

Covenant History Series
Revelation—Vengeance for the Covenant

Sunday, January 10, 2010

I. Introduction

- A. The book of Revelation is both a difficult and fascinating book. Some people are excessively devoted to it, we could say, almost *obsessed* by it; while others, because of its difficulty and frequent abuse, neglect it altogether
- B. We don't want to fall into either error. We want to understand both the meaning of the book itself and its place in the redemptive purpose of God; but we don't want to make it the centerpiece of our thought, as if everything in the Bible and everything in life revolves around it. It doesn't.

II. Approaches: There are four basic approaches to Revelation.

- A. The *preterist* interpretation regards the prophecy as being largely fulfilled already in the events of the first century.
- B. The *historicist* interpretation understands Revelation as predicting significant historical events beginning in John's day and continuing to the end of time.
- C. The *futurist* interpretation approaches the book as if the events prophesied are still to be fulfilled, i.e., they lie yet in our future.
- D. The *idealist* interpretation approaches the book, not as depicting specific historic events, past, present, or future, but as setting forth timeless truths concerning the ongoing struggle in all ages between good and evil, the kingdom of God and the forces of darkness

III. I am convinced that the preterist interpretation is correct. Here's why:

A. The Time texts:

1. **1:1** "...the things that *must soon take place*"
2. **1:3** "...the time is *near*"
3. **3:19** "I am coming *soon*"
4. **22:6** "...what must *soon* take place"
5. **22:7** "I am coming *soon*"
6. **22:10** "...for the time is near"
7. **22:12** "I am coming soon"
8. **22:20** "Surely I am coming soon"

Whether we are discussing the book of Revelation or any other prophecy of the Bible it's vital to remember that one of the most important keys to properly understanding it is the element of *timing*. *When* is the prophecy to be fulfilled? Sometimes the prophecy itself tells us. It doesn't always do this, but often it does. And when it tells us, sometimes it tells us very clearly, even pinpointing the very year when the prophecy is to be fulfilled. Let's look at a few examples.

Isaiah 7:8 — This is a pretty straightforward prophecy. It foretells the fall and captivity of Ephraim—the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Further it tells us that it was to occur within 65 years of when the prophecy was given.

In the sixteenth chapter of Isaiah we find a prophecy concerning one of Israel's neighbors—the nation of Moab (**Isa. 16:13-14**). Moab would suffer

a humiliating defeat that would render it insignificant as a nation, and it would occur within three years from when the prophecy was given.

Also, in Isaiah 32 God warns Israel of his displeasure and coming judgment in the form of a failed grape crop (**Isa. 32:10**).

These prophecies give us a very precise understanding of the time element: 65 years, 3 years, 1 year.

Other prophecies are not so specific. They give us a more general indication of the time of their fulfillment. For example, in Jeremiah 16, in light of the Babylonian invasion and captivity, the Lord warns Judah in verse 9, “Behold, I will silence in this place, before your eyes and in your days, the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride” (Jer. 16:9). Now, this is not so precise as the other prophecies we’ve looked at. It doesn’t tell us exactly when the judgment would come: one year, five years, 20 years—it doesn’t say exactly. But it does say, “it will come *in your days*.”

Likewise, in Ezekiel 12—and again in light of the coming Babylonian invasion and captivity—

²² “Son of man, what is this proverb that you have about the land of Israel, saying, ‘The days grow long, and every vision comes to nothing?’ ²³ Tell them therefore, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: I will put an end to this proverb, and they shall no more use it as a proverb in Israel.’ But say to them, *The days are near*, and the fulfillment of every vision. ²⁴ For there shall be no more any false vision or flattering divination within the house of Israel. ²⁵ For I am the LORD; I will speak the word that I will speak, and it will be performed. It will no longer be delayed, but *in your days*, O rebellious house, I will speak the word and perform it, declares the Lord GOD.” (Ezek. 12:22-25)

Again, the passage doesn't tell us exactly when the threatened judgment would come, but it does say, "The days are *near*." And then he specifies this further by saying, "In your days." That is, in the days of those to whom Ezekiel was prophesying. And so it was. In just about six years after the prophecy was given, Judah fell to the Babylonians.

This element of timing is very important to the task of properly understanding Bible prophecy. Suppose someone today should pick up a Bible and stumble upon this passage in Ezekiel 12. If he didn't keep in mind when the prophecy itself said it would be fulfilled—namely, in the days of those who first received the prophecy—he might come to expect a fulfillment of the prophecy today. He might expect an imminent invasion of Israel today in the twenty-first century, by a Babylonian army. But of course, he would have completely ignored the time element and consequently he would have misunderstood what the prophecy was all about. Understanding *when* a prophecy is to be fulfilled is essential to understanding the prophecy itself.

Sometimes, then, Bible prophecy tells us very specifically when it is to be fulfilled: 1 year, 3 years, 65 years, 70 years, 490 years (in one instance).

At other times it gives us less specific information. God told Hosea, "in just a *little while*, and I will punish the house of Jehu" (Hos. 1:4). In one place, God told Daniel to "seal up" the words of a prophecy because it was not to be fulfilled until the distant future (Dan. 12:4, 9).

At still other times prophecies are given that don't include any indication of the time when they are to be fulfilled. For example, in Genesis 3:15 we find God's first promise of redemption when he said to the serpent, "I will put

enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15), but there is no indication of *when* this was to occur. Of course it was definitively fulfilled in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ four thousand years later, and will be ultimately fulfilled at the consummation of history at the Second Coming.

But whenever there are indications of the time when a prophecy is to be fulfilled, we must pay very close attention if we are going to understand the prophecy properly.

And so it is with the book of Revelation. Any interpretation of the book that does not grapple seriously with the time statements must be discarded. A sense of urgency pervades the entire book. "Shortly," "quickly" and "near" can by no means be understood of 2,000 or more years without doing great violence to human language. If near is far and short is long, then language loses all significance and becomes perfectly meaningless.

Some have argued that we should understand these time-texts from God's perspective. But if God should tell men that he will bring about salvation or judgment quickly, to comfort the righteous and terrify the wicked, and then should add that he means "quickly," not from a human, but from a divine perspective, then the intended effect is completely lost. Of what use is it to tell *men* that it would come "soon," and "the time is near," when from *their* perspective it is *not* soon, and the time is *not* near?

So when we find statements in the book of Revelation that say the time for the fulfillment of its prophecies is "near," that the prophesied events must "soon take place," and so on, should we not look for a fulfillment of the

prophecies in the first century, during the lifetime of those to whom the prophecies were first given?

Despite this, many people look for a fulfillment of Revelation's prophecies today. Now, why is this? If the book of Revelation itself tells us that its prophecies were to be fulfilled soon after they were given, why do people look for a fulfillment in our day?

I think the answer is largely because they have misunderstood the symbolism of the book. Anyone who has read Revelation knows that there is a great deal of symbolism in it. Revelation belongs to a genre of literature commonly referred to as "Apocalyptic," a literary style popular between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100. Revelation is a book of symbols. It contains many very vivid images and figures. Real historical events and important spiritual realities are depicted by the bold symbolism of the book.

An excellent illustration of the nature of apocalyptic literature is seen in the apocryphal additions to the Book of Esther. These additions were made to Esther some centuries after the book was written. They are in the form of a prelude and a postscript from the hand of someone impersonating Mordecai. In the prelude, this pseudo Mordecai relates a dream he had:

Addition A

And the postscript, which interprets this passage, reads as follows:

Addition F

In these two passages we see how the symbols of apocalyptic literature were used to describe real historical events. There is nothing in the book of Esther about thunders and earthquakes, about dragons roaring or a tiny spring

becoming a great river. But the apocalyptic author used these vivid images to represent the actual events of Esther's history. The events were in themselves rather *ordinary*,¹ but the symbols used to communicate them, rather *extraordinary*.

This is very similar to what we find in the Book of Revelation and other apocalyptic literature in the Bible (i.e., portions of Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and the Olivet Discourse).

We don't have enough time to do anything but take a brief look at a couple of the major symbols.

The Beast

The first image that we will examine is undoubtedly the most well-known image of Revelation: the Beast. Few things in the book of Revelation excite as much interest as the Beast of chapter 13. Who is this dreaded figure? Is he, as many prophecy teachers claim, a political figure alive on earth today and soon to come to power (or perhaps already in power)?

The beast, as I will attempt to show, was none other than the Roman Empire itself, personified in the emperor Nero (r. A.D. 54-68).

The manner in which the beast is described perfectly accords with what we know of Nero and the Roman Empire in the first century.

¹ In saying that the events of the book of Esther were rather ordinary, I do not mean to suggest that God was not involved in them. Indeed, perhaps more than in any other book of the Bible the over ruling providence of God is manifest in Esther. The events were "ordinary" in the sense that there was nothing *visibly* "extra" ordinary or supernatural.

In verse one the beast is described as having ten horns and seven heads. In 17:12, the ten horns are further described as “ten kings who give their power and authority to the beast.” This is probably a reference to the ten imperial provinces of the Roman Empire, each of which had a governor directly accountable to the emperor.

The seven heads are explained in 17:9, as seven mountains. As a matter of fact, Rome was built on seven mountains, and numerous Christian and pagan writers refer to Rome as the seven-hilled city. So this description of the beast as having ten horns and seven heads fits the Roman Empire, which at the time of John’s writing Revelation was ruled by Nero.

Interestingly, a pagan writer who was a contemporary of Nero, Apollonius of Tyana, described Nero in remarkably similar terms as the book of Revelation, calling him a “Tyrant,” and a “beast” with many heads.

The description of this character as a “beast” certainly fits Nero. If ever there was a man deserving to be called a *beast*, it was he. Ancient Roman historians describe in detail his many crimes and horrible moral perversions, things so shameful even to mention. In addition, he claimed to be a god and insisted he be worshipped as such. Furthermore, he set fire to Rome and blamed the Christians, whom he relentlessly persecuted.

In verse 3 John tells us, **One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast.** This refers to the death of Nero, and with his death the near collapse of the Empire through the civil wars that followed. Nero was the last of the Julio-Claudian line of emperors, the founding dynasty of the Roman Empire. The ancient historians of the time—

Josephus, Tacitus, Suetonius—all spoke of how the empire nearly collapsed with the death of Nero. His death resulted in a year and a half of civil strife that saw three emperors rise and fall until Vespasian came to the throne. Observers everywhere thought it was the end of the empire. But through Vespasian's strong and wise rule, the empire continued. It was very much like a deadly wound that had been healed.

We are also told that the beast was given authority to make war against the saints for forty-two months. Nero's infamous persecution of Christians began in the middle of November A.D. 64 and ended with his suicide in the beginning of June A.D. 68—42 months, just as Revelation had foretold!

It also says that everyone will *worship* the beast—that is, the emperor—and that a second beast, would enforce the worship of the beast. This is a reference to the imperial cult of emperor worship led by the imperial priesthood that required everyone to recognize the divinity of the emperor.

In verse 13 it says that the second beast—the imperial priesthood—**It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people.** A number of examples of false prophets and other deceivers performing great signs are given in Scripture, the Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses, for instance, and Simon Magus, in the 8th chapter of Acts. Moses had warned of such deceivers, as had Jesus. Josephus mentions a number of false prophets and magicians in Israel during the first century. And commentator James Moffatt observes, "Most Oriental cults practised such tricks lavishly."²⁶

In verse 14 it speaks of an image of the beast. This refers to the images or

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 432.

likenesses of the reigning emperor placed in temples throughout the empire to be worshipped by the faithful subjects of Rome.

In verses 16-18 John says everyone is caused to have a mark on their right hand, or on their forehead, and that no one should be able to buy or sell except he has the mark, either the name of the beast or the number of his name, the number being 666.

The mark of the beast is not to be understood as a literal, physical mark. It stands opposed to the “mark of God” which he places upon the faithful (7:2-3; 9:4; 14:1; 22:4; cf. Ez. 9:4; Rev. 3:12). A mark on the forehead is primarily intended to signify allegiance on the part of the one bearing the mark, and ownership on the part of the one giving the mark.

Interestingly, in Exodus 13:9, the observance of the Passover was said to “be...a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes [i.e., on your forehead].” A little later this is also said of the offering of the first-born (Ex. 13:16).

The offering of the first-born and the observance of the Passover, God says, would serve as reminders to them, *as if* the Law were written on their hands and on their foreheads (cf. Deut. 6:8; 11:18). These religious observances served as *marks*, as it were, on their foreheads and on their hands of their allegiance to God.

In the same way, Nero required similar expressions of devotion from his subjects: worshipping his image, offering sacrifice or incense to him, confessing, “Caesar is Lord,” etc.

Now, what are we to make of the prohibition against anyone not possessing the mark of the beast from “buying and selling”? Clearly, this means there would be an economic boycott imposed against them. We have evidence from history that this was a form of persecution that was practiced against the church. The churches of Lyons and Vienna in Gaul, about A.D. 177 describe just such a punishment inflicted upon them. They write, “[we were] excluded from houses, and baths, and *markets*” (5:1).

Various forms of persecution were used against the Christians. Some were thrown to the lions. Some were bound to stakes, doused with oil and set aflame as human torches to light Nero’s gardens. Some were exiled. And some were prevented from participating in the economic activity of their community. As the churches of Lyons and Vienna described, because of their devotion to Christ, they were “excluded from...markets...” They couldn’t buy or sell unless they had the necessary paperwork from the imperial cult that they had paid homage to Caesar.

We are told that the number of the beast’s name was to be 666. Now, the letters of many ancient alphabets, including both Hebrew and Greek also represented numbers. Consequently, names could be reduced to their numerical equivalent by adding up the mathematical value of all the letters in the name.

The Jewish Rabbis were particularly fond of this ancient art as appears from its use in the Babylonian Talmud and other Rabbinical works, and so it is not surprising to find it employed in a book such as Revelation.

The beast is a man whose name has the numerical equivalent of 666. As a matter of fact, the *Greek* form of Nero’s name *transliterated into the Hebrew*

adds up to the dreaded number.

The Beast: Conclusion

All the lines of evidence for the identity of the beast converge upon Nero. He lived within the time frame which Revelation imposes; his character fits the portrait painted for us in the text; his activity in persecuting the saints for forty-two months corresponds to what Scripture says the beast would do; and the number of his name is 666.

We need not look, then, for some modern figure to fulfill the prophecy of Revelation 13. Nor do we need to look for the number of the beast in bar codes, social security numbers, or national identification systems.³⁰ The prophecy has already been fulfilled in Nero.

Babylon, the Great City

Six times in chapters 17-18 of Revelation, Babylon is called the great city. The identity of this city is revealed in 11:8. It is Jerusalem. Chapters 17 and 18 have to do with the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in A.D. 70.

The Jewish war with Rome, culminating with the destruction of Jerusalem, was going on at about the same time as Nero's persecution of Christians. It is these two events that Revelation largely has in view.

³⁰ This is not to say that a national identification system using an ID card or perhaps even a computer chip implanted in the skin is neither unlikely nor undesirable. There have already been a number of attempts to implement some kind of national identification system, ostensibly to help fight illegal immigration. We should always be wary of an invasion of privacy and concentrating too much power into the hands of the federal government. The point is, if such a system is adopted, it would not be the fulfillment of Revelation 13.

Obviously we don't have time to go through all the symbols of the book...

Prophecies Which Remain to be Fulfilled

If the hermeneutical principles by which we have interpreted the major New Testament prophecies are correct, namely that they should be understood with a strict adherence to the time limits of the text, then those prophecies (the Olivet Discourse and the Book of Revelation) relate to events not in our future, but in our past. They deal with the events of the first century, primarily the conclusion of the Old Covenant order and the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in A.D. 70. The question then arises, "What prophetic events in Revelation, if any, still lie in the future? What prophecies, if any, remain to be fulfilled?"

First of all, let me say, I do not believe that there are any prophecies in Revelation, or anywhere else in Scripture, that tell us what world and political conditions will be like when Christ comes to consummate human history. We are not told, for example, what nations will then be in the ascendancy, or what rulers will be in power. Nor are we told precisely *when* the second coming will occur. We are simply informed of the fact of the second coming and that two grand events are to take place in association with it, namely, 1.) the resurrection of the dead, and 2.) the final judgment.

The fact of the second coming is contained, of course, in those passages which speak of the resurrection of the dead and final judgment.

It seems to me that the transition between what lies in our past and what

lies in our future takes place in Revelation 20:7-15, in relation to what is called the millennium. It appears the millennium of vv. 1-6 is a symbol of the entire period between the first and second comings of Christ. Christ, at his first coming, bound the devil (Rev. 20:2; Matt. 12:28-29; Lk. 10:18; Jn. 12:31; Col. 2:14-15; Heb. 2:14-15; 1 Jn. 3:8). This does not mean that all of the devil's activity has ceased, but that it has in some sense been curtailed. He's been restrained. He's been limited in his operations in some way. It specifically relates to redemption, for when, in these other passages, it is said that, he has been "cast out" or "disarmed" or "rendered powerless," it is always in connection with the cross. Through our Lord's redemptive activity on the cross, Christ has "bound" the devil. He remains bound until the end of the period when he is loosed once again to deceive the nations (Rev. 20:7-8). But he is immediately destroyed and thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:9-10). Then the dead are raised and the final judgment is conducted (Rev. 20:11-15).

Finis

