

Historicist Expositors of the Nineteenth Century



The cover of the book, *Horae-Apocalypticae* by 19th century expositor Rev. E. B. Elliott.

This is the next chapter of the book, [The Foundations Under Attack: The Roots of Apostasy – By Michael de Semlyen](#) An “expositor” is another word for commentator, in this case, a Bible commentator. This chapter is about the best Bible commentators of the 19th century who held the original Protestant historicist view of the prophecies of the books of Daniel and Revelation.

Chapter 5

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Dr. H. Grattan Guinness, in his review of Post-Reformation interpreters, recorded his belief that the false futurist writings of the Jesuits Ribera and Bellarmine had been ably answered by Brightman and Mede in the seventeenth century and by Isaac Newton in the first half of the eighteenth century.

Joseph Mede’s most excellent exposition of Revelation was approved and printed by the Puritan Parliament in 1641, and at the same time the Westminster Confession of Faith endorsed the historical interpretation of prophecy. Sir Isaac Newton followed Mede and the Puritan writers and further advanced the comprehension of prophecy. The vastness of his genius led him to the most extensive views of things natural and Divine. He studied nature as a whole, history as a whole, chronology as a whole, and (in connection with these) prophecy as a whole. (Ref: [Romanism and the Reformation](#))

In 1842, Rev. Edward Bickersteth, hymn writer and author of the well respected book, *The Trinity*, who later in life became Bishop of Exeter, joined with Professor T. R. Birks in founding *The Prophecy Investigation Society*. Earlier, in 1839, Bickersteth had issued a warning against mixing doctrines and speculative prophetic interpretation, couched in temperate language:

“The variety of new systems of the Apocalypse is a serious evil, and it is to be hoped that the present list of books may help to check this evil. Men of

talents, and imagination, and piety, are in danger of forming to themselves a system of the Apocalypse, without any careful study of even leading writers who have gone before them. With great ingenuity they turn the figures of this book to their own views, and build up a beautiful theory; parts of which may indeed be true; but not having cautiously gone over the ground, nor duly considered the researches of their predecessors, they lose the benefit of lengthened experience, and the Church loses that full benefit, which their ability and piety might have imparted. The warnings against false prophets (Matthew 24:21-24) may reach both authors and readers—the danger of a false interpretation of prophecy, calculated to deceive the very elect.”

Birks, in his *First Elements of Sacred Prophecy*, was more forthright. He warned of the dangers of rejecting, “without distinction, the maxims in the interpretation of the sacred prophecies generally received by the Protestant churches, ever since the time of the Reformation.” He referred to “several late writers” (including Burgh, Maitland, and Todd).

“They agree in few points, except in rejecting the conclusions of all previous expositors; and maintain that nearly the whole of Daniel’s prophecies and those of the Apocalypse are unfulfilled. Now, if the theories of these writers are entirely groundless, the responsibility, which they have incurred, is very great, and the effects of their error might prove extremely fatal to the Church. The strongest bulwark against the revived zeal of the Romish Church will have been taken away when it is most needed; and the danger of a renewed apostasy will have been fearfully increased.....the light which the Word of God has thrown on half the whole period of the Church’s history will have been quenched in darkness; and her hopes for the future, by a perplexed and fallacious application of irrelevant prophecies, be involved in a chaos of fanciful conjectures and inextricable confusion.”

Apart from Bickersteth and Birks, the principal historical expositors of the nineteenth century were Albert Barnes, Grattan Guinness, Christopher Wordsworth (the Bishop of Lincoln), Dr. A. J. Gordon in the United States, and Rev. E. B. Elliott. Elliott is widely recognised as the greatest among them.

Elliott’s four-volume exposition, *Horae Apocalypticae* (Literally, “Hours with the Apocalypse”), was published in 1844. C. H. Spurgeon, who was himself an Historicist, or a “Continuist” as he called it, described Elliott’s work as “the standard work on the Apocalypse.” A monument of both historical and theological scholarship, *Horae Apocalypticae* traces the main streams of interpretation, handed down through the centuries by “*that great cloud of witnesses*” and illuminated by the Holy Spirit through the light of history. It shows with a wonderful weight of evidence in lingering detail how the Book of Revelation has been fulfilled right up to the sixth vial in chapter 16.

E. B. Elliott also wrote of the new Futurist scheme, “It has a great advantage over every other form of interpretation in that it is not chained down by the facts of history. It can draw on unlimited powers of fancy, wherewith to devise in the dreamy future whatever may seem to fit the sacred prophecy.”

Elliott went on to show, “the insuperable difficulties attending the Futurist scheme—how it sets language, grammar, and context at defiance; how inconsistency marks it from beginning to end; how erroneous is their conception of antichrist, how self-contradictory and illogical; how opposed to History, Scripture, and the Ancient Fathers is the Futurist view of the religion of Antichrist... but that it is, even intellectually speaking, a mere rude and commonplace conception of Satan’s predicted masterpiece of opposition to Christ, compared with what has been actually realised and established in the Papacy. The Papal system is beyond anything that the Futurists have imagined, or ever can imagine, the very perfection of Anti-Christianism.”

Continued in [Islam in Prophecy](#)

All chapters of The Foundations Under Attack: The Roots of Apostasy

- [The Foundations Under Attack: The Roots of Apostasy – By Michael de Semlyen](#)
- [The Historical View of Prophecy and Antichrist](#)
- [Futurism – Leapfrogging History – The Wiles of the Devil](#)
- [The Counter-Reformation – The Source of the Futurist View of Prophecy](#)
- [Futurism Devised across the Centuries by the Jesuits](#)
- [Historicist Expositors of the Nineteenth Century](#)
- [Islam in Prophecy](#)
- [The Proliferation of Modern “Bibles”](#)
- [The Modern Versions – Origins and Influences](#)
- [The Textual Controversy](#)
- [Bible Verse Comparisons](#)
- [The Origins of Arminianism](#)
- [Catholicism and Arminianism in England and France During the Sixteenth and Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries](#)
- [“New Revivalism” Charles Finney, D.L.Moody, and a Man-Centered Gospel](#)
- [The Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements](#)
- [The Abandoning of the Protestant Reformed Religion](#)