

MODES OF INTERPRETING REVELATION: THE LOCUSTS IN REVELATION 9:1-12

PRETERIST INTERPRETATIONS

Definition: “Pre” = “before.” Preterists believe most of the prophecies in the Revelation have already been fulfilled, either in the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., or at least in the days of the early church.

Preterism, Example 1: from *Revelation: the Triumphant Reign of Christ*, by Joe Morecraft III (a partial preterist): “Locusts were used to symbolize the pagan armies-invaders of Israel in the OT – Joel 1:2f; 2:1-11; Dt. 28:42. There were figures of destruction and devastation.... Comparing this text with Dt. 28:42 and Lk. 21:20, it becomes easy for us to identify these hideous armies with the Roman armies and their besieging of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. [Rev. 9:11], The king of the Locusts: This verse contains a derogatory reference to the Greek god, Apollo, and those Roman emperors who claimed a special relationship to him.... Apollo and Apollyon are derived from the same Greek word meaning, destroyer.... A locust was one of the symbols of Apollo.... Nero, during whose reign Revelation was written, imitated and aped Apollo and later Domitian claimed to be his incarnation.... The destructive hosts of hell, inspired by Satan, has as their king, the emperor of Rome. Here, again, the Bible presents us with God’s assessment of all anti-Christian civil governments!!!!”

Preterism, Example 2: Duncan McKenzie, *Antichrist and the Second Coming*. “The connection between Apollyon and Apollo is significant; the Roman legion that Titus headed up was dedicated to Apollo; it was the XVth Apollinaris (“sacred to Apollo”). Given this and the fact that the locust was one of Apollo’s symbols, it is possible that Titus’ legion actually carried banners with locusts on them. Notice that the shape of the ‘locusts’ in Revelation 9 is like horses prepared for battle (v. 7), the sound of their wings was like chariots running into battle (v. 9). These locusts had a sting in their tail like a scorpion. Interestingly enough, one of the weapons drawn into battle by the Roman war horses was a quick firing arrow launcher; it was nicknamed the scorpion by the Romans. In addition to all this, the Roman army’s armor was segmented, (similar to the physiology of a locust); they even looked like locust! In Revelation 9:5, 10 there are references to this locust army’s invasion being five months (‘... their power was to hurt men five months’ v. 10). When Titus came from Egypt for the final siege of Jerusalem at Passover of AD 70 the campaign took five months.”

Other Preterist views:

- The locusts may have represented the incursion of the Goths and “those barbarous People” that interrupted the Roman Empire during the time of Decius.
- The locusts may have represented the Jewish heretics who denied Christ. Most notably, Theodotus, Praxeas, Noetus, Paul of Samosata, Sabellius, and Arius.

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Definition: Historicists believe the details in the book correspond to actual people, places, events and ideas throughout church history between the first and second comings of Christ.

Historicism, Example 1: John Wesley’s *Bible Notes*: Wesley sees the locusts as representing the Persians in the 5th-6th centuries A.D.: “There went forth locusts - A known emblem of a numerous, hostile, hurtful people. Such were the Persians, from whom the Jews, in the sixth century, suffered beyond expression. In the year 540 their academies were stopped, nor were they permitted to have a president for near fifty years. In 589 this affliction ended; but it began long before 540. The prelude of it was about the year 455 and 474: the main storm came on in the reign of Cabades, and lasted from 483 to 532. Toward the beginning of the sixth century, Mar Rab Isaac, president of the academy, was put to death. Hereon followed an insurrection of the Jews, which lasted seven years before they were conquered by the Persians. Some of them were then put to death, but not many; the rest were closely imprisoned. And from this time the nation of the Jews were hated and persecuted by the Persians, till they had well nigh rooted them out.”

Historicism, Example 2: Family New Testament Notes (1856): “The smoke arising out of the bottomless pit and darkening the sun and the air may be taken as an apt emblem of the Mohammedan delusion. Out of this smoke come the swarms of locusts which well represent the hosts of the Saracens; for these fierce invaders had their origin in this satanic delusion, and were thoroughly animated by its spirit. The star fallen from heaven that opens the bottomless pit will then be Mohammed, the introducer of this pestilent superstition, with all who aided and abetted him in it. The description of the star as fallen from heaven, is thought by many to symbolize the fact that Mohammedism had its occasion in the deep corruption of Christianity that preceded it. Five months; the period of the duration of natural locusts. It here denotes a time appointed and limited by God; according to some, 150 years — a day being taken for a year — which was about the period during which the Saracens extended their conquests, though their empire lasted much longer. As the torment of a scorpion; compare verse, Rev. 9:10. The Saracens were cruel and bigoted conquerors... This seems to be especially the torment of their stings. Wherever they went they left behind them the poison of their false religion.”

Other Historical Interpretations for the locusts:

- The Roman Catholic clergy, who come out of the smoke, that is, the devil's great influence on the world. They are numerous. Their king is Abaddon; they destroy every green herb, nipping religion, in all places, in the bud.
- The barbarians from the North that ravaged Italy during the one hundred and fifty years from the invasion under Alaric to the capture of Rome by Totila.
- According to Bellarmine and other Catholic commentators: The locusts are Luther and the Lutherans.

FUTURIST INTERPRETATIONS

Definition: Futurists believe most of the prophecies of the book are yet to take place at a time of great crisis just prior to the end of the age.

Futurism, Example 1: J.A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse*. Seiss sees the locusts as literal, to be unleashed by Satan just prior to Christ's return: "They are extraordinary and infernal agents, whom Satan is permitted to let loose upon the guilty world, as a part of the judgment of the great day. All the seals, trumpets, and vials of this book relate to that day. It is a day of miracle throughout—a day of wonders—a day of fierce and tormenting wrath. It is everywhere so described in the Scriptures. And we do greatly mistreat the records which God has given for our learning, if we allow the skeptical rationalizing of our own darkened hearts to persuade us that such supernatural things are impossible, and therefore must not be literally understood. On the same ground the whole doctrine of the judgment may be explained away and, every article of the distinctive Christian faith, until we have nothing left but a book of preeminent pretensions and equally preeminent obscurity, uncertainty, and emptiness."

Futurism, Example 2: William R. Newell, *The Book of the Revelation*. Newell also interprets the locusts literally: "When we remember that the Revelation is *not a sealed book*, we shall have no difficulty in regarding the *locusts* that God says will proceed from this smoke, as actual locusts.... It is because of the fog of unbelief, and the super-fog of 'historical interpretation,' that this passage has been considered 'hard to understand.' If we do not *believe* that God means what He so plainly and explicitly says in Revelation 9, let us *say* we do not believe it, and be honest. But let us not dare to bring in vain imaginations and call them interpretations of Scripture.... It preens our pride to point as wise ones to this or that in Church history and say, "There was the fulfillment of, for example, this locust army." But the trouble is... Christ said about this part of the book... that it was to be fulfilled after Church times and Church history are closed."

Futurism, Example 3: H.A. Ironside, *Revelation*. Ironside sees them as symbolic but yet future: "That we do not have any merely literal plague of

locusts in view here [is] evident: 'And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads. And to them it was given that they should not kill them, but that they should be tormented five months...' Our Lord Himself limits Satan's power in the same way, when, referring to this very period and the plague of false teaching, he says, "If it were possible, they would deceive the very elect." Thank God, it is not possible... In verses 7-12, we have a highly symbolic description of this delusion... The shapes of the locust we are told, are like unto horses prepared unto battle, thus symbolizing their rapid progress and apparently providential irresistibility in obtaining sway over those who are unprepared to do battle with them. "Upon their heads were crowns like gold" – because apostasy during that time of delusion will seem to carry all before it triumphantly, driving from Christendom the last vestige of orthodoxy.... Faces of men would seem to imply intelligence, and these evil teachers make a great appeal to human reason and ridicule the truth of God... Moreover, they are characterized by intense seductiveness and attractive fancies, typified by "the hair of women"... But as seductive and apparently rational as these systems are when they are first presented, they prove at last to have teeth like the teeth of lions, tearing to pieces those who put their trust in them.

IDEOLOGICAL/SPIRITUAL INTERPRETATION

Definition. The people and events of the book of Revelation represent important principles in the spiritual warfare of the church.

Ideological, Example 1: William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*: "The destruction, the utter ruin, the desolation and despondency caused by a locust storm can be understood only by the person who has seen and experienced it. These locusts, unbelievably terrible in their destructive power, are a fit symbol of the far more terrible and destructive hellish locusts which the apostle is about to picture. Under the symbolism of a locust plague John describes the powers and influences of hell operating in the hearts and lives of wicked men. No ordinary locusts are these; they do not destroy vegetation; they do not even harm it. They harm the men who have not been sealed (cf. Rev. 7:1-8). Yet – glory to God – the duration of their destructive work has been definitely determined by God's permissive decree: five months, no longer. There follows a very graphic description of these hellish locusts (9:7-11). We should take the picture as a whole... – can you conceive of a more frightful and horrible and true picture of the operation of the powers of darkness in the souls of the wicked during this present age? Here are the demons, robbing men of all light, that is, of all true righteousness and holiness, joy and peace, wisdom and understanding. And their king is 'the angel of the abyss', whose name, in two languages – Hebrew and Greek – is Destroyer. The entire symbolic picture emphasizes this one idea: terror and destruction, for that is Satan's work!"