

## **Sermon 24: Hermeneutical review**

### **INTRODUCTION**

We have spent some time in missions and been away from the book of Revelation for a while. We want to continue now looking at the body of the prophecy having looked at all the introductory material. But before we can proceed I think it is most important that we remind ourselves of our hermeneutical approach. Hermeneutics is the science of interpreting the bible and there is no harder book in the bible to interpret than Revelation. So allow me then to take three minutes on each of the ten principles we need to remember when reading this book as a way of priming the pump for the rest of the book.

**Proposition 1:** 'The Book of Revelation consists of seven sections. They are parallel: each spans the entire new dispensation, from the first to the second coming of Christ.'

Section 1: Chapters 1-3

Section 2: Chapters 4-7

Section 3: Chapters 8-11

Section 4: Chapters 12-14

Section 5: Chapters 15-16

Section 6: Chapters 17-19

Section 7: Chapters 20-22

Dennis Johnson uses the picture of building a puzzle to help us understand this structure in Revelation. When a person builds a puzzle they begin by getting the outline of puzzle by identifying all the flat edged pieces. We must take the same approach to the book of Revelation seeing all the verses that speak about judgement as those flat edged pieces. When we pick up on this clue we begin to get an outline which marks the sevenfold structure. 6:12-17 is just such a piece. 'When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. 14 The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. 15 Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, 16 calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, 17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"'

Another set of flat edged pieces are the breaks in the judgements to indicate God's protection of His people, look out for these as well. And the whole of chapter 7 gives insight to the lot of the God's people, they are numbered and enter into their rest, their rest is described in terms of final rest we see the entire number of God's people before Him in safety and worship, v15-17,  
"Therefore they are before the throne of God,

and serve him day and night in his temple;  
 and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.  
 16 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;  
 the sun shall not strike them,  
 nor any scorching heat.  
 17 For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,  
 and he will guide them to springs of living water,  
 and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

It was these descriptions of the final judgement throughout the book that led to my embracing the 7 fold structure and finally the Amillennial point of view.

A third set of flat edge pieces which reveal the 7 fold parallel structure are out of chronology verses. For example, the fall of Babylon is found in chapters 17-18, however there is an intrusion of the fall of Babylon, without any introduction in 14:8, 'Another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality." This indicates that something that is introduced later should be filled in at this point. Another example is the beast from the abyss which wars against the witness church in 11:7, but it is only 13:1, 7 the beast properly introduced as having the power of the dragon.

**Proposition 2:** 'The seven sections may be grouped into two major divisions. The first major division, chapters 1-11, consists of three sections. The second major division, chapters 12-22, consists of four sections. These two major divisions reveal a progress in depth or intensity of spiritual conflict. The first major division, chapters 1-11, reveals the church—indwelt by Christ—persecuted by the world. The church is avenged, protected, and victorious. The second major division, chapters 12-22, reveals the deeper spiritual background of this struggle. It is a conflict between the Christ and the dragon, in which the Christ—hence, his church—is victorious.'

**Proposition 3:** 'The book is One. The principles of human conduct and of divine moral government are progressively revealed: the lampstands give rise to the seals; the seals to the trumpets, etc.'

The vision begins with Christ, He is present with His church to purify it and to judge those who are persecuting it. As you move to chapters 2-3 the Christ of chapter 1 permeates the messages to the 7 churches. In it all it is as if we hear Christ whispering, 'Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' Christ the light of the world is among the lampstands the lights of the world. Conflict between the church and the world is inevitable. However, before we see the outbreak of persecution that will soon take place John is lifted into the heavens in order to see that the terrible sufferings about to ensue are all part of God's decree. (And no, this is not the point at which the church is raptured and the 7 year tribulation begins). The 7 churches will be refined in the fire of suffering. In chapter 4 we are transported to the throne room where it is Christ who takes the scroll and opens the seals, the Son of Man governing the world in the interest of the church. Can they be bad if

they come from Christ's hands to us? We see peace taken from the world and many killed and in anguish, but in it all we see the church, although harassed, it is protected. In the fifth seal (6:9) we see that God's people are not destroyed but kept in His presence in the intermediate state and then we see a final judgement and banishment of evil 6:12-17, the rest of the sixth seal is a distended description of the numbered people of God complete in number and in a state of bliss 7:15-17.

But what about the persecutors do they get off scot free? No in chapter 8 we see the prayers of the persecuted saints returning to earth as thunder, lightning and an earthquake 8:5. 'Thus this section on the trumpets of judgements teaches us that by means of plagues upon the land, 8:7, the sea, 8:8, the rivers, 8:10, sun, moon, stars, 8:12, evil influences of demons 9:3, 11, the battle-field, 9:16, and the dreadful expectation of the final judgement, 11:15, our risen and exalted Redeemer is constantly avenging the church and sending judgements upon her persecutors. Yet, these judgements, though severe, are charged with warning. They are not *final*. They destroy a *third part*. By means of them God is still calling to repentance. Remember: trumpets *warn.*'<sup>1</sup>

While these judgements are falling what is happening to the church? The churches safety, witness bearing, power and cross bearing along with final victory are described in 10-11, which ends with a song of triumph, 11:15-18.

Now the book could have ended here, but there are still questions crying out for an answer, 'What is the underlying cause of this persecution of the church by the world.' And, 'what is going to happen to those who did not heed the voice of the trumpet judgements 9:21?' chapters 1-11 tell the story of the church as the light of the world hated by the darkness, God preserving His church, judging the world, calling it to repentance and all wrapped up in a final judgement. Chapters 12-14 take us behind the scenes that we can see that the real conflict is not one of flesh and blood but a spiritual battle between Christ and the devil. We are told of the devil's defeat in being thrown out of heaven and introduced to his helpers as he rages against the church. The beast out of the sea 13:1-10 represents antichristian persecution, and the devils war for our bodies in John's day, the government of Rome. The beast out of the earth represents false religion and the devil's war for our minds, in John's day this would have been the paganism and Caesar worship. Babylon represent worldly seduction and the devil's war for our hearts, the first century culture with all its decadence would have been the first century expression. We see that these forces will not succeed for there is a final judgement scene at the end of chapter 14.

The rest of the book of revelation draws out the judgement of the churches foes. 5 enemies in all were introduced in 12-14. First the dragon, second, the beast out of the sea, then the beast out of the earth, the Babylon, then men with the mark of the beast. We see that they are shown to be judged in the reverse order, we see the men with the mark judged 16:2, 11. Much is made of the fall of Babylon 17-18, and the two beasts are judged in 19:20, followed by satan Ch. 20. But then the vista opens up with the new creation and a world

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<sup>1</sup> Hendriksen, p37.

free from all enemies, satan, sin and death. The lamb is the victor, God gets the glory and we, the church, share in the everlasting joy.

**Proposition 4:** The seven sections of the apocalypse are arranged in an ascending, climactic order. There is progress in eschatological emphasis: The final judgement is first announced; then introduced, finally described. Similarly the new heavens and earth are described more fully in the final section than in those which precede.

The closer one gets to the end of the book of Revelation the more the focus turns to judgement and what lies beyond it. 'A careful examination of the Apocalypse will make this clear. In the first series—Christ is the midst of the Seven Golden Lampstands—we have no more than a mere announcement of Christ's coming unto judgement, 1:7. There is no description of the judgement. In the second section—chapters 4-7—the final judgement is not merely announced but definitely introduced: we catch a glimpse of the horror which fills the wicked when they behold the Judge coming unto them 6:12ff. But that is all. Again, no description. A few verses are devoted to a description of the Church Triumphant after the final judgement, 7:9ff. The next vision similarly,—chapters 8-11—introduces the final judgement and the joy of the redeemed, 11:15ff....

But as soon as we enter the second main division of the book, there is a change. In the very first section of this main division we have a real description of the final judgement 14:14ff. It is, however a symbolic representation. Under the symbolism of a double harvest the final judgement is pictured to us. The next vision—chapters 15-16—describes the pouring out of God's final wrath, so that this section, though synchronous with the others, is in a special sense descriptive of the final judgement. In the next minor division—the Fall of Babylon, chapters 17-19—this emphasis upon Christ's second coming unto judgement and its meaning for the world and for the church, both militant and triumphant, is even greater, more pronounced. See especially 19:11-12. The seventh or final section—chapters 20-22—not only describes the final judgement, but in this description drops much of the symbolism of the earlier visions. Nothing is vague or indefinite and little is clothed with symbolism, 20:12ff. The joy of the redeemed in the new heaven and earth is described much more circumstantially than, for example, in 7:9ff. The book has reached its glorious end.'

**Proposition 5:** The fabric of the book consists of moving-pictures. The details that pertain to the picture should be interpreted in harmony with its central thought. We should ask two questions: first, what is the entire picture? What is its predominant idea?'

How to read pictures is a difficult thing. We must not spiritualise the text as some have done with the good Samaritan. We must remember that things are not what they appear and are often put forth as paradoxes, e.g. conquering through death. Pictures also convey tacit information and are very dense in their ability to communicate. In revelation you can have multiple pictures for one reality, e.g. Jesus is a lion and a lamb. The pictures are also fluid and not set in concrete. When a picture is borrowed from the OT it is not copied and

pasted but does undergo some change though it will still be recognizable. All of this goes to overthrow the literal-where-possible approach.

**Proposition 6:** The seals, trumpets, bowls of judgement and similar symbols refer not to specific events, particular happenings, details of history, but to principles—of human conduct and of divine moral government—that are operating throughout the history of the world; especially, throughout the new dispensation.

This means we do not follow the chronological approach that seeks to find corresponding historical events that line up with the book.

**Proposition 7:** The apocalypse is rooted in the contemporaneous events and circumstances. Its symbols should be interpreted in the light of conditions which prevailed when the book was written.

A first century interpretation is the starting point for all interpretation. This will not exhaust the meaning but it guards us from the futurist approach which makes the visions irrelevant to its original hearers.

**Proposition 8:** The apocalypse is rooted in the sacred Scriptures. It should be interpreted in harmony with the teachings of the entire bible.

**Numbers count in Revelation:** Various numbers in the book of Revelation have significance and are repeated various times. The numbers 7, 10, 12, 3, 4 and 6 feature prominently. However the numbers are symbolic in value not literal.

**Revelation is for a Church under attack:** The graphic nature of the book of Revelation has disturbed many people but the imagery is consistent with a situation where the church is at war. The church's struggle is emphasized by the 7 beatitudes that are found in the book. God promises blessing to those who are faithful in keeping the word of this prophecy 1:3, 22:7, 'even upon pain of death (14:13), who maintain purity in alert expectation of Christ's return (16:15), who are invited to the Lamb's wedding feast (19:9), who have been beheaded for their faith and so share in the first resurrection (20:4-6) and share in the tree of life in the city of God (22:14).' The blessings indicate the attacks upon the church, attacks of persecution, false religion and seduction. Every church receives a promise 'to him who overcomes' and the various promises usually pertain to things that belong to chapters 19-22, things like not tasting the second death, eating from the tree of life, etc. The enemies of the church are the dragon with his seven heads indicating his cunning. As well as the beast that wages war with persecution, the second beast with false religion, and the Harlot with seduction. These would have been Rome's armies and political power, the Emperor worship and paganism, and the wealth and seduction of the culture and lifestyle of the largest city, Rome. The call is for one of persevering witness (14:12) not a withdrawal from the world but an imitation of Christ's faithful witness unto death (1:9). John writes as a co-sufferer and a prisoner on Patmos in the same struggle 1:5. 'Our interpretation of Revelation must be driven by the difference God intends it to make in the life of His people.'

If we could explain every phrase, identify every allusion to Old Testament Scripture or Greco-Roman society, trace every interconnection, and illuminate every mystery in this book and yet were silenced by the intimidation of public opinion, terrorized by the prospect of suffering, enticed by affluent Western culture's promise of 'security, comfort and pleasure,' then we would not have begun to understand the Book of Revelation as God wants us to.'