the beginning of the birth pains*.”

Daniel’s context for 12:1 of “a time of distress, such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time” indicates that this will happen in the time of the End. Jesus virtually quotes these words then adds, “*no, and never will*.” He therefore declares the event quite unique. There can be but one tribulation greater than all before or since in history’s vast panorama of passing events! This places the Christians’ flight to the mountains, too, in this time of the end, for he expresses his concern for nursing mothers and the pregnant “in those days.” (vs.19). He also asks his disciples to pray that their flight be spared the difficulties of winter and the Sabbath. (vs. 20). The reason is simple: “**For** then there will be great tribulation” (vs. 21). The causal conjunction ‘**for**’ certainly binds the Great Tribulation to the flight. So the latter, like the former, was originally scheduled to take place immediately prior to Jesus’ climactic Parousia. Daniel 12:1,2 shows that at the time Michael stands up “*there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation*” and that the first **resurrection** occurs. This makes it impossible that the Great tribulation could be stretched out to 2,000 years in length.

The Cosmic Signs and the Sign of the Son of Man

These follow in close order ‘immediately’ after the Great Tribulation. They cannot be widely scattered events through the centuries. Neither can they be figurative of various political troubles because they are set within narrative that is wholly literal.

The Historicist Interpretation of Revelation

This interpretation:

- a. Incorrectly interprets “signified” of Revelation 1:1 as meaning ‘presented it in signs’ thereby directing them to see the book as more symbolic than it actually is.
- b. Interprets the book of Revelation in terms of European history. However, this book draws its material from the OT prophets whose work concerned ‘end-time’ characters and events which will be found in the Middle-East.
- c. Views the red horse rider as depicting ‘the loss of spiritual peace, and division over the gospel through history.’ However, the Greek verb for ‘slay’ in Rev. 6:4 means actual death as with Jesus’ death or Christian martyrdom. Also Babylon the great is responsible for “all who have been killed [*same verb*] on the earth” (18:24). The red horse rider causes “men to slay one another” which therefore precludes any drawn-out persecution over the centuries and shows Historicism to be in error. Further, Historicism views the Christians of the fifth seal as the **martyrs of the Middle-Ages**. Yet this seal concerns 42 months of persecution and testimony. It is not 1,260 literal years through the Dark Ages, but a short period of about 3½ years prior to the Parousia. ***This is shown by the fact that the sixth-seal Advent follows hard on the heels of this fifth-seal martyrdom***, Martyrdom is implicit in Jesus’ words: “Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved” (Matt. 24:22).

The Time of Jesus’ Return would be Unknown

Although date-setting for the time of Christ’s return has been applied by those with other approaches to prophecy, it has mostly been applied by those with a historicist approach or variations of this approach. Jesus stated in Matthew 24:36 that he did not know the day of his return. For Jesus such a lack of knowledge in this area means that we must understand the time-scale leading to his end time prophecies in a very elastic way. His expectations were that it would be ‘a long time.’

A LONG TIME BEFORE HIS RETURN

- Luke 19:12-15 gives Jesus’ parable of the man of noble birth which indicates that it would be some time before he returned.
- Matthew 24:48 is concerning the evil slave that says: “My master is not coming for a long time.”
- Matthew 25:5. Regarding the 10 virgins the bridegroom is described as being “a long time in coming.”
- Matthew 25:19. The Parable of the talents: “After a long time the master returned and settled accounts with his servants.”
- It would have to be long enough for **the Great Commission** to be accomplished.

BUT NOT EXPECTED TO BE HUNDREDS OF YEARS

❖ “Jesus said to him [*Peter*], ‘If I want him [*John*] to remain **until I come**, what is that to you?’” (*John 21:22*).

This seems to indicate Jesus’ expectation was that he would return within John’s life-time. Yet evidently Jesus did not know that it would take longer than this for the accomplishment of the Great Commission. So everything that he said regarding the end time **must be understood as being within his expectations concerning the time-scale**, and yet noting his lack of knowledge of the specific time of his return.

Conclusion Concerning Historicism

From the above we can see that end-time prophecy cannot be history (especially European history) in advance that is punctuated by *prophetic way-marks*. Jesus’ repeated warning to be ready and on the watch shows that we will have no idea of the timing of his return until we see ‘the sign’ of the “abomination of Desolation”

followed in relatively short time by the cluster of portents. Historicism leads its exponents to look for the wrong things and to miss the essentials.

APPENDIX 1

The History of the Year/Day Approach and the Gentile Times

The Historicist approach to interpreting prophecy was unknown to the early church. It first appeared about the **middle of the 12th century** in the teachings of the Cathari.

Joachim de Floris (1202) assigned a year/day value to the 1,260 days of Revelation. From then there have been 36 different starting points up to 1823 supposedly leading to the return of Christ.

Walter Brute, a fourteenth century Welsh Lollard scholar wrote that the “woman” of Revelation 12, or true church, had fled to Britain where for 1,260 years the true faith had been maintained. He adopted the year-day principle for all prophetic time periods. The 1,260 years were the papal persecution.

John Aquila Brown (1823) gave an application of 622 A.D - 1844. He later applied the year/day rule to the 2,300 days of Dan 8:14 so that they ended in **1843** (later 1844). Next he expounded *the seven times* of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream giving an application of **2,520 years** running from 604 B.C to 1917 A.D.

William Cunningham (1826) at the Albury Park Prophetic Conferences was the first to connect these sorts of calculations to the “**Gentile Times.**”

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APPENDIX 2

The Historical A.D. Destruction of Jerusalem Does Not Correspond to the Details in the Prophecies

Please see STUDY 2 to see the more than 20 reasons given.

Historicists often fail to realize the many discrepancies between the prophecies and the A.D.70 event. This is because they make their interpretation with reference to the works of the Jewish historian Josephus. However, because he was in the pay of the Roman propagandists, it is doubtful that he gave an unbiased account of the Jewish wars e.g. Josephus interprets the clouds that Jesus states that he will arrive on as meaning *all the dust the Roman army kicked up during its march.*

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