

## **A Definition and Short History of Historicism as a Method for Interpreting Daniel and Revelation**

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The main approach Adventists have taken to the books of Daniel and Revelation, the so-called *historicist* method of prophetic interpretation,<sup>1</sup> was no invention of Adventists. It was the most commonly used approach throughout most of church history. Yet today few outside the denomination share the approach, and it seems hard even to get others to understand the Adventist position.

This article will reflect on ways the term historicism has been understood and communicated by Adventists. I will suggest some elements that might be useful to share in conversations with non-Adventist interpreters—namely a definition of historicism and a brief history of its prominent usage throughout church history. Follow-up articles by Jon Paulien will reflect on and evaluate the historicist method in light of recent scholarship (this issue)<sup>2</sup> and some select cases from the biblical data (forthcoming).

### **The Nature of Historicism**

**Historicism as “School-of-Interpretation.”** The traditional way Adventists use the term historicism (in relation to interpretation of biblical prophecy) is

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<sup>1</sup>The essence of the historicist approach is part of the official faith of the Seventh-day Adventist church, last confirmed in a report by the Methods of Bible Study Committee approved by the 1986 General Conference Annual Council: “apocalyptic [prophecy] emphasizes the sovereignty of God and His control over history,” “apocalyptic prophecy presents the course of history from the time of the prophet to the end of the world.” “Actions of General Interest From the 1986 Annual Council—1,” *Adventist Review* (Jan 22, 1987): 19.

<sup>2</sup>Jon Paulien, “The End of Historicism?: Reflections on the Adventist Approach to Biblical Apocalyptic—Part One,” *JATS* 14/2 (Fall 2003): 15–43.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

as a comprehensive system or school of interpretation. Historicism is here seen as exclusive (an interpreter using historicism for some parts of Daniel or Revelation cannot use another approach, like preterism or futurism, for other parts) and personal (it presupposes a one-to-one relationship between interpreter and method, so that an interpreter uses only one approach and thus can be identified as a historicist, preterist, or futurist).

William Shea represents many Adventists in his usage of the term historicism when he writes:

Through the ages several different methods of interpreting Daniel and Revelation have been proposed. The *historicist* method sees these prophecies as being fulfilled through the course of human history beginning at the time of the prophets who wrote them. *Preterism* sees Daniel as focusing on the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and it sees the book of Revelation as focusing especially on the reign of the emperor Nero. Thus the preterist school focuses upon the past. In contrast to this, the *futurist* school places the major emphasis of these two books in the future, yet to be fulfilled. A specially prominent branch of futurism is *dispensationalism*, which narrows this future fulfillment to the last seven years of earth's history.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>William H. Shea, "Historicism: The Best Way to Interpret Prophecy," *Adventists Affirm* (Spring 2003): 22. Here are some other examples:

"The Preterist finds only the contemporary meaning of the Revelation as applicable to the early church, and the Futurist sees the prophecy as projected into a remote age to come, but the Historicist sees that the Revelation had its function first in counseling and encouraging the early Christians in the vicissitudes through which they were passing, while at the same time extending its prophetic pictures beyond their range of vision to the final victory." LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1950), 1:89.

"Three main systems have marked the history of interpretation. 1. The 'preterist' approach interprets prophecy by reference to past events. . . . 2. The 'futurist' approach is practically the reverse of the former and projects all prophecies into the future, hence beyond our control. . . . 3. The 'historicist' approach interprets prophecy with regard to historical events from the time the prophecy was uttered down to the end of time." "Actually the three systems cannot be used together. A single prophecy does not have several applications." Jacques B. Doukhan, *Daniel: The Vision of the End* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1987), 7–8, 9.

"Once we accept the unity, exilic origin, and apocalyptic nature of the book of Daniel, the only consistent method of interpreting the prophetic chapters of Daniel is that suggested by the historicist school. Historicism . . . suggests that the prophetic portions of the book of Daniel take the reader from Daniel's own day, in the sixth to fifth centuries B.C., to the ultimate setting up of God's eternal kingdom at the end of the world." "Modes of interpretation that consider the fulfillment of these chapters to have occurred totally in the past (such as the historicocritical [preterist] interpretation), or that apply their fulfillment entirely or primarily to the future (such as futurism), or that see in these chapters no more than the eternal confrontation between the forces of good and evil (such as idealism) fail to do justice to the thrust of these chapters." Arthur J. Ferch, *Daniel on Solid Ground* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1988), 83–84, 85–86.

"Commentaries on the Revelation are classified generally into several major categories: historicism, preterism, and futurism. . . . [In the *historicist* method] the prophecies are understood to meet their fulfillments in historical time between the days of John and the establishment of the eternal kingdom. *Preterism*. On the other hand preterism has tended to interpret either the entire book of

*VETNE: A DEFINITION AND SHORT HISTORY OF HISTORICISM*

In Shea's understanding of the term, historicism cannot be used alongside other approaches. The interpreter must choose one method and stick with that for all of Daniel and Revelation.

No combination of these three methods has ever been successful. A brief flirtation with such an attempt was contemplated in the 1980s under the claim that "interpreters are correct in what they advocate and wrong in what they deny," but it did not work.<sup>4</sup>

Shea shows how interpreters with historicist, preterist, and futurist approaches have arrived at conflicting positions on many prophecies. Thus, he argues, choosing the historicist approach entails denying other approaches.

Both of these schools [historicism and futurism] use the same prophecies but see their fulfillment in different places. . . . These suggested fulfillments are so very different there is no way they can be combined.<sup>5</sup>

Historicism and futurism claim that much in these prophecies goes beyond those preterist end points, so there is no way to combine these systems.<sup>6</sup>

The interpreter has to choose among these three methods.<sup>7</sup>

The reader might wonder why it is not conceivable that Daniel and Revelation might consist of different types of prophecies, so that some sections were intended by the ancient author to be understood with the preterist approach (the author writing about events from his own day and earlier), another section to be read with the historicist approach (a prediction of events between the author and the eschaton), and another section intended to be read with the futurist approach (predicting events surrounding the Parousia). Behind this all-or-nothing logic is an important assumption seldom stated: historicism should be understood to include the time-periods of preterism (the ancient author's own time) and futurism (eschatological events). Whenever we read a section of Daniel or Revelation that seems to be referring to events contemporary with the author, the interpreter who favored the historicist approach for another prophecy cannot now claim the

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Revelation or virtually all of it as ancient history. . . . *Futurism*. The futurist system of interpretation sees the fulfillment of most of Revelation restricted to a short period of time still future to our own day." Kenneth A. Strand, "Foundational Principles of Interpretation," *Symposium on Revelation—Book I*, Daniel & Revelation Committee Series [hereafter DARCOM], vol. 6 (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference, 1992), 4–5. See also Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1976), 11–16.

<sup>4</sup>Shea, 22.

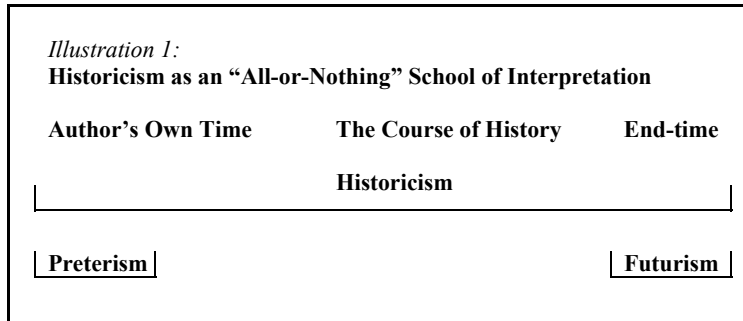
<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

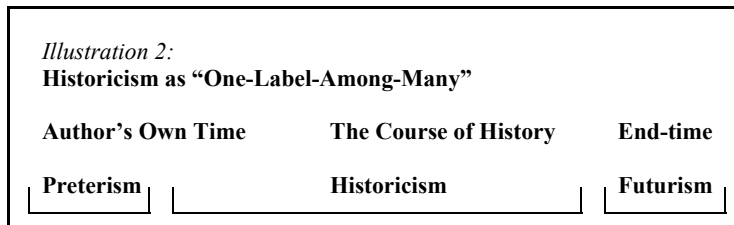
<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 24.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

label of preterism in this case. Once you use the historicist method, everything else you do is by definition also historicism.



**Historicism as “One-Label-Among-Many.”** A quite different way of using the term historicism sees it as one approach among many that one and the same interpreter might use. Historicism is here an appropriate label for the way the interpreter reads one section of a prophecy, but the way the interpreter reads other sections might receive other labels (preterism, futurism).



Ranko Stefanovic argues that not all sections of John’s Apocalypse are suited for the historicist approach.

A good commentary on Revelation does not favor any particular one of the traditional approaches. The method of interpretation an author chooses normally governs the way he or she reads and interprets the text. It usually results in forcing an interpretation into the framework of a predetermined idea, regardless of whether or not it fits the context.<sup>8</sup>

The exposition of the text must be controlled by the intent of its author, who should tell us what we are supposed to find in it. If the message of the studied text was primarily for John’s day, then it calls for the preterist or idealist approach. On the other hand, if it discusses

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<sup>8</sup>Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 2002), 11–12.

*VETNE: A DEFINITION AND SHORT HISTORY OF HISTORICISM*

the very end times, then its interpretation calls for a futurist approach. If the studied text presents the events occurring throughout the course of history, however, a sound interpretation calls for a historicist approach to the text. Strong evidence must demonstrate that the scenes and symbols in the text point to events throughout all of history, rather than those primarily in John's time or the time of the end.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to notice that this is not the same as a multiple fulfillment approach. Stefanovic, as I understand him, does not suggest that one and the same section of Daniel or Revelation has more than one fulfillment in history. Each prophetic prediction addresses only one place (long or short) on the "timeline" of history.<sup>10</sup> The placement on this timeline determines the label (preterism, historicism, futurism).

**Evaluation.** Both ways of understanding the term historicism have their strengths and weaknesses.

The first and traditional use of the term, historicism as an all-or-nothing school, has the benefit that it emphasizes the important distinctions of the Adventist approach. Belief in the possibility of true predictive prophecy is an important aspect not shared with all interpreters. Historicist interpretations give the message of a God who is in control of history and able to foretell events before they take place.

By personalizing the definition (talking about historicist and preterist interpreters, rather than merely about historicist and preterist methods), the reader of Adventist expositions of prophecy is called upon to take a stand and choose a side. This us-versus-them language has probably contributed to a positive sense of identity and fellowship among Adventists.

On the negative side, by linking the method so completely with the interpreter and demanding exclusive loyalty to one method, this traditional way of defining historicism has also contributed to a more difficult dialogue with the rest of the Christian world. Because Adventists raised the fence and offered a take-it-or-leave-it approach, interpreters outside Adventism mostly stopped listening. The package could not be sold *in toto*, and so the non-Adventist audience dwindled even on limited exegetical case-studies (particularly for the book of Revelation).

The second approach, the more limited way of using the term historicism as a label only for some parts of the prophecy, might improve matters in this area. A dialogue with someone of a different opinion usually improves by beginning with shared ground and building the dialogue about differences from that common foundation, rather than claiming unbridgeability up front. By demonstrating how both conversation partners read certain sections as related to events in the

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 12. So also Jon Paulien, *The Book of Revelation*, Bible Explorer Series (Harrisburg: Ambassador Group, 1996), audio cassettes, vol. 1, "Keys to the Code."

<sup>10</sup>As Gerhard F. Hasel argues in "Fulfillments of Prophecy," *70 Weeks, Leviticus, Nature of Prophecy*, DARCOM, vol. 3 (Washington: Biblical Research Institute, 1986), 312–322.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

ancient author's time, and how both read some as describing events surrounding the Parousia, the Adventist interpreter will more likely have an attentive audience when he or she goes on to show the sections of prophecy where events in history are predicted; at least if one carefully states the reasons for seeing history predicted there. The Adventist is not trying to sell an all-or-nothing package, but can present arguments for having chosen the historicist approach in each individual case.

A second advantage of this limited definition of historicism is for "internal" research. To the degree that many Adventist laypeople have begun to see larger parts of Revelation as still unfulfilled (in comparison with traditional Adventist interpretation), they might find it more convincing that Adventist scholars argue for the appropriateness of historicism for each individual disputed section, rather than branding them as being in error on a general, abstract level (as in "they are futurists instead of historicists, and since Daniel 2 clearly demands a historicist reading, they are wrong in seeing the future in Revelation chapter so-or-so").

The seven years of Daniel chapter 4 and the seven churches of Revelation chapters 2–3 are examples of sections where some have applied historicism and seen predictions of future history, while others (including most Adventist scholars today) are not so convinced. The mentality must be to argue for every section one by one, and not assume the appropriateness of historicism for a certain section without convincing arguments. It is not unlikely that historicism as one label among many may foster this important attitude better than the traditional historicism.

The advantage of the traditional historicism as a school is the disadvantage of this second way of using the term. Since preterism, historicism and futurism have histories as rich terms conveying many underlying values and assumptions, by choosing to view historicism only as one label among many it is easy to overlook many important differences between Adventist and non-Adventist approaches to prophecy. We usually assume that scholars who read most of Daniel and Revelation with the preterist approach do so because they do not believe in the possibility of true, predictive prophecy. Adventists emphatically and uncompromisingly hold that predictive prophecy has taken place in sections of Daniel and Revelation. If historicism is redefined into one label among many and Adventists begin conversations with non-Adventists on points of agreement (for the benefits we saw above), one should not neglect to point out the real and important differences that do exist.<sup>11</sup>

My personal judgment is that the traditional definition of historicism works better for discussions of Daniel than for Revelation. For Daniel chapters 2, 7, and 8, most interpreters will agree with the Adventist historicist that the text intends to describe events throughout history (events between the time of the intended author and the eschaton). The disagreement narrows down to belief in

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<sup>11</sup>Stefanovic is also carefully doing this; cf. Stefanovic, 9–12.

*VETNE: A DEFINITION AND SHORT HISTORY OF HISTORICISM*

the possibility of true, predictive prophecy and the dating of the book. By describing the Adventist approach as an all-or-nothing school, the important issues of the debate are clarified.

For the book of Revelation, however, I fear the pedagogical effect is the opposite. Most interpreters will *not* agree with Adventists that the text in some places intends to describe events throughout history.<sup>12</sup> By Adventists appealing to historicism (as a school), the non-Adventist interpreter thinks “Millerism,” recalling the heyday of the early 19th century, and conjures up images of the most creative and excessive kind of historicism. I find the proposal of Stefanovic and others appealing: they say that for John’s Apocalypse it is better to “cut up the pie in smaller pieces,” showing which sections Adventists agree on placing in John’s own day, noting in which sections eschatological Parousia-related events are described, and then going on to argue for historicism only in the very sections where Adventists find predictions of the course of history.

**A Definition of Historicism**

In the rest of this article I will suggest some elements Adventists might include in conversations with non-Adventist interpreters. In this section I propose a definition of historicism in the more narrow sense of the term. Thereafter I sketch a short history of the use of the historicist approach (as I have defined it) throughout church history, so dialogue partners can know that Adventists stand in a long line of interpretation.

Here is my proposed definition of historicism: *Historicism reads historical apocalyptic as prophecy intended by its ancient author to reveal information about real, in-history events in the time span between his day and the eschaton.*

No part of this definition is novel, but some comments may be valuable.

“*Historicism reads.*” Notice that the subject of the definition is ‘historicism’ (the approach) and not ‘historicist’ (the interpreter using the approach), the advantage of which we discussed above.

The next part of the definition, “*historical apocalyptic,*” deals with the jurisdiction: historicism is a method limited to certain types of apocalyptic literature. Most genres found in the Bible are excluded, as are apocalyptic writings where other, heavenly realms are revealed,<sup>13</sup> rather than future historical events in this world. It is the task of the interpreter to argue the case for historical apocalyptic in each individual section. One may hold one section or chapter of Daniel or Revelation to be historical apocalyptic without automatically assuming that all the rest of the material in Daniel and Revelation is likewise intended to describe future history.

“*Intended by its ancient author.*” Given the growing scholarly interest in reader-oriented approaches, it is worth noting that a historicist interpretation is

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<sup>12</sup>Again, see Paulien’s companion article in this issue about recent scholarship on Revelation.

<sup>13</sup>Sometimes labeled “mystical apocalyptic”; see Paulien, 26–27.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

an exegetical task that aims at saying something about the *intent of the author* behind the prophecy. Divine inspiration and revelation behind the text and future events truly predicted—as Adventists believe of the biblical apocalypses—need not mean the ancient human authors understood every detail of what they were inspired to write. But if one uses the historicist approach, one must assume that the authors somehow understood they were referring to future history.

Because many interpreters in the past combined historicism with unchecked creativity and read many imaginary prediction-fulfillments into the apocalyptic text, readers have got the false impression that historicism conveys merely what is in the eye of the modern beholder. Interpreters using the historicist method aim for more than expressing what is in their own minds; they hope to comment on something that is really in the text, as intended by whatever human and divine agents produced the text.

“*Reveal information about real, in-history events.*” Historicism not only looks for the meaning implied in the text and intended by the author (as opposed to meaning created in the mind of the reader), but claims to find authorial attempts at describing *real, historical* events and developments.

The Apocalypse Group of the SBL Genres Project has defined an apocalypse as “revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent *reality* which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”<sup>14</sup> Although we might not believe in all the realities depicted in all the various apocalyptic writings from antiquity, few scholars today dispute that the ancient authors often intended to describe real events. When the ancient author intended to describe travels into heavenly realms or write timeless, a-historical fiction, historicism is not a suitable method to use to understand it.

“*In the time span between his day and the eschaton.*” The elements in our definition up to this point would fit equally well for the preterist and other approaches to apocalyptic literature within the historical-critical and historical-grammatical frameworks. What sets historicism apart is this last phrase. Did the ancient author intend to describe events to take place in the time span from the writing up until the eschaton? If we believe so about a passage, historicism is the approach we take.

If the author of Daniel intended to describe events after his time—i.e., after the 6th century (early dating of the book) or after the 2nd century (late dating), yet before the eschaton, then we have a case calling for a historicist approach; likewise if John the Revelator set out to predict events in a span of time after his days and up to the Parousia.

It is worth observing that one does not have to believe in divine foreknowledge and revelation in order to read a prophecy with a historicist approach. As I

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<sup>14</sup>John J. Collins, “Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9, emphasis mine.



## VETNE: A DEFINITION AND SHORT HISTORY OF HISTORICISM

have defined it, historicism is not just for the believer. There are several ancient apocalypses around, and none of us believe in the truthfulness of all these attempted predictions. Historicism as a scholarly method only asks for a likely reconstruction of the original *authorial intent* of the writing. Whenever we think we see an author of an apocalypse attempting to foretell events placed in the future yet before the end of the world, we take the historicist approach—whether we consider those predictions to be true or not.

### History of Historicism

In the traditional way of defining historicism, as an all-or-nothing school of interpretation, appeals to the history of prophetic interpretation often tried to show how details from current Adventist expositions were shared by interpreters in the past. The “whole school” had to be justified from history, so to speak.<sup>15</sup>

If we reduce historicism to one label among many and use it only about events between (not including) the author’s day and the Parousia, all we have to show by appealing to the history of interpretation is that many have believed in the possibility of true predictive prophecy and found it in parts of Daniel and Revelation. When the popularity of that has been demonstrated, the interpreter can turn from the history of prophetic interpretation to exegetical studies to show which parts of Daniel and Revelation he thinks specifically predict history.

The list of prominent interpreters using the historicist approach for at least some part of Daniel or Revelation is quite impressive. Throughout most of history since the writing of Daniel, historicism has been widely used.

**Jewish Apocalyptic Writings.** Many Jewish apocalypses were written in the period 200 BC to 100 AD. Whether we see them as influenced by and commenting upon the biblical book of Daniel or see them merely as being written at the same time and in the same environment as Daniel, the nature of these apocalypses throw great light on Daniel. Interestingly, several of these apocalyptic writings clearly attempt predictions of the future—the time between their writing and the end of the world (historicist prophecies).

In chapters 91 and 93 of the fifth book of *I Enoch* we find a prophecy of ten consecutive periods, each lasting one “week.”<sup>16</sup> The weeks are obviously symbolical, since events that take longer time than a literal week are mentioned, like the building of a house and a kingdom in week five (verse 7). John Collins comments: “The substance of this apocalypse is made up not of heavenly cosmology but of an overview of history. The history is highly schematized and

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<sup>15</sup>See the grand and truly impressive project behind Le Roy Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 4 vols. (Washington: Review & Herald, 1946–1954).

<sup>16</sup>James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1:74

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

organized into periods of ‘weeks.’”<sup>17</sup> “This division into a set number of periods is a common feature of the ‘historical’ type of apocalypse.”<sup>18</sup>

Where does the ancient author see himself in this series of ten periods? Collins thinks that the author saw six of the periods in the past. “In the case of the Apocalypse of Weeks, the time of the real author is evidently to be situated in the seventh week.”<sup>19</sup> If Collins is correct in this, these last periods call for the historicist approach. In the seventh period the text mentions coming oppression, the Gentiles to be conquered, towers or castles to be overthrown, and many sinners to be destroyed (91:8–11). In the eighth period, the “week of righteousness,” the righteous will prosper over against the oppressors and sinners (91:12–13). In the ninth period, sin will disappear from the earth and moral perfection or uprightness take over (91:14). Finally, in the tenth period, the day of God’s final judgment takes place, executed by the angels, the first heaven departs and a new heaven appears, and eternity replaces temporality (91:15–17).

In the *Apocalypse of Abraham* chapters 29–30, the writer receives a vision of twelve periods or “hours” of history that are to take place before the eschaton (29:1–3, 9).<sup>20</sup> The events of each period are listed in chapter 30, and the end of the world takes place in chapter 31. “The historical axis is divided into twelve hours, a form of periodization that is also found in *2 Baruch*’s vision.”<sup>21</sup> Where in the series of twelve the author of Abraham saw himself is hard to determine. If he intended the twelve periods to be in his future, we need to interpret this apocalypse with the historicist approach.

In *2 Baruch* chapter 27 we also find twelve periods of history with different events taking place,<sup>22</sup> but it is not clear whether these are meant to cover the time span from the author to the eschaton, or are all part of the immediate events surrounding the end of the world itself.

In the fifth vision in chapters 11–12 of *4 Ezra*, a symbolic vision of an eagle is given where different parts of the bird’s body represent different time periods and reigning kings.<sup>23</sup> The vision itself is in chapter 11, and the interpretation is given in chapter 12. This writing is clearly meant as an interpretation and elaboration of the biblical book of Daniel. In 12:11–15 the eagle is said to be a more detailed prophecy of the fourth kingdom in Daniel. First “twelve kings will reign, one after another” (12:14), then another eight kings (v. 20), of which the last two will reign until the end (v. 21), when three more kings will appear

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<sup>17</sup>John J. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 63.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>Charlesworth, 1:703–705.

<sup>21</sup>Collins, 229.

<sup>22</sup>Charlesworth, 1:630.

<sup>23</sup>Charlesworth, 1:548–551.

*VETNE: A DEFINITION AND SHORT HISTORY OF HISTORICISM*

(v.23). Then a lion will appear—God’s Messiah—and make an end of the eagle with its many kings.

This eagle, explained by Ezra to be the fourth kingdom in Daniel, is interpreted by most scholars, including Collins, as Rome.<sup>24</sup> So the author of 4 Ezra clearly interprets Daniel with the historicist method, reading Daniel as a predictive prophecy about times beyond the days of Daniel. Where in his series of Roman kings does the author of 4 Ezra see his own time? Does he believe the end is imminent, or that many more kings are to come first? If the latter, then even the prophecy of 4 Ezra itself demands a historicist interpretation.

**Other Early Jewish Interpretations.** The translators behind the Alexandrian *Septuagint* (the early version, not the later Theodotian translation) read Daniel with the historicist approach, believing Daniel to contain predictions about future history. For instance, in Daniel 11:30 the “ships of Kittim” are interpreted and translated with *Ρωμαῖοι*—“the Romans.”<sup>25</sup>

The Jewish historian Josephus seems to interpret the fourth kingdom of Daniel 2 as the Roman empire and the stone kingdom as a future power that would overthrow the Romans.<sup>26</sup>

**Jesus and the Synoptics.** In Matthew 24:15 Jesus is said to refer to a prediction by “Daniel the prophet,” interpreting it as a future event. Mark 13:14 contains the same saying, but here only the prediction (clearly taken from Daniel) is given; the reference to Daniel is omitted. In the parallel account in Luke 21:21, Jesus also interprets the prophecy in Daniel as a future event and gives an even more detailed interpretation of it.

Whether one takes these sayings as authentic (as most Adventist scholars do) or as a product of the early Christian tradition, they are in any case evidence of early historicist readings of Daniel. Some in the early Christian church believed that Daniel had predicted events that were to take place after Daniel’s time and before the end of the world.

**Early Church Fathers.** The early Christian interpretations from the first three hundred years seem to agree on seeing prophecies in Daniel as reaching past Daniel’s time and into the Roman era.

The first chapter of the *Epistle of Barnabas* appeals to the reader to consider the seriousness of the “present circumstances” because “the last stumbling block is at hand” and cites the fourth beast and the ten horns of Daniel 7.<sup>27</sup>

Irenaeus likewise interpreted the fourth kingdom of Daniel 2 and 7 as the present-day Roman empire and believed that Rome in Irenaeus’ future was

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<sup>24</sup>Collins, 196; Froom, 1:288. Since Froom is still widely consulted by many Adventists, I have included the references to each of his discussions for the convenience of the reader.

<sup>25</sup>Alfred Rahlfs, *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979).

<sup>26</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities* 10:10, in William Whiston, trans., *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988), 280; cf. Froom 1:199.

<sup>27</sup>*Epistle of Barnabas* 1:1–5, in Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 279, 281. Cf. Froom 1:210.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

going to be divided up into smaller kingdoms, as suggested by the iron mixed with clay (Dan 2) and the ten horns of the fourth beast (Dan 7, Rev 13).<sup>28</sup>

Tertullian asked his readers to pray for the stability and unity of the Roman empire in order to delay the prophesied breakup of Rome and thus the coming of the antichrist.<sup>29</sup>

Clement of Alexandria provided one of the first documented interpretations we have of Daniel 9 predicting the time of Jesus Christ's arrival.<sup>30</sup>

Eusebius followed the other early Christian writers in identifying the four kingdoms of Daniel 2 and 7 as Assyria/Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Rome. The seventy weeks of Daniel 9 Eusebius saw as a 490 year prediction of the timing of Messiah, stretching from the Persian period to the time of Jesus.<sup>31</sup>

Cyril, the fourth century bishop of Jerusalem, wrote that the fourth kingdom being Rome was a well-established tradition in the church. "The fourth beast shall be a fourth kingdom upon earth, which shall surpass all kingdoms. And that this kingdom is that of the Romans, has been the tradition of the Church's interpreters."<sup>32</sup>

Jerome took the prediction-fulfillments a step further, claiming that the time of the break-up of Rome, as he saw predicted in Daniel 2 and 7, had begun to take place in his time.<sup>33</sup> He refuted the Pagan Porphyry's proposal that Daniel was written in the second century as an after-the-events-took-place narrative about Antiochus Epiphanes.<sup>34</sup>

More names could be mentioned. The unified voice of the early Christian church, from the Synoptic Jesus to the leading church historians and scholars of the formative years, was that the biblical apocalypses had in certain sections predicted events to take place in history from the time of their writing down to the end of the world. Historicism reigned.

**Middle Ages.** Historicist expositions were less common in the middle ages, due possibly to an increasing use of allegorical, ahistorical interpretations of Scripture in general and Augustine's downplay of a literal second Parousia

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<sup>28</sup>Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 5, chap. 26, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1885 [reprint 1989]), 1:554–555; cf. Froom 1:244–245, 407.

<sup>29</sup>Tertullian, *Apology*, ch. 32, as found in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:42–43. See also the other references to Tertullian in Froom 1:258.

<sup>30</sup>Clement, *Stromata*, book 1, chap. 21, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 2:329; cf. Froom 1:265–266.

<sup>31</sup>Eusebius, *Church History*, 1:6, in Paul L. Meier, *Eusebius: The Church History: A New Translation with Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 35. See also Eusebius, *Proof of the Gospel*, 8:2; *Selections from the Prophets*, 3:45; cf. Froom 1:363–364.

<sup>32</sup>*The Catechetical Lectures of S. Cyril*, 15:13, as found in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, 7:108. Cf. Froom 1:413.

<sup>33</sup>Jerome, *Commentary on Daniel* 2:40, as found in Gleason L. Archer, trans., *Jerome's Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 32; cf. Froom 1:442–443.

<sup>34</sup>Jerome, *Commentary on Daniel*, prologue (Archer, 15–16).

*VETNE: A DEFINITION AND SHORT HISTORY OF HISTORICISM*

(which the early church had seen in the stone-kingdom replacing the Roman empire in the prophecies of Daniel).

Though no longer in the majority, the list of interpreters using the historicist approach to Daniel and Revelation is also long for the medieval period. One of the best known is Thomas Aquinas, who held the four kingdoms predicted in Daniel 2 and 7 to be Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Rome, the ten horns as ten future kings to come in the time of antichrist, and the 70 weeks of Daniel 9 as 490 (lunar) years predicting the coming of Jesus.<sup>35</sup>

According to Froom, other lesser known medieval interpreters using the historicist approach were Bruno of Segni, Anselm of Havelberg, Rupert of Deutz, Andreas of Caesarea, Sargis d'Aberga, Berengaud, Pseudo-Methodius, Bede, Robert Grosseteste (identifying the papacy as the antichrist), Peter Comestor, Albertus Magnus, Joachim of Floris (seven seals and seven trumpets cover the Christian era), Villanova (urging fellow preachers to preach more on the prophecies, including Daniel 9, which he believed foretold the time of Jesus' first advent), Olivi (who believed the Christian church had become corrupt, as prophesied in the symbol of Babylon in Revelation, and that the seven seals and seven trumpets are seven periods of church history), Emperor Frederick II (who held the pope to be the predicted antichrist), Eberhard (who claimed the papal system was predicted in the little horn of Daniel), Dante, Francesco Petrarch, John Milicz, and the Waldensian Christians (who believed the corruption of the Christian church was predicted in the symbols of the harlot and Babylon of Revelation).<sup>36</sup>

**Renaissance and Reformation.** With the Protestant Reformation we return again to a period of dominance for the historicist approach. I mention here only two major early writers.

The English "Morning Star of the Reformation," John Wyclif (1324–1384), believed strongly that the corruption of the papacy was the event predicted in the prophecies of the antichrist, the little horn of Daniel 7, and the harlot woman of Revelation 17. The four kingdoms of Daniel 2 and 7 were Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome.<sup>37</sup>

When Martin Luther (1483–1546) saw what he considered as the hopelessness of reforming the Church of Rome, he became increasingly convinced that it was apostate and that this apostasy was predicted in Daniel and Revelation.

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<sup>35</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio in Daniele*, chap. 2, 7 and 9; cf. Froom 1:656–657.

<sup>36</sup>See the references for these twenty interpreters respectively in Froom 1:559, 562, 568, 569, 574, 579, 583, 612, 624, 653, 654, 688, 760, 765–772, 795, 798, 876, 2:21, 29, 31.

<sup>37</sup>Rudolf Buddensieg, ed., *John Wyclif's De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* (London: Trüber, 1907), 262–272. Parts of this work, including some but not all of this section on Daniel, has recently been translated into English: Ian Christopher Levy, *John Wyclif: On the Truth of Holy Scripture* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 349–352. The rest is not too inaccessible in the Latin; cf. Froom 2:54–58.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

When Luther burned the pope's bull of excommunication, he burned it as the bull of the prophesied antichrist and Babylon.

Luther's view on Daniel was the traditional one. The fourth kingdom was the Roman empire, while the break-up of iron into clay in the feet (Daniel 2) predicted the break-up of the Roman empire into smaller nations. Luther wrote that it was common knowledge that the 70 weeks of Daniel 9 should be interpreted with a day for a year and that it predicted the death of Christ.<sup>38</sup>

This historicist approach to prophecy remained the common and accepted approach among Protestants for the next three hundred years, to such a degree that scholars sometimes define historicism simply as the approach to prophecy of Protestants up until the mid-19th century.<sup>39</sup>

Today the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the only major denomination officially using the historicist approach—the most common approach during two millennia of biblical apocalyptic interpretation. If Adventists wish to see the use of historicism increased among other interpreters, it might be necessary to change the way the approach is communicated. Many scholars do not believe in the possibility of true, predictive prophecy, and the gap between Adventists and these interpreters cannot be closed. The community of believers who are open to this possibility is large, however—in our days as it has always been. To these people Adventists should demonstrate carefully from the biblical text, case by case, where and why one sees history in advance.

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<sup>38</sup>See extensive references in Froom 1:21; 2:252–277.

<sup>39</sup>E.g. Kai Arasola, *The End of Historicism: Millerite Hermeneutic of Time Prophecies in the Old Testament* (Sigtuna: Datem, 1990), 28: “For the purposes of this research historicism is defined as the method of prophetic interpretation which dominated British and American exegesis from late seventeenth century to the middle of nineteenth century.” Cf. Froom, vol. 3.