

HISTORICISM: THE ADVENTIST APPROACH? A RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGES TO HISTORICISM¹

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The purpose of this article is to respond to various challenges against the historicist approach to the book of Revelation. After presenting debates among scholars, including Adventist scholars, concerning the historicist approach, this study proposes an approach that is based on the original readers' perspective as they read the Apocalypse. Rev 1:19, 4:1, and 21:6 establish the sectional division of the book: from ἃ εἰσὶν "things which are" (1:19), through ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι "things that must take place" (4:1), until γέγοναν "they have taken place" (21:6). This suggests that the Apocalypse itself calls for historicism.

Key Words: hermeneutics, Revelation, Historicism (the historicist approach), original readers

1. Introduction

Among the four interpretive approaches to the book of Revelation,² the historicist approach has been challenged.³ Scholars have tried to show its

¹ The term *historicism* is understood as the historicist approach in comparison to the other approaches to the book of Revelation, namely, the preterist, the futurist, and the idealist approaches, and not understood as historicism from the perspective of the historical-critical method used, for example, in S. S. Davaney, *Historicism: The Once and Future Challenge for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006). The present study has been presented in the Apocalyptic Literature section of the International Society of Biblical Literature congress, held at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, on July 11, 2008. I would like to recognize the valuable interaction with international scholars following the presentation as well as the helpful comments of the two unknown reviewers of the *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* international review board that have helped to shape the final draft of this study.

² For a brief review of the four approaches to the book of Revelation, see Joel N. Musvosvi, "The Issue of Genre and Apocalypse Prophecy," *Asia Adventist Seminary Studies* 5 (2002): 43–60. See also Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (rev. ed; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 21–30; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 18–22; Gerhard F. Hasel, "Israel in Bible Prophecy," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 3.1 (1992): 123.

³ Other approaches have existed as responses to this approach. Cf. Musvosvi, "The Issue of Genre and Apocalypse Prophecy," 49–50.

weaknesses.⁴ Furthermore, the historicist approach seems to be excluded in the attempts of scholars to blend interpretive approaches to the book of Revelation.⁵ This approach is claimed as “clearly not in vogue.”⁶ This raises the question for the interpreter: Is the historicist approach still relevant in interpreting the biblical Apocalypse?⁷

The purpose of this study is to present some attempts made by Adventist scholars to respond to various challenges against the historicist approach to the book of Revelation, since Seventh-day Adventists have been branded advocates of historicism.⁸ Finally, this article will propose an approach to the book of Revelation based on some literary indicators found in the book itself.

- ⁴ Craig S. Keener, *Revelation* (New International Version Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 27, for example, argues that “the links between Revelation’s contents and history’s events always have proved forced.” Osborne, *Revelation*, 19, points out, what he considers, the weakness of the historicist approach, including “... its identification only with Western church history, the inherent speculation involved in the parallels with world history, the fact that it must be reworked with each new period in world history, the total absence of any relevance for John or his original readers.”
- ⁵ Keener, *Revelation*, 27, calls it the “eclectic (mixed) approach.” George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 14, tries to blend the preterist and the futurist methods. As a result, he concludes that Revelation has a double application, namely, to its contemporary readership and to the modern church. Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 29, makes a contrast between future prediction and timeless truth. He claims that the author of Revelation “was more concerned with his reader’s faithful service to God than with the specific sequence of events that would transpire in the end times.” As a result, Koester sees Revelation not as a review of history but as cycles of visions whose chronological sequence is not clear. The most important thing in the book is the message of “encouragement designed to promote faithful endurance.” Ibid. Osborne, *Revelation*, 21, suggests that the solution for a better approach “is to allow the preterist, idealist, and futurist methods to interact in such a way that the strengths are maximized and the weaknesses minimized.”
- ⁶ Steve Gregg, *Revelation Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Tomas Nelson, 1997), 34.
- ⁷ Hasel, “Israel in Bible Prophecy,” 125, recognizes a challenge by futurism that is “knocking at our door, the door of historicism, urging to be received. Its aim is to modify, challenge, and, if possible, to replace the historicist method of prophetic interpretation which has so profoundly shaped Christianity at large and Protestantism in the last centuries.” Challenge to the historicist approach is not a new issue. In 1958, in response to LeRoy E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1950), Roy L. Aldrich accused Froom as trying “to create the impression that the historical stream of orthodox prophetic interpretation culminates in Seventh-day Adventism.” Roy L. Aldrich, “Can the End of the Age Be Computed by the Year-Day Theory?,” *BSac* 115 (1958): 159.
- ⁸ Gregg, *Revelation Four Views*, 34.

2. Attempts Made to Answer Challenges Against the Historicist Approach

Historicist scholars are not silent in facing the challenges against the historicist approach.⁹ Alberto R. Timm, for example, seems to suggest that Rev 2 and 3 may be interpreted from the historicist perspective,¹⁰ a view that is opposed by Jon Paulien, another Adventist scholar.¹¹ Timm introduces the “year-day principle” that he considers as “a basic hermeneutical component of the historicist school of prophetic interpretation.”¹²

In his conclusions, Timm opts that the time “ten days” of Rev 2:10 is part of the miniature symbolization of the church in Smyrna. For that reason, he argues that the church in Smyrna is a miniature symbol of the Christian church between A.D. 100 and A.D. 313. Therefore, Rev 2 and 3 should be interpreted in the historicist perspective.¹³ However, Timm’s condition-based argument needs further development.¹⁴

Ranko Stefanovic seems to suggest applying the historicist approach only to certain passages of the Apocalypse. In stating the method used for his commentary on Revelation, Stefanovic impresses a neutral position: “A good commentary on Revelation does not favor any particular one of the traditional approaches.”¹⁵ Further he argues:

⁹ By historicist scholars I mean biblical scholars who apply the historicist approach to either the whole book of Revelation or even only to certain passages of it. I will focus on the responses of Seventh-day Adventist scholars, one of the “remaining bastions” of historicism. Cf. Jon Paulien, “The End of Historicism? Reflections on the Adventist Approach to Biblical Apocalyptic—Part Two,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17.1 (2006): 180.

¹⁰ Alberto R. Timm, “Miniature Symbolization and the Year-Day Principle of Prophetic Interpretation,” *AUSS* 42 (2004): 149–67.

¹¹ Jon Paulien, “The End of Historicism? Reflections on the Adventist Approach to Biblical Apocalyptic—Part One,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14.2 (2003): 20.

¹² Timm, “Miniature Symbolization,” 149.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 167. By putting the church in Smyrna in the Christian church historical line, Timm sees the seven churches in progressive line of church history.

¹⁴ “... if the ‘church of Smyrna’ is considered just as a reference to the first-century Christian community of that specific town, *then* the ‘ten days’ would have been taken just as a literal ten days. But *if* that church is understood as a miniature symbol of the Christian church between about the close of the 1st century c. A.D. 100 and about A.D. 313, when Constantine espoused the cause of the church, *then* the ‘ten days’ should also be considered as a miniature symbol of longer period, most probably ten literal years” [*italics added*]. *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁵ Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2002), 11.

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 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.¹⁶

However, Stefanovic does not provide guidelines as to how to determine whether a passage belongs to John's day, or to end times, or to the course of history. Although Stefanovic's approach seems to give place to all four approaches, in the section on Rev 2 and 3 of his commentary Stefanovic includes a summary of Christian periods represented by the seven churches.¹⁷ This implies a historicist perspective.

Edwin Reynolds proposes that "only a balanced approach to the interpretation of the book, keeping in mind the true object of the revelation, will yield satisfactory results."¹⁸ By a balanced approach he means: (1) each vision of Revelation has a personal message to the original audience; (2) each vision should be understood within the historical context; (3) each vision has personal present fulfillment; (4) what lies ahead is promise to those who make right decisions in the present.¹⁹

Although this approach seems to be related to all the four approaches: preterism, historicism, idealism, and futurism,²⁰ Reynolds's emphasis is predominantly on the historicist approach. He understands that, within the perspective of the historical context, each vision of Revelation portrays historical events but at the same time contains a personal message for the reader, especially within the Christian experience. In this case historical application of events is different from a personal message for any individual at any given time.²¹ Pertaining to the seven churches, Reynolds argues, "The

¹⁶ Ibid., 12. He calls his approach, "the approach of letting the text govern the interpretation." Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 117–51.

¹⁸ Edwin Reynolds, "Ten Keys for Interpreting Revelation," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11 (2000): 275.

¹⁹ Ibid., 275–76.

²⁰ The four components of Reynolds's balanced approach are matched to the four approaches to Revelation: (1) each vision of Revelation has a personal message to the original audience (preterism); (2) each vision should be understood within the historical context (historicism); (3) each vision has personal present application (idealism); (4) what lies ahead is promise to those who make right decisions in the present (futurism).

²¹ Ibid., 276.

seven churches represent the complete cross-section of the church in every age [...]."²² This is a historicist understanding.

Reynolds's proposal may be understood from the point of view of an interpreter living in the twenty-first century, who has data of historical events that are considered as fulfillments of some visions of Revelation. Some events portrayed in the visions that were future from the perspective of the first century readers have now become history and past from the perspective of the twenty-first century readers. If the historicist approach is relevant for the modern readers, it must also be relevant for the original audience. However, from the perspective of the original audience of Revelation, what they had—the text before them—was about their present and future. They could not base their historicist understanding on past events. The clue that might direct them to the historicist approach was the text before them. Therefore, Reynolds's proposal must be supported by internal evidences—namely, the text of Revelation—that historicist approach is relevant not only for the modern readers but also was for the original audience.

Another attempt to answer the challenge against historicism is a redefinition of historicism itself. Reimar Vetne distinguishes historicism as a "school of interpretation" from historicism as "one-Label-Among-Many."²³ He describes the historicist school of interpretation as "take-it-or-leave-it" or "all-or-nothing" approach, in which "once you use the historicist method, everything else you do is by definition also historicism."²⁴ Vetne redefines historicism not as a school of interpretation, but an approach that applies only to historical apocalyptic.²⁵

The main advantage of Vetne's proposal, according to him, is for Adventist scholars to be able to build a dialogue with those of a different opinion.²⁶ As to how to determine which sections of Revelation belong to historical apocalyptic, Vetne says: "It is the task of the interpreter to argue the case for historical apocalyptic in each individual section."²⁷ Vetne does not provide any definition, or explanation, of historical apocalyptic. However,

²² Ibid.

²³ Reimar Vetne, "A Definition and Short History of Historicism," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14.2 (2003): 4.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 7. Vetne defines 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*" [italics original]. He emphasizes that "historicism is a method limited to certain types of apocalyptic literature." Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 5.

²⁷ Ibid., 7.

he lays an initial foundation for Jon Paulien who later develops further characteristics for a historical apocalyptic.

Similar to Vetne, Jon Paulien suggests identifying genres in Revelation. He says that the genres of Revelation are a mixture of general prophecy, mystical apocalyptic, historical apocalyptic, epistles, and narrative.²⁸ He sets a challenge to Adventists:

If Adventists wish to revive the historicist approach to Revelation, therefore, they will need to pursue a thoroughgoing examination of the genre of Revelation's visionary passages on a case-by-case basis.²⁹

Paulien outlines the steps for interpreting passages in Revelation: first, the genre of a passage should be determined; next, when the genre is already determined, an approach can be applied. "A historicist approach is appropriate wherever the genre of a passage is clearly historical apocalyptic. Other genres call for other approaches."³⁰ Paulien sees that the seven churches (Rev 2 and 3) do not belong to historicism.³¹

In the part II of his article, Paulien establishes four general principles for determining historical apocalyptic genre based on a literary analysis of Dan 2 and 7, two visions that portray the same sequence of the world kingdoms from the time of Daniel to the coming of God's kingdom. He argues that whenever a passage in Revelation has allusions to Dan 7, that passage is historical apocalyptic.³² After establishing, what he calls "taxonomy of historical apocalyptic,"³³ Paulien argues that Revelation 12 is a historical apocalyptic, since it has parallels with Daniel 7 and also meets all other criteria of the historical apocalyptic genre.³⁴

Paulien is correct in saying that Rev 12 belongs to historicism. However, as far as the chapters of Revelation are concerned, one must analyze the other twenty-one chapters of the book to see whether each of the chapters is

²⁸ Paulien, "The End of Historicism? Part One," 34.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³² Paulien, "The End of Historicism? Part Two," 186, 193. The four principles are: (1) There are textual markers for sequence, e.g., "after you, ... another... next" (Dan 2:39), "in the time of those kings" (2:44); (2) The sequence of both the symbols and the explanation is consistent. Although the sequence markers do not occur in the explanations, the sequence remains the same as it is in the symbols; (3) The vision and explanation have a comprehensive sweep of events that covers the period of time from the time of the visionary to the *eschaton*; and (4) Parallels with earlier historical apocalyptic are evident. Whenever a passage in Revelation has allusions to Dan 7, that passage is historical apocalyptic.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 194–207.

a historical apocalyptic or not. It might be advisable to reverse the work by analyzing the genre of Revelation as a whole before looking into specific chapters. Furthermore, consideration of the general structure of the book may contribute to the appropriate treatment of the book as apocalyptic.³⁵

3. A Proposed Approach

This article would like to propose an approach to Revelation that is based on the division of the historical and the eschatological sections of the book.³⁶ The division is discussed from the perspective of both the original readers and modern readers of Revelation.³⁷ Approaching Revelation from the perspective of the original readers is important because John “must have believed that the original readers would understand his book.”³⁸ Before doing this, it may be necessary to see the nature of Revelation as an apocalyptic prophecy and how familiar the original recipients were with apocalyptic writing and mind-set.

3.1. Genre of Revelation

Revelation is an apocalyptic prophecy by nature. The term “apocalyptic prophecy” is used here not merely to distinguish it from general proph-

³⁵ Roy Gane, “Genre Awareness and Interpretation of the Book of Daniel,” in *To Understand the Scriptures: Essays in Honor of William H. Shea* (ed. David Merling; Berrien Springs: Institute of Archaeology/Siegfried H. Horn Archaeological Museum, 1997), 139–40, who argues that “‘apocalypse’ is a genre and genres are represented by whole works ... an apocalypse includes a narrative framework which leads into and out of visionary material.”

³⁶ By historical section I mean the section that covers events that would happen between John’s time and the *eschaton*, and by eschatological section I mean the section that covers events that will “take place at the *eschaton* and beyond.” Reynolds, “Ten Keys for Interpreting Revelation,” 265. Similar also Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 36–37.

³⁷ By “original readers” I understand the first century Christians who read the letters to the seven churches, and by “modern readers” the twenty-first century readers.

³⁸ Musvosvi, “The Issue of Genre and Apocalypse Prophecy,” 46. He describes that John’s Apocalypse was to be understood by his audience because “John the author was a pastor who was writing to his congregations. He was not an ivory-tower mystic, removed from the daily realities of his people.” *Ibid.* Similar also George B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John* (BNTC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1966), 3. He asked a key question: “What did those early Christians know about this book that we do not know?”

ecy.³⁹ Rather, the term is used to show that Revelation is a general prophecy and at the same time an apocalypse.⁴⁰

It is a prophecy because the author himself calls it “the words of this prophecy” (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19),⁴¹ and the book contains prophecies of future events (1:1; 22:6).⁴² It is also apocalyptic. Actually the word ἀποκάλυψις “unveiling, uncovering, revealing” is the very first word of the book of Revelation.⁴³ So inseparable is the relationship between prophecy and apocalyptic genres of Revelation that the book may be called “prophetic apocalypse or apocalyptic prophecy.”⁴⁴

Apocalyptic is not only a genre but also a “mind-set of the group that follows apocalyptic beliefs.”⁴⁵ The audience of Revelation was already familiar with Jewish apocalyptic works, and these works influenced the mind-set of the audience.⁴⁶ Revelation is full of symbolic language that is common to the audience.⁴⁷

³⁹ For comparison between general prophecy and apocalyptic prophecy, see Paulien, “The End of Historicism? Part One,” 28.

⁴⁰ Apocalypse is defined as “a genre of 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.” John J. Collins, “Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” in *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (ed. John J. Collins; Semeia 14; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 9, as quoted in Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 6. See also John M. Court, *Revelation* (NTG; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 80; Arthur W. Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 143. Wainwright suggests that the genre of apocalypse is similar to prophecy.

⁴¹ The author uses the genitive expressions τῆς προφητείας τοῦ βιβλίου τούτου “the prophecy of this book,” (22:7, 10, 18) and τοῦ βιβλίου τῆς προφητείας ταύτης “the book of this prophecy” (22:19) interchangeably. This suggests that the book may also be called the prophecy. The near demonstrative pronouns τούτου (neuter, referring to the book) and ταύτης (feminine, referring to the prophecy) show that the author is not talking about any other book or any other prophecy but the book of Revelation and the prophecy contained in it.

⁴² See also Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 48.

⁴³ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 7, argues that it is called apocalyptic because John “is taken in vision to God’s throne-room in heaven to learn secrets of the divine purpose.”

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 14. See also Paul S. Minear, *New Testament Apocalyptic* (Interpreting Biblical Texts; Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 44. He suggests, for example, that the Christians in Smyrna had already developed a “pattern of thinking” that helped them in understanding the message addressed to them.

⁴⁶ For example, the use of Enoch in Jude. For the information about the familiarity of 1 and 2 Enoch in the early church, see E. Isaac, “1 Enoch: A New Translation and Intro-

Unlike the occasional nature of any other NT epistle, it was not John's decision to respond to any particular issue in each of the seven churches. No specific names are greeted by John in the messages to the seven churches.⁴⁸ The messages to the seven churches are the continuation of the introductory vision in 1:9–20. They are part of the revelation of Christ through John (1:1–2). John "must write an apocalypse with the record of his vision, but he must enclose it in a letter to the churches."⁴⁹ One might say that the literary character of Revelation is a combination of three distinct literary types: apocalypse, prophecy, and letter,⁵⁰ in which apocalypse remains superlative.⁵¹ However, "if a letter, it is like no other early Christian

duction," *OTP* 1:8. See also some parallels between 4 Ezra and Revelation in B. M. Metzger, "4 Ezra: A New Translation and Introduction," *OTP* 1:522. Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 21, states: "Some of the Jewish apocalyptic works, like 1 Enoch (Ethiopic Enoch), 2 Enoch (the Slavonic Enoch), 4 Ezra, and 2 Baruch, were widely popular and read in the first century A.D." Kenneth A. Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation: Hermeneutical Guidelines with Brief Introduction to Literary Analysis* (2nd ed.; Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1979), 17, sees these as "extra-biblical apocalypses written shortly before the time of Revelation or approximately contemporary with it." In the OT, the book of Daniel is apocalyptic. It mostly contains eschatological visions. The apocalyptic characteristics of the book of Revelation are similar to that of Daniel. For further discussion about the characteristics or the nature of apocalyptic, see *ibid.*, 17–20. For a guide to interpret apocalyptic works, see Minear, *New Testament Apocalyptic*, 31, 45; and Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 28–29.

- ⁴⁷ Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 20, says: "In order to communicate his revelation effectively to those living in the pagan environment and culture, the inspired prophet used the language and terms that made sense to them." Keener, *Revelation*, 30, shows how the use of numbers was common for the first century readers. Osborne, *Revelation*, 16, mentions that the symbols used in Revelation are taken from the "common store of apocalyptic symbols in the first century." Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 26, gives three sources of symbols of Revelation: (1) preceding biblical literature, i.e., the OT; (2) the world of religious thought of the writer and hearers; and (3) customs and practices prevailing at the time. For a representative explanation about the familiarity of the original readers with the imagery language, see Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 17–22. See also Kenneth A. Strand, *Perspectives in the Book of Revelation: Essays on Apocalyptic Interpretation* (Naples: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1975), 24–31.
- ⁴⁸ For the occasional nature of NT epistles, see Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (2nd ed.; Manila: OMF Literature, 2002), 48.
- ⁴⁹ William M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (rev. ed.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 27.
- ⁵⁰ Osborne, *Revelation*, 12; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 12–19.
- ⁵¹ James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament: A Handbook* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 205–6, argues that "the vision motif, a central element in apocalypses, remains preeminent."

letter we possess. If an apocalypse, it is like no other apocalypse, if a prophecy, it is unique among prophecies."⁵²

With a unique document before them and with an apocalyptic mind setting, the original readers—specially selected seven churches (1:4, 11)—were now ready to read the visions written in Revelation.⁵³

3.2. Division between Historical and Eschatological Sections

Besides its literary characteristic as an apocalyptic prophecy, the literary division of Revelation may also help the readers to understand the book. Modern scholars recognize that there is division between the historical and the eschatological sections of the book.⁵⁴ Excluding 11:19–15:4 as the central piece of the book,⁵⁵ I would like to suggest a division between the historical

⁵² J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Guides to New Testament Exegesis 7; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 32.

⁵³ Each of these churches lies on a trade route. Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (JSNTSup 115; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 26, explains how a messenger could reach those seven churches: "A messenger coming from Patmos would arrive at Ephesus and moving North would come first to Smyrna and then up to Pergamum. If he then turned and descended in a south-easterly direction, he would come to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and finally Laodicea, where the route back to Ephesus would be due West." Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, 123, states: "There never was a time when those seven churches existed, and no others. Their situation shows that they could not well be the first seven to be founded: several other unnamed churches certainly must have been founded before Thyatira and Philadelphia."

⁵⁴ To mention some, Kenneth A. Strand, "Foundational Principles of Interpretation," in *Symposium of Revelation: Introductory and Exegetical Studies. Book 1* (ed. Frank B. Holbrook; Daniel and Revelation Committee Series 6; Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 29, considers chs. 1–14 as the historical section and chs. 15–22 as the eschatological section of the book. Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 36, argues that Rev 1:1–11:8 is the historical section and 11:9 to ch. 22 is the eschatological section of the book. Roy C. Naden, *The Lamb among the Beasts* (Hagerstown: Review & Herald, 1996), 20–21, draws a dividing line of the book between 12:10 and 12:11. Reynolds, "Ten Keys for Interpreting Revelation," 265, states, "In any case, chaps. 1–11 fall in the historical section of the book and chaps. 15–22 fall in the eschatological section of the book." Jürgen Roloff, *The Revelation of John* (trans. John E. Alsup; CC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 15, sees 1:1–3:22 as the first section and 4:1–22:5 as the second section. Frederick J. Murphy, *Fallen Is Babylon: The Revelation to John* (New Testament in Context; Harrisburg: TPI, 1998), 50, divides the book by visions. The introductory vision is 1:9–3:22, and 4:1–22:5 consist of two great cycles of visions.

⁵⁵ For a detailed discussion of the structure of Revelation, see Richard Sabuin, "Repentance in the Book of Revelation" (Ph.D. diss., Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, 2006), 87–102, which offers a review and evaluation of structures presented in current scholarship and proposes an alternative structure.

and eschatological sections of the book, based on the explicit purpose of Revelation. This purpose is stated in both the prologue and the epilogue of the book: δείξει τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει “to show his servants what must soon take place” (1:1; 22:6).⁵⁶ The original readers of Revelation would have read the book with an awareness of the purpose of the book. Indicated in the purpose is also the content of the book: ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει “what must soon take place.” The text before the original readers was about things that would soon take place. Any reemphasis of the purpose and the content of the book might help the original readers to understand what they were reading.

Between the prologue and the epilogue, John states three times that he heard the same voice, which is the voice of “the Alpha and Omega,” reemphasizing the purpose and the content of Revelation (1:19; 4:1; 21:6).⁵⁷ These phrases could help the original readers to see the literary development of the book.

Before 1:19, the command given to John to write what he saw occurs already in 1:11, ὃ βλέπεις γράψον εἰς βιβλίον καὶ πέμψον ταῖς ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαις “what you are going to see write in a book and send to the seven churches.” This is a command to write everything that John was about to see or was seeing⁵⁸—all the visions of Revelation.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ When the original readers read 22:6, they would have understood that the purpose of the Apocalypse they read about in 1:1 is now repeated or reemphasized: “The angel said to me, ‘These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place’” (22:6). As they continued reading this closing part of the book (22:6–21), they would find that many elements mentioned in the introduction (1:1–11) are now repeated. For a discussion of the prologue and the epilogue of Revelation, see Sabuin, “Repentance in the Book of Revelation,” 87; Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 37.

⁵⁷ In 1:19 (cf. 1:8), the voice comes from “the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!” In 4:1 the voice comes from “the voice I [John] had first heard” referring to 1:19. In 21:6, the voice comes from “the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.” The phrase ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος referring to God in 21:6 applies also to Jesus in 22:12, 13. In all three cases, the voices refer to either God (the Father) or Jesus.

⁵⁸ The substantive ὃ βλέπεις could be better translated in the sense of futuristic present, either completely or mostly futuristic. The first testimony of John that he saw something/someone, which is indicated by the word εἶδον “I saw” is recorded in 1:12. It is contextually relevant, therefore, to consider that γράψον in 1:11 is a command to write everything that John was about to see or was seeing in the sense of futuristic present. For grammatical explanation about futuristic present, see Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 229–30.

⁵⁹ The imperative is for John to write in βιβλίον “a book [without definite article].” This noun is mentioned again in the epilogue (22:9, 10, 18, 19), with definite articles, which

In 1:19, Jesus again told John to write what he has seen. This time the content or the nature of what John saw is mentioned: καὶ ἃ εἶσιν καὶ ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα “both things which are and things which are about to come after these things.”⁶⁰ Reading this, the original readers would have understood that what follows after 1:19⁶¹ would be visions about (1) things that were happening in their time (local), and (2) things that will happen in the future (historical and eschatological).⁶²

In 4:1, once again Jesus says to John: δείξω σοι ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα “I will show to you the things which must take place.” With the absence of the phrase “the things which are” which occurs in 1:19, the original readers may have understood that, while chs. 2 and 3 describe the life of the Christian church in Asia Minor (local fulfillment) as well as the church along the timeline of history (historical fulfillment), what follows 4:1 no longer has local fulfillment. What remain are historical and eschatological fulfillments. Therefore, when they read about the seven seals (chs. 4:1–8:5), the seven trumpets (chs. 8–11), and the seven bowls (ch. 16), they would think of what was going to happen, and not what was happening.

In 21:6, Jesus says to John: γέγοναν “they have taken place.”⁶³ At this point, the original readers would understand that they had just finished reading about the things that must take place (4:1), the historical and the eschatological section of the book—from ἃ εἶσιν “things which are” (1:19),

suggests that these occurrences refer to “a book” in the prologue (1:11). Here, in the epilogue, “a book” of 1:11 is now called “the words of the prophecy of this book” (22:10). This reference should not be confused with βιβλίον in chs. 5 and 10, in which the first occurrence of the noun is without definite article (5:1 and 10:2, respectively), and the next occurrences are with definite articles (5:2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9 and 10:8, respectively).

- ⁶⁰ The translation “both things which are and things which are about to come after these things” for the phrase καὶ ἃ εἶσιν καὶ ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα is contextually evident. John was not instructed to write three things: (1) what he saw, (2) things which are, and (3) things which are about to come—a suggestion by Clinton Wahlen “Heaven’s View of the Churches in Revelation 2 and 3,” *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 9 (2006): 148. Instead, “things which are” and “things which are about to come” are what John saw.
- ⁶¹ I am aware of the fact that the original readers of Revelation did not have the text with the divisions of chapters and verses.
- ⁶² The terms *local*, *historical*, and *eschatological* were not originated by the first century readers. These terms are used in this article with reference to the subdivisions of the book.
- ⁶³ In 16:17 there is also a voice saying: γέγονεν “it has taken place.” This word is singular, while γέγοναν (21:6) is plural. The antecedent of γέγονεν could not be ταῦτα “these things” (1:19; 4:1). These references should be the antecedent of γέγοναν. Therefore, γέγονεν refers particularly to the series of the seven last plagues. Moreover, γέγονεν occurs exactly in the seventh plague, the last one of the final plagues.

through ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι “things that must take place” (4:1), until γέγοναν “they have taken place” (21:6). Although after 21:6 there are additional explanations about the New Jerusalem (21:7–22:5), these explanations do not point to another event. The event is already introduced in 21:1–2. The question is, How could, between 4:1 and 22:5, the original readers recognize the border between the historical section and the eschatological section of the book?

After reading three “sequences of seven that have dominated John’s visions almost from the start,”⁶⁴ the original readers were introduced to an account of a great conflict between Christ and Satan, a long episode described in 11:19–15:4.⁶⁵

While 4:1 introduced the original readers to what would be happening, it would be questionable as to why the vision in 11:19–15:4 covers a macro period from the beginning of the conflict in heaven up to the singing of the victorious song of the Lamb by the conquering saints on the sea of glass.⁶⁶ This section contains the events that have already happened from the perspective of the original readers. It interrupted the plot of the visionary narrative that had been established in the minds of the readers. Instead of continuing the visionary narrative of the previous chapters, the central piece of Revelation covers the account of the great conflict: started in heaven (11:19–12:12), has been continued on earth (12:13–14:13), will end at the *eschaton* with a celebration in heaven (14:14–15:4). Therefore, this section could be seen as the thematic key to the whole book or as “the micro-apocalypse within the macro-apocalypse.”⁶⁷

Excluding the central piece, one indication of the border between the historical and the eschatological sections is the use of the adjective ἔσχατος “last” to modify the noun πληγή “plague” in 15:1 (cf. 21:9).⁶⁸ This is the first

⁶⁴ Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 63. The three sequences of seven are the seven churches, the seven seals, and the seven trumpets.

⁶⁵ For a discussion on the central piece of the structure of the book, see Sabuin, “Repentance in the Book of Revelation,” 87–102, arguing that the central piece of Revelation is 11:19–15:4.

⁶⁶ Revelation 11:9 and 15:1–4 are included in this section because 11:19 mentions the opening of the temple of God to introduce the vision that begins in 12:1 and 15:1–4 presents the song of victory of those who conquer the beast (ch. 13), and is a celebration after the great harvest of the earth (14:14–20). See also Reynolds, “Ten Keys for Interpreting Revelation,” 265, who recognizes that the vision in chs. 12–14 “points all the way backward to the beginning of rebellion in heaven and points forward to the glorified redeemed standing victorious with the Lamb on Mt. Zion.”

⁶⁷ Musvosvi, “The Issue of Genre and Apocalypse Prophecy,” 54.

⁶⁸ I consider that the central piece is overlapped with the following section (the seven last plagues). In addition to concluding the central piece, 15:1–4 introduces the seven last plagues. Although the seven angels with the seven bowls are introduced in 15:1,

occurrence of this adjective after 4:1. The seven plagues are called πληγὰς ἑπτὰ τὰς ἔσχατάς “[the] seven last plagues” (15:1). The adjective ἔσχατος distinguishes the seven plagues from the previous plagues, namely, the seven trumpets.⁶⁹ The seven-bowl plagues—from the first to the seventh—are the last plagues. There will be no more plagues afterward. Therefore, the original readers would understand that when they came to 15:1 they were reading about the last things—the *eschaton*. They would understand that, although dealing with the things which are going to take place (1:19; 4:1), the seven churches, the seven seals, and the seven trumpets are not eschatological but historical—the things that would happen from their time up to the *eschaton*. Of course, there are some glimpses of the eschatological elements in the local and historical sections as well as some glimpses of the historical elements in the local and eschatological sections.⁷⁰

When the original readers read γέγοναν “they have taken place” (21:6), they would understand that the local, historical, and eschatological events have already ended. The additional explanation about the New Jerusalem (21:9–22:5) is given by one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues (21:9). The seven angels—or at least one of them—who pour the seven final plagues also reveal details about the New Jerusalem. The original readers would understand that the last events cover a series of events from the seven last plagues to the coming down of the New Jerusalem to the earth. Therefore, these events are eschatological. What lies beyond the eschatological events will be the fact that God’s people “shall reign for ever and ever” (22:5).

4. Summary and Conclusion

The historicist approach to Revelation has been challenged. Several responses have been given to these challenges. Of those scholars who responded to the challenges to historicism, it seems that only Paulien provides literary indicators to justify the historicist approach to apocalyptic passages that he labels as historical apocalyptic. However, Paulien’s sugges-

15:2–4 seems to have no connection to the seven bowls. Rather, 15:2–4 is the continuation of ch. 14. Revelation 15:2–4 is a description of the saints of God that follows the two harvests in 14:14–20. The narrative of the seven bowls resumes in 15:5, 6. This shows that the central piece is literarily overlapped with the seven last plagues.

⁶⁹ The judgments in the seven trumpets are also called plagues. Notice the phrase ἐν ταῖς πληγαῖς ταύταις “by these plagues” (9:20).

⁷⁰ So also Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 50. For example, in the local and historical sections, the promises to the seven churches, the seventh seal, and the seventh trumpet are eschatological; in the eschatological sections, the cry to come out in chap. 18 refers back to prior history.

tion disqualifies even Rev 2 and 3 from the historicist approach—chapters that are included by many historicist scholars as clearly requiring a historicist approach. His response to these challenges is by itself another challenge to historicism. This study has responded to these challenges including the one of Paulien, and at the same time proposes an approach to Revelation.

Between the prologue (1:1–11) and the epilogue (22:6–21), and without the long interlude of the central piece (11:19–15:4), Revelation presents the following outline:

REFERENCE	INTERNAL INDICATOR	FULFILLMENT	COVERAGE
Rev 2:1–3:21	“Things which are and things which are about to come” (1:19)	Local and Historical	The Seven Churches ⁷¹
Rev 4:1–11:19	“Things which must take place after these things” (4:1)	Historical	The seven seals; the seven trumpets
Rev 15:1–22:5	“Seven last plagues” (15:1)—“They have taken place” (21:6)	Eschatological	The seven-bowl plagues; Second Coming; Millennium; New Heaven and Earth and the New Jerusalem

Table 1: Summary of the sectional divisions of Revelation

The outline above suggests that Revelation covers “a comprehensive sweep of events.”⁷² It presents (1) events that *begin* with a local fulfillment (or application) to the first reader of the first century A.D. that at the same time cover the timeline of history; (2) events that happen *through* the historical timeline from the time of the vision up to the *eschaton*; (3) events that will happen at the *end* of the history of the old heaven and earth that continues into eternity.

The outline is described by similar internal indicators or “textual sequence markers,” a condition required by Paulien to identify a passage as historical apocalyptic.⁷³ This would alert the original readers as to what would happen in sequence *from* their time *through* their future *up to* the *eschaton*. The sequence is not only from one section to the other but also within each section.⁷⁴

⁷¹ For a comprehensive discussion of the apocalyptic nature of the seven churches, see Wahlen, “Heaven’s View of the Churches in Revelation 2 and 3,” 146–56.

⁷² Paulien, “End of Historicism? Part Two,” 186.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ For a discussion about sequence within the seven seals and the seven trumpets, see Ekkehardt Mueller, “Recapitulation in Revelation 4–11,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 9.1–2 (1998): 260–77. In the case of the seven churches, it is noteworthy to

The apocalyptic prophecies are understood from the perspective of the original readers. The original readers knew that those passages would find their fulfillment along the historical timeline. However, they did not know exactly the historical periods within which those events would take place. What lay before the original readers was the text of Revelation and their future. One thing that was certain for them was that at the end God will establish an eternal kingdom and the saints will live together with Christ forever and ever (Rev 21:3, 4; 22:5).

This concept is similar to that of Dan 2. Nebuchadnezzar, being the first recipient of the dream and the interpretation given by the prophet Daniel, became aware of what would happen in sequence from his time (2:38) up to the coming of God's kingdom (v. 44). However, he did not know the names of the coming earthly kings or kingdoms and when those kingdoms would come. One thing certain for him was that at the end God would establish his eternal kingdom (v. 44).

The fact cannot be denied that the original readers lived almost two thousand years ago. Some of their future might have become history for the present-time readers. What lies before the modern readers is the same text and the history. Therefore, for the passages in the historical sections, an approach of historicism without being "over-zealous in attempting to define every detail of the symbolism in their schematization of history"⁷⁵ may be applied.

In dealing with eschatological section, promises given for the original readers are also for the modern readers; what was eschatological to the first-century audience is still eschatological for the present-time readers. The modern readers know what the original readers did not know: the *eschaton* that the original readers expected soon to take place has not taken place yet. However, the eschatological events are the continuation of the historical events. As time goes by, the eschatological events will in turn become history. The seven-bowl plagues, the *parousia*, and the millennium will become history for the saved ones.

The fact that many Adventist scholars use the historicist approach in interpreting Revelation does not make the historicist approach *the* Adventist approach. The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ itself provides literary indicators for historicism.

observe that Christ is consistent with the sequence of the seven churches. The sequence that he gives in 1:11 is maintained in chs. 2-3.

⁷⁵ Reynolds, "Ten Keys for Interpreting Revelation," 275.