

Review of *The Book of Revelation Made Easy: You Can Understand Bible Prophecy*, 2nd ed. by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2010. 158 pages. \$15.95.

Reviewed by Alex Soto

When a marriage covenant has been breached by harlotry, offended spouses can pursue divorce, which entails placing a certificate of divorce in the hand of the offender (Deut. 24:1). Further legal action may be pursued. The legal punishment for this marital unfaithfulness was death by stoning (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:21), requiring the testimony of at least two witnesses (Deut. 17:6; 19:15). The offended spouse, of course, could remarry.

Ken Gentry's book presents St. John's Revelation as dramatizing God pursuing a legal divorce from His harlot-bride, Israel. We can hardly miss this legal component of John's drama. Judicial terms such as "witness" and "judgment" permeate the book; and when he arrives in heaven, the first thing he sees is God sitting on His legal throne (4:2). In fact, Gentry informs us that out of the sixty-two times the word "throne" is used in the New Testament, forty-seven of those are in the book of Revelation. As Israel was covenantally married to God (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 31:31–32), their idolatries were accounted "adultery" and "harlotry" (Jer. 3:9; 5:7; Ezek. 23:37). In the opening vision after John is transported to heaven, he sees the certificate of divorce, the seven-sealed scroll (chs. 4–5). After the requisite testimony of two witnesses (ch. 11), God judges Israel for her harlotry by stoning (16:21). After this judgment, John introduces us to God's new bride, heavenly New Jerusalem (chs. 21–22), implying the replacement of his previous bride, earthly Old Jerusalem.

In the first century the Lord publicly demonstrated these truths when He made use of the mighty Roman Empire, which utterly destroyed Jerusalem and razed it to the ground. Gentry's book thus presents a *preterist* approach to the book of Revelation, an approach teaching that most of the events foretold have already happened. They were future to John's writing, but past to us today. This approach is contrasted with *futurism*, which teaches that most of the events of Revelation have yet to happen.

Chapter One: Interpretation and Expectation

The opening chapter discusses "two vital and foundational issues for properly understanding Revelation." As a faulty foundation can mar any edifice, when interpreters mangle these two foundations the strangest-looking structures arise.

Interpretation

The first foundational issue involves *how* John expected his prophecies to be interpreted. Futurists tell us that "biblical prophecy deserves literal interpretation, just as do other literary genres of Scripture."¹ Gentry, though, shows the absurdities that result from such a method: we end up with robes washed white by blood (Rev. 7:14); we have demons that look like frogs coming out of the mouths of evil persons (Rev. 16:13–14); we get a woman intoxicated by human blood (Rev. 17:6); we make Jesus ride a horse out of heaven fighting His enemies with a sharp sword held by His mouth (Rev. 19:11, 15). And about Revelation 21:10, 16, Gentry asks: "Do we expect a literal city (complete with plumbing and electricity?) to descend to the earth from heaven? . . . And will it be so gigantic that it will extend from the earth's

¹ Robert L. Thomas, "A Classical Dispensationalist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, Counterpoints, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 224.

surface upwards of 1500 miles, about 1200 miles higher than the Space Shuttle orbits?” With so many absurd interpretations resulting, even the literalist cannot abide by his rules,² so that Gentry can write: “despite the popular claim of literalism, *no one takes Revelation literally.*”

Gentry, on the other hand, follows the lead of the book itself. In the opening verse it explains that John was *shown* the prophecy via *signs*. About this Gentry writes: “John encourages his readers to expect figurative symbols rather than literal events.” The revelator goes on in the opening chapter to show by way of example how to interpret his writing. Though John sees Jesus in the midst of seven lampstands holding seven stars in his hand (Rev. 1:13–19), he is specifically told not to interpret these literally. The Lord explains that the lampstands *represent* churches and the stars *represent* the angels of these churches (1:20). “John’s first vision sets the pattern for later symbolic interpretation,” says Gentry. And if any interpreter should forget this method, “several times in Revelation, [John] stops to provide interpretive insights in the visions.” For example, John informs us that Jesus’ seven horns and seven eyes signify the seven Spirits of God (5:6); that incense symbolizes the saints’ prayers (5:8); that the beast’s seven heads represent seven hills and seven emperors (17:9–10); that the ten horns of the beast portray ten kings (17:12); and that the waters on which the Harlot sits stand for peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues (17:15).

Whenever an author explains how to interpret his book, wisdom demands we listen lest our interpretations *rewrite* his book. In several ways, John tells us he symbolically portrays the future.

A failure to take full account of this feature has led to some of the most outlandish teachings on this book by some whose rule of interpretation is “literal, unless absurd.” Though this is a good rule when dealing with literature written in a literal genre, it is the exact opposite in the case of apocalyptic literature, where symbolism is the rule, and literalism the exception.³

Expectation

The second foundational issue involves *when* John expected his prophecy to occur. He tells us outright; we need not guess. John expected the prophecy to occur in his near future:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must **soon take place**. (Rev. 1:1; cf. 22:6)

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for **the time is near**. (Rev. 1:3; cf. 22:10)

As clear as these statements appear, the newcomer might be surprised at the number of interpretations given to these near-term time texts:

² Here are a few things that literalists interpret symbolically: **(a) The mark of the beast** (John F. Walvoord, *The John Walvoord Prophecy Commentaries: Revelation*, eds. Philip E. Rawley and Mark Hitchcock [Chicago: Moody, 2011], 30, 215; Weidner quoted in Steve Gregg, ed., *Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997], 303); **(b) the thousand years of Revelation 20** (Lange in Gregg, *Parallel Commentary*, 468); **(c) the seven hills of Revelation 17:9** (Mark L. Hitchcock, “A Defense of the Domitianic Date of the Book of Revelation” [PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2005; in Pre-Trib Research Center, <http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/hitchcock-dissertation.pdf> (accessed July 15, 2013)], 166); and **(d) the time texts “soon” and “near” in Revelation 1:1, 3** (see below). The fact that literalist Henry Morris can boast that his commentary may well be “the most literal approach” (*The Revelation Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Revelation* [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1983], 14) implies that other literalists have employed figurative interpretations where literalism’s rules of interpretation at least allow for a literal interpretation. Jerry Falwell and Tim LaHaye agree with Morris’s assessment of his own commentary (Morris, *Revelation Record*, 9, 12).

³ Gregg, *Parallel Commentary*, 11.

- (a) Some have tried to interpret the “soon-ness” as describing the *manner* of how the events will transpire, avoiding a temporal meaning altogether. They say that John is “indicating the rapid progression of events once they begin to occur.”⁴ “The emphasis, perhaps,” writes Henry Morris, “is that the entire sequence of events outlined in Revelation, once begun, will be completed in a short period of time.”⁵ But even fellow futurist, Mark Hitchcock, cannot accept this interpretation, pointing out that even if it is within the purview of the original language to translate Revelation 1:1 as “things that must *quickly* or *suddenly* come to pass,” just two verses later John uses another word, *engus* (translated as “near”), requiring an interpretation as to *when* the prophecy will occur.⁶
- (b) Hitchcock offers a different interpretation: “These events are near, in that, they are the next events on God’s prophetic calendar.”⁷ Yet I know not how Hitchcock squares this with his belief that Israel’s re-gathering as a nation in 1948 partially fulfills Ezekiel 37.⁸
- (c) Still another interpretation suggests that John was not giving a time for the accomplishment of the prophecy but rather a time for his book to be “diffused, read and explained.”⁹

But these last two interpretations are probably the most popular:

- (d) These time-texts refer to God’s time not man’s time. Such interpreters usually cite 2 Peter 3:8—“with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.” John is perhaps supplying us with “a new perspective on time (apocalyptic time).”¹⁰ Morris thinks that John may be giving us “a reference to the brevity of human time in contrast with eternity.”¹¹ But Hitchcock objects again, pointing out that “it seems doubtful that a reader would naturally make a connection between these timing terms and a passage like 2 Pet 3:8.”¹² And Steve Gregg would add:

When Paul told Timothy that he intended to come to him shortly (1 Tim. 3:14; 2 Tim. 4:9), it is unlikely that Timothy was expected to take into consideration that Paul, an inspired writer, was reckoning in divine terms and that if Paul came thousands of years later, he should not be thought to have defaulted on his promise. It is hard to believe that the repeated words of comfort to the suffering churches that Jesus would come quickly (Gr. “without delay”) were intended to convey anything other than their natural meaning to the human recipients.¹³

⁴ Walvoord, *Revelation*, 38.

⁵ *Revelation Record*, 472. And without embarrassment Morris goes on to give a length for this *short(!)* period of time: “say, 1,007 years, the tribulation plus the millennium.”

⁶ Hitchcock, “Domitianic Date,” 92–93.

⁷ “Domitianic Date,” 94. Thomas suggests the same interpretation: “in a biblical context, no biblical prophecy remains to be fulfilled prior to the predicted happening” (“Classical,” 189).

⁸ “Israel and Ezekiel 37–38,” entry posted February 9, 2010, <http://marklhitchcock.com/2010/02/israel-and-ezekiel-37-38/> (accessed July 15, 2013). In fact, in an interview on a news network, he called this re-gathering “the super sign . . . of the end times” (“Mark Discusses the Number 666 on MSNBC,” <http://marklhitchcock.com/videos/> [accessed July 15, 2013]).

⁹ William E. Biederwolf quoted in Gregg, *Parallel Commentary*, 501.

¹⁰ Stuart R. Jones, review of *Before Jerusalem Fell*, by Kenneth L. Gentry, *New Horizons* 12:2 (Feb., 1991): 24, quoted in Kenneth L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: American Vision, 1998), li.

¹¹ *Revelation Record*, 472.

¹² “Domitianic Date,” 93.

¹³ *Parallel Commentary*, 25–26.

- (e) And lastly, by “things that must soon take place” and “the time is near,” the revelator means that Christ can come at any time. “The Lord wanted all His servants to live in an attitude of expectancy, knowing that He might return at any moment.”¹⁴ In John F. Walvoord’s words, “the end is always impending because of the imminent return of Christ at the rapture.”¹⁵ Yet it baffles me how one gets “the time *can* be near” from the words “the time *is* near.” It is just in this most crucial area that the literalist does not want to interpret the Bible literally!

After studying the theories offered, Gregg expresses my thoughts precisely: “A degree of stretching, or even desperation, is sometimes discernible in the comments of non-preterists on such [time-text] passages.”¹⁶

Contrary to the foregoing desperations, Gentry offers the most natural reading of John’s time-texts. John expected his prophecies to occur soon, for the time was near to his writing. Gentry proves this from a number of angles. First, John uses various expressions: *en tachei* (translated “soon” in 1:1 and 22:6) and *engus* (translated “near” in 1:3 and 22:10). “If, for some reason,” Gentry explains, “his original audience could not understand one term, they had another nearby to elucidate it.” Then he asks: “How else could John have declared that the events were near?”

Second, he notes the strategic placement of these terms. They are placed in the opening (1:1, 3) and closing (22:6, 10) of the letter.

This becomes all the more relevant when we realize that these temporal indicators appear *before* and *after* the difficult visions. They are not in the symbolic sections where we might wonder if they require special interpretive rules. Rather, they are in the clear, straightforward, didactic portions of Revelation.

Third, Gentry observes the contrary instructions delivered to Daniel and John about a similar matter:

Daniel lived several hundred years before John, and the angel directed him to “seal up the book” [Dan. 12:4]. But much later in history, a similar angel instructed John (writing a similar, apocalyptic work) *not* to seal up the book—“for the time is near” (Rev. 22:10). What could be clearer? Daniel’s expectations are long term; John’s are short term.

To bolster his case, Gentry notes the situation of John’s intended audience. Revelation was written to first century churches in Asia Minor experiencing severe persecution (Rev. 6:9–11; 13:7), with John himself being a fellow sufferer (1:9). “Is John taunting these men and women who are under such trials by using familiar terms speaking of temporal nearness?” We cannot construe the apostle’s words in such a way that would involve cruel taunting on his part.

One cannot overstate the importance of the two foundational issues Gentry covers in the first chapter: *how* John expected his prophecy to be interpreted and *when* he expected his prophecy to occur. The apostle did not leave these up in the air but gave direct teaching on both of them. He who has an ear, let him hear what John says to interpreters.

¹⁴ Morris, *Revelation Record*, 33.

¹⁵ *Revelation*, 346; cf. 344. See also Hitchcock, “Domitianic Date,” 94–96; and Thomas, “Classical,” 189–191.

¹⁶ *Parallel Commentary*, 38.

Chapter Two: Revelation's Theme

Gentry believes John expressly states his theme in the opening chapter:

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. (Rev. 1:7)

Though many see the second coming of Christ in this verse, Gentry gives several arguments showing “this verse presents us with a judgment prophecy against first century Jerusalem, whose destruction occurs in A.D. 70.”

First, he reminds us of the time texts. John expected a near fulfillment of his prophecy (Rev. 1:1, 3; 22:6, 10). “One would think that if he is writing about ‘the things which must shortly take place,’ this would involve his very theme.”

Second, John applies this theme to his first century audience just two verses later. Those suffering in the “tribulation” and “perseverance” “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Rev. 1:9) greatly concerns John. “Surely, [John] is not telling these persecuted saints that the time is near, that they must heed that which he is writing, that God is concerned with their persecution—but He will avenge you thousands of years in the future!”

Third, Gentry makes us aware that Scripture’s “coming with the clouds” language does not always refer to Christ’s second (bodily) coming, but sometimes refers to God’s historical judgments on nations. Such “comings” did not involve God’s visible presence. For instance, God came “riding on a swift cloud” to judge Egypt (Isa. 19:1)—“a judgment which transpires when the Assyrian king Esarhaddon conquered Egypt in 671 B.C.”

Fourth, this understanding of Revelation 1:7 lines up with Jesus’ teaching about the coming judgment on Jerusalem. In His Parable of the Landowner (Matt. 21:33–46), wicked tenants violently beat and kill servants of the owner. When the owner sends his son, the tenants kill him as well. For this, the owner “comes” (v. 40) and replaces the people of his land (vv. 41, 43). The Jewish leadership “understood that [Jesus] was speaking about them” (v. 45). Jesus continues this thought in the next parable, more particularly describing this judgment-coming: “But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire” (Matt. 22:7)—precisely how God “comes” to express His wrath on first century Israel.

Fifth, John places this prophetic judgment on “those who pierced [Christ].” Gentry cites several passages that blame the Israelites for the Savior’s death—such as Matthew 27:25, “All the people answered, ‘His blood is on us and on our children!’”; and Acts 5:30, “The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.” About this, Gentry concludes: “The unrelenting testimony of Scripture blames Israel for Christ’s death. She is covenantally responsible.”

Sixth, “the reader must understand that the Greek word translated ‘earth’ (*gē*) can also be translated ‘land.’ In fact, it often refers to ‘the land of Israel,’ i.e., ‘the Promised Land.’” And with no trouble Gentry demonstrates this (see, for example, Matt. 2:6, 20–21). Our English translations, therefore, should not mislead us to expect a global judgment in Revelation. Gentry then adds: “When we note that the ‘land’ contains ‘tribes,’ we move even closer to the proper interpretation,” as Israel was made up of twelve tribes.

Seventh, the theme’s phrase, “will wail on account of him,” hearkens us back to Jesus’ words to the “daughters of *Jerusalem*,” that they will be weeping for themselves when judgment befalls them (Luke 23:28–31; cp. Rev. 6:15–16).

Gentry presents a strong case for understanding Revelation 1:7 as describing Christ’s judgment on first century apostate Israel—“those who pierced him.”

The first two chapters are the most important. With these issues properly understood, many of the others become transparent. Consequently we can make shorter work of some of the following chapters.

Chapter Three: The Beast

Gentry has no problem proving Revelation's Beast is the ancient Roman Empire. When John explains the Beast's "seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits" (Rev. 17:9), this ought to end all inquiries. "This," says Gentry, "locks in the Beast's geographical identity as the famed 'city on seven hills,' Rome." The Beast also represents the individual emperor as well,¹⁷ that is, the emperor ruling at the time of John's writing.

Again, the banished apostle does not leave these issues up in the air, but specifically addresses them. He tells us, first, that he is writing during Nero Caesar's reign. The interpreting angel informs him of this:

Here is the mind which has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits, and they are seven kings; five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain a little while. (Rev. 17:9–10)

Gentry comments on these verses:

Now the angel associates a series of seven kings with this famous empire. As it turns out, the five fallen kings represent the first five emperors of Rome: Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, and Claudius . . . They are dead when John writes, hence they are "fallen." The sixth king is presently reigning, for "one is." This is Nero Caesar. The angel then explains to John regarding the seventh king: he "has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain a little while." The seventh emperor of Rome was Galba, who reigned from June, A.D. 68 to January, A.D. 69—just six months, the shortest reigning emperor until that time (Nero had reigned over thirteen years).

Other interpreters, though, believing that John wrote during Domitian's reign (30 years after Nero), argue that the "kings" in Revelation 17:9–10 should not be understood as kings but as *kingdoms* or *empires*.¹⁸ According to Hitchcock, these kingdoms are Egypt, Assyria, Neo-Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and the reunited Roman Empire that will exist at the time of the rapture. But this view conveniently ignores other empires (e.g., Hittite, Spanish, English), even empires that persecuted the people of God (e.g., Ottoman). New Testament scholar, Donald Guthrie, summarizes the situation well:

Advocates of a Domitianic date have not satisfactorily dealt with the problem of this sixth king. In view of the mention of the seven hills in Revelation 17:9, there can be little doubt that the primary reference in Revelation 17:10 is to the sequence of Roman emperors. Since five have fallen, the sixth must be the reigning emperor.¹⁹

Second, John teaches that the Beast is Nero. The gematria²⁰ value of Nero Caesar equals 666. "A first-century Hebrew spelling of his name was *Nrwn Qsr* (pronounced: 'Neron Kaiser'). Archaeologists have documented this Hebrew spelling which provides us with precisely the value of 666."

Hitchcock, though, asks an obvious question: "One wonders why John, writing to a primarily Greek-speaking audience in western Asia Minor, would not use a Greek form instead of a Hebrew form."²¹ To this Gentry reminds us:

¹⁷ That the Beast can symbolize the *corporate* empire and the *individual* emperor is acknowledged even by futurists. See Hitchcock, "Domitianic Date," 166; Morris, *Revelation Record*, 339; Walvoord, *Revelation*, 213.

¹⁸ "The best solution to the identifi[t]y of the seven kings . . . understands the seven kings primarily as representing seven successive Gentile world powers or kingdoms" (Hitchcock, "Domitianic Date," 165; cf. Walvoord, *Revelation*, 262; Morris, *Revelation Record*, 336–337).

¹⁹ *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1990), 957.

²⁰ Gematria is a system of assigning a numerical value to words and names. Many ancient languages assign a numerical value to each letter, whereupon one who had wisdom and understanding could calculate the number of a person's name.

²¹ "Domitianic Date," 140.

As we begin highlighting Revelation's unfolding drama, we must always bear in mind that it is the most Old Testament flavored book in the entire New Testament. Grammarians note its peculiar grammar, which is strongly influenced by Hebrew thought-forms which break the rules of Greek grammar. We also see hundreds of allusions to Old Testament verses, images, and themes. We even encounter Hebraic names and places, some of which are translated from their Hebrew form into a more Greek form ("Abaddon" becomes "Apollyon," Rev. 9:11) or are explained to be Hebrew forms ("Har-magedon," Rev. 16:16). (p. 48)

Morris suggests another view of the Beast's coded name:

Since "six" is one short of the perfect "seven" and since man was made on the sixth day, the number six has long been associated with man in his imperfection. The three sixes together may be suggestive of the unholy trinity—the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet.²²

But Gentry points out: "John does not state that this mark involves a series of three sixes. In the Greek of Revelation 13:18, the number actually is 'six hundred, sixty and six,' not 'six and six and six.'" Moreover, this view goes well beyond the text, making the mark of the *beast* the mark of the *dragon* and *false prophet* as well.

Chapter Four: The Harlot

In this chapter, Gentry builds a case for first century Jerusalem being Revelation's Harlot. Such fits the temporal indicators and the theme. It also fits Jesus' statements, where He labels first century Israel an "adulterous generation" (Matt. 12:39), upon which He placed the responsibility "for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world" (Luke 11:50).

Other indicators include (a) the Harlot's identification as "the great city" (Rev. 17:18), a title clearly assigned to Jerusalem in Revelation 11:8; (b) the Harlot's persecution of the prophets and saints (Rev. 18:24), of which Israel was patently guilty (Luke 11:47–51; Acts 7:52; 8:1; 14:2, 19; 17:5, 13; 22:4–5); (c) the Harlot's priestly attire (Rev. 17:4; cp. Ex. 28:4–5, 8–9) "reflects her covenantal status as a kingdom of priests," and her headgear ("the Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth," Rev. 17:5) is a wicked negative image of the high priest's headgear ("Holy to the Lord," Ex. 28:36).

But especially helpful is John's contrast of the Harlot with the Bride. After the Harlot is judged and cast out (Rev. 18:2, 10, 21), he then speaks of a marriage to a new Bride (Rev. 19:1–9; 21). John introduces the Harlot ("Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters," Rev. 17:1) and the new Bride ("Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife," Rev. 21:9) in strikingly similar language. He contrasts the two environments of the women: the Harlot in the wilderness (Rev. 17:3), the new Bride on a high mountain (Rev. 21:10). But John most conspicuously contrasts the characters of the two women: a harlot verses a chaste bride. Consequently, as the new Bride is clearly the *new* and *heavenly* Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2), the Harlot being contrasted to this Bride must be the *old* and *earthly* Jerusalem.

Her title of "Babylon," therefore, should not throw anyone from this conclusion, as Gentry explains:

As a fiery prophet of judgment, John applies to Jerusalem names involving evil biblical associations.

As historical Jerusalem's character becomes more evident, he eventually assigns the name "Babylon" to old, historical, condemned Jerusalem. This name-calling practice is a form of prophetic judgment speech.

Gentry goes on to show how the prophets Isaiah (Isa. 1:10) and Jeremiah (Jer. 23:14) and even John himself (Rev. 11:8) engaged in this practice of name-calling, prophetic judgment speech.

²² *Revelation Record*, 256. Cf. Walvoord, *Revelation*, 30.

Chapter Five: Key Judgments and Their Meaning

In this fascinating chapter, Gentry covers some of the first century historical events dramatized by John's Apocalypse. He describes, first, the mountains moving from their place (Rev. 6:14), and how the Roman legions demolished the mountainous defenses of Israel that stood in their way. Second, the people hiding in caves (Rev. 6:15–17) quite literally happened, as “Josephus records many instances showing how the caves and caverns were used by the Jews in attempts to escape the wrath of the Roman armies.” Third, the splitting of the great city into three parts (Rev. 16:19) was fulfilled by Jerusalem's internal factions, which divided into three party lines led by three rogues, Eleazar, John, and Simon. Fourth, the bombardment of Jerusalem by hundred-pound hailstones (Rev. 16:21) symbolizes the white-colored boulders the Roman military catapulted on the city—boulders that happened to weigh a hundred pounds. Fifth, the blood flowing a distance of 1600 stadia (Rev. 14:20) also fits the events of the first century Jewish War: “Interestingly, Israel's length as a Roman province was 1664 stadia—right at the figure John records. . . . [And] Josephus reports that ‘the whole of the country through which [the Jews] had fled was filled with slaughter.’”

Chapter Six: The Millennium and Resurrections

Millennium

Futurist Walvoord writes: “Believers are not now reigning with Christ, which would require Christ to be in the present earth in a physical way, participating directly in the government of the world.”²³ One wonders why futurists require Christ's physical presence to rule earth while they do not require the same for Satan as he rules earth (John 12:31; 2 Cor. 4:4). But such are the inconsistencies of this school of thought.

Gentry teaches us better. He cites such verses as Mark 1:15, where Jesus proclaims at His first coming, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand”; John 18:37, where Jesus instructs Pilate, “You say correctly that I am a king”; and Acts 17:7, where some unbelieving Thessalonians were upset by the believers' preaching that even Caesar had to submit to King Jesus. “Christ,” says Gentry, “declares his kingdom authority during his earthly ministry. He vigorously proclaims that the kingdom is coming in his ministry, forbidding us from assuming that it awaits his Second Advent in the distant future.” As John puts it, Jesus Christ is “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev. 1:5). And this rule we *presently* share with Him (1 Cor. 3:21–23; Eph. 2:6), as we have been made co-kings (Rev. 1:6).

The lengthy duration of Christ's rule John *symbolizes* by “a thousand years” (Rev. 20:4). Scripture often uses the figure “1000” in a non-literal way: God shows mercy to a thousand generations (Ex. 20:6), owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps. 50:10), and Moses wishes that God would increase Israel's population a thousand times more than in his day (Deut. 1:11). Coupling this with the knowledge that Revelation is the most symbolic book in the Bible, we must surely interpret the length of Christ's kingdom symbolically. And how this lengthy period fits into the near-term parameters of the book (Rev. 1:1, 3; 22:6, 10), Gentry explains:

In Revelation 20, John glances off into the distant future, beyond the near-term events to discover their *consequences*. Yet the 1000 years do *begin* in the first century so that the millennial period is rooted in the near-term expectations of Revelation. In Revelation 20, John reveals to us the *long-term results* of the *near-term judgments*. Chapter 20 sets the first century judgments in the historical big picture.

The binding of Satan parallels Christ's kingdom. As Christ set up His kingdom in the first century, so also He bound Satan at that time. Did not Jesus Himself declare such (Matt. 12:28–29; John 12:31–

²³ *Revelation*, 309.

32)? Thus in the narrative flow of Revelation 20, we find the binding of Satan (vv. 1–3) immediately followed by Christ’s millennial rule (vv. 4–6).

But a common objection to this view states that Satan today “is more active than ever.”²⁴ How can a being be bound who is so active, we are asked. Such an objection, however, overlooks two truths. First, the text says that Satan is bound for a particular purpose: “to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore” (Rev. 20:3). It does not say that Satan has been killed or rendered completely inactive. Second, we must have blinders to miss the conquests the gospel has made over Satan in the past two millennia. Before Christ’s first advent, all nations were deceived (2 Kings 17:29; Luke 4:5–6), God allowing “all the nations to walk in their own ways” (Acts 14:16). Even in the beginning of the New Covenant Church, severe persecution impelled believers to meet secretly in caves. Today, Christians exist in nearly every nation—oftentimes as the dominant religion of a nation—and in many nations assemble without fear of attack at all. Yes, we are indeed living in an era with Satan bound. This truth should embolden us to evangelism.

Resurrections

We come now to what caused Gentry to write a second edition: he changed his views on Revelation 20’s resurrections. In his first edition, he interpreted the first resurrection as spiritual regeneration, which accords well with other passages speaking of our conversion in resurrection terms (John 5:24–29; Eph. 2:4–6). Gentry understood the second resurrection as the bodily resurrection at the end of history. Since the resurrections in Revelation 20 are separated by a thousand years, we are theologically forced to interpret them as two distinct kinds of resurrections inasmuch as Scripture elsewhere speaks of one general bodily resurrection of all men (John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15) on “the last day” (John 6:39–54; 11:24).

But Gentry recognized a problem with the foregoing interpretation: it seems to divide unnaturally the people of Revelation 20:4 into two groups. The first group John sees would be those dead (“beheaded”) saints in heaven; the second group, introduced by the phrase “and which” (Greek: *kai hostis*), would be the faithful saints still on earth. Gentry explains:

I originally held that two groups were in view [in] Revelation 20:4. I held the common Augustinian view that the martyrs represent deceased Christians in heaven (the Church Triumphant), and that the confessors represent living saints on the earth (the Church Militant). And together these two groups picture all Christians throughout Church history. I no longer accept this interpretation.

In addition to its forced construction, Gentry notes an exegetical problem. Whereas the Greek word *hostis* can be used either to introduce a new idea or to explain further the idea already mentioned, John’s use of *hostis* in Revelation always involves the latter.

I began to notice that everywhere else in Revelation, John uses *hostis* to further explain the preceding. For instance, in Revelation 1:12, he turns to see the voice, the one *which (hetis)* was speaking with him. In Revelation 11:8, the bodies of the two prophets lie in the great city, the city *which (hetis)* is mystically called Sodom and Egypt. In Revelation 12:13, the dragon persecutes the woman, the one *who (hetis)* gives birth to the child. In Revelation 19:2, God judges the great harlot, the one *who (hetis)* is corrupting the Land.

Understood this way, *hostis* would then further explain the group already mentioned. So Gentry now conceives only one group in Revelation 20:4. Those John sees on thrones are the same as those beheaded and the same as those who did not worship the beast and the same as those who lived and reigned with Christ during the millennium. “They are *deceased* Christians *in heaven*, who were *martyred* in the *first*

²⁴ Walvoord, *Revelation*, 306.

century.” As Revelation is an occasional epistle, dealing with a specific historical occasion, Gentry reasons that John must be addressing a first century event.

Buttressing his argument, Gentry notes the similar wording of Revelation 6:9 and 20:4, showing that 20:4 is the answer to the martyrs’ prayer in 6:9.

Thus, their “coming to life” [Rev. 20:4], a fulfillment of the promise given to them *after they are already in heaven* (Rev. 6:11), appears to be an image of their *vindication* in the *death* of their opponents in A.D. 70, rather than at the very moment when the martyrs enter heaven.

So we see Gentry still distinguishes the two resurrections, only now the first resurrection is a vindication of the martyrs and the second resurrection is the bodily resurrection at the end of history.

Well, I have a mixed evaluation of Gentry’s new understanding of the resurrections. I think seeing one group in 20:4 reads much more naturally. I also appreciate reading *kai hostis* (“and which”) in 20:4 consistently with John’s other uses. And seeing 20:4 as the answer to the martyrs’ prayer in 6:9 makes a lot of sense.

However, I am not fully persuaded with this understanding. It is certainly awkward to interpret “coming to life” (20:4) and “resurrection” (20:5) as sitting on thrones and given authority to judge or as *vindication*. Are there any precedents for interpreting the Greek words in this way? Gentry seems to say no: “This is unique to John—but his work is unique in many respects.” Also, it seems odd to have such a divergent meaning of the two resurrections in such close proximity. Even though Gentry’s old interpretation gave them two different meanings (spiritual and bodily), at least they had something in common; and he could point to John’s similar practice in John 5:24–29. But vindication and bodily resurrection are rather disparate notions. Moreover, we do not have to interpret everything in an occasional epistle as dealing with historical matters of that audience. Other occasional epistles address matters in the distant future (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15 deals with the bodily resurrection at the end of history). Even Revelation 20 deals with events well past the first century: a lengthy millennial period, the loosening of Satan, final judgment, and final resurrection.

Consequently, I see pluses and minuses in Gentry’s new construction. Perhaps he may fully persuade me when I read his more lengthy case in his forthcoming commentary on Revelation.

Chapter 7: The New Creation and the Church

New Creation

Gentry writes of John’s vision of a new heaven and a new earth:

Orthodox Christians believe that at the end of history, we will literally enter the *consummate* new heavens and new earth in physical bodies renewed through the physical resurrection. John’s picture of the new creation, however, represents a *present* reality which *the consummate order eventually fulfills, perfects, and replaces*. John’s image is a picture of new covenant salvation coming into the world in the first century.

Gentry argues for its present reality by paralleling it with Isaiah’s prophecy of the new creation (Isa. 65:17–25)—a new creation in which contain childbirths, sin, aging, death, and the curse (Isa. 65:20). These will not happen in the eternal order. Furthermore, he argues for a present new creation by noting the near-term indicators in Revelation 22:6 immediately after the section describing the new creation (Rev. 21:1—22:5). “It seems exegetically unlikely that we could surmise that the preceding description actually applies to a reality thousands of years in the future.”

New Bride

Gentry believes that in the bride description “John speaks of the church in elevated and ideal terms.” John “looks at the *end results* of the present redemptive reality.” Christ shows the apostle the full beauty of His people that they possess now only in principle. Among the things John mentions are the absence of seas in the new Jerusalem-Bride (Rev. 21:1), pointing to a time of perfect peace, as a turbulent sea often symbolizes a restless and wicked world (Isa. 57:20; Jer. 6:23); grief is removed (Rev. 21:4); salvation is provided, spoken in terms of food and water (Rev. 21:6; 22:1–2). And through many other symbols, John portrays the new Bride-city as light, valuable, secure, influential, and as a healer (Rev. 21:9—22:5).

Conclusion

Reading this book is like listening to a well-played symphony. Gentry has taught John’s Apocalypse for so many years, in so many settings, that his presentation has become something of an art. It is a true pleasure to read this book. Besides the pleasure of reading it, two other benefits result. As the title indicates, it makes one of the least understood books (and one of the most debated books) of the Bible understandable.

It benefits us as well by taking out one of the supposed legs of a futurist eschatology.²⁵ If the book of Revelation largely depicts events of the first century, as Gentry argues, then the world’s days of spiraling downward, and the Church’s days of diminishing influence, need not be in our future. The Great Commission’s fulfillment does not require Jesus’ physical presence on earth, as today’s majority opinion suggests.²⁶ Even with our Lord bodily in heaven He yet assures us “I am with you always” in your mission (Matt. 28:20). *The Great Commission will be accomplished prior to the second coming*—our all-conquering Sovereign’s presence will see to it. But we cannot move toward our goal while we have friends within the camp who keep telling us we are going to lose, and, even worse, stating that it is God’s will that we lose! Gentry’s book counters futurism’s demoralizing views of the end times. He refreshingly gives us a view of Revelation comporting with Jesus’ expected accomplishment of the Great Commission.

²⁵ The other supposed leg is the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21). As with the book of Revelation, however, this passage also describes first century events—viz., the Jewish war with Rome. As Jesus explains to His generation, this discourse prophesies about a time when “*this generation*” (Matt. 24:34) will see “Jerusalem surrounded by armies” (Luke 21:20). Noticing that the Olivet Discourse speaks of the same events as Revelation, theologians have called it the “little Apocalypse.” And since John is the only Gospel writer to omit this discourse, “some have suggested that Revelation might be regarded as John’s expanded version of the Olivet Discourse” (Gregg, *Parallel Commentary*, 38). For a brief but fine exposition of Matthew 24, see J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1971).

²⁶ Futurist Walvoord reflects on the worldwide evil and false religions that he believes will characterize the days before Christ’s second coming: “The fact will be demonstrated beyond question that mankind is not able to solve his own problems and only God can bring righteousness and peace to the earth” (*Revelation*, 216).