



THE LAST DAYS 2

RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

'Eschatology' is the study of last things. Christians should never fear having their eschatological 'system' scrutinised by the plain teaching of the Bible. If you subscribe to the currently popular "Left Behind" system of eschatology, prepare to be challenged by Scripture and history. Moreover, prepare to gain a greater respect for the integrity of the Bible.

Christianity is in danger of being labelled a false religion because of the many failed predictions based on Revelation, which is the source of much end-time speculation. One of the major keys to its proper interpretation is the identity of the harlot city, Babylon.

WHO IS THE WHORE?



How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow is she, who was great among the nations! The princess among the provinces has become a slave! She weeps bitterly in the night, her tears are on her cheeks; Among all her lovers she has none to comfort her. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her; They have become her enemies. Lamentations 1:1-2

Read on the ninth of Av in commemoration of the desolation of Jerusalem

Revelation and the Covenant

FROM "THE DAYS OF VENGEANCE"
BY DAVID CHILTON

The Book of Revelation is part of the Bible. At first glance this may not seem to be a brilliant insight, but it is a point that is both crucially important and almost universally neglected in the actual practice of exposition. For as soon as we recognize that Revelation is a Biblical document, we are forced to ask a central question: What sort of book is the Bible? And the answer is this: *The Bible is a book* (The Book) *about the Covenant*. The Bible is not an Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge. Nor is it a collection of Moral Tales, or a series of personal-psychology studies of Great Heroes of Long Ago. The Bible is God's written revelation of Himself, the story of His coming to us in the Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ; and it is the story of the Church's relationship to Him through the Covenant He has established with her.

"From the very beginning, cranks and crackpots have attempted to use Revelation to advocate some new twist on the Chicken Little Doctrine: 'The Sky Is Falling!'"

David Chilton

The Covenant is the meaning of Biblical history (Biblical history is not primarily adventure stories). The Covenant is the meaning of Biblical law (the Bible is not primarily a political treatise about how to set up a Christian Republic). And the Covenant is the meaning of Biblical prophecy as well (thus, Biblical prophecy is not “prediction” in the occult sense of Nostradamus, Edgar Cayce, and Jean Dixon). To a man, the prophets were God’s legal emissaries to Israel and the nations, acting as prosecuting attorneys bringing what has become known among recent scholars as the “Covenant Lawsuit.”

That Biblical prophecy is not simply “prediction” is indicated, for example, by God’s statement through Jeremiah:

At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it.

Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will repent of the good with which I had promised to bless it. (Jer. 18:7-10)

The purpose of prophecy is not “prediction,” but evaluation of man’s ethical response to God’s Word of command and promise. This is why Jonah’s prophecy about Nineveh did not “come true”: Nineveh repented of its wickedness, and the calamity was averted. Like the other Biblical writings, the Book of Revelation is a prophecy, with a specific covenantal orientation and reference. When the covenantal context of the prophecy is ignored, the message St. John sought to communicate is lost, and Revelation becomes nothing more than a vehicle for advancing the alleged expositor’s eschatological theories.

Let us consider a minor example: Revelation 9:16 tells us of a great army of horsemen, numbering “myriads of myriads.” In some Greek texts, this reads *two myriads of myriads*, and is sometimes translated *200 million*. All sorts of fanciful and contrived explanations have been proposed for this. Perhaps the most well-known theory of recent times is Hal Lindsey’s opinion that “these 200 million troops are Red Chinese soldiers

accompanied by other Eastern allies. It’s possible that the industrial might of Japan will be united with Red China. For the first time in history there will be a full invasion of the West by the Orient.”

Such fortunetelling may or may not be accurate regarding a coming Chinese invasion, but it tells us absolutely nothing about the Bible. To help put Lindsey’s view into historical perspective, we will compare it to that of J. L. Martin, a 19th-century preacher who, while sharing Lindsey’s basic presuppositions about the nature and purpose of prophecy, reached the different, and amusing, conclusion that St. John’s “200 million” represented “the fighting force of the whole world” of 1870. Note Martin’s shrewdly scientific, Lindsey-like reasoning:

We have a few more than one billion inhabitants on the earth... But of that billion about five hundred millions (one-half) are females, leaving an average population of male inhabitants of about five hundred millions; and of that number about one-half are minors, leaving about two hundred and fifty millions of adult males on the earth at a time. But of that number of adult males about one-fifth are superannuated – too old to fight. These are statistical facts. This leaves exactly John’s two hundred millions of fighting men on earth. And when we prove a matter mathematically, we think it is pretty well done.

But Martin is just hitting his stride. He continues with his exposition, taking up the terrifying description of the soldiers in 9:17-19: “The riders had breastplates of fire and of hyacinth and of brimstone; and the heads of the horses are like the heads of lions; and out of their mouths proceed fire and smoke and brimstone. A third of mankind was killed by these three plagues, by the fire and the smoke and the brimstone, which proceeded out of their mouths. For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails are like serpents and have heads; and with them they do harm.” Whereas modern apocalyptists view this in terms of lasers and missile launchers, Martin had a different explanation – one which was in keeping with the state of military art in his day, when Buffalo Bill was fighting Sioux Indians as chief of scouts for General Sheridan’s Fifth Cavalry:

John is pointing to the modern mode of

fighting on horse-back, with the rider leaning forward, which, to his sight, and to the sight of one looking on at a distance, would appear as the great mane of the lion; the man leaning on his horse’s neck. He would, in fighting with firearms, have to lean forward to discharge his piece, lest he might shoot down his own horse that he was riding. In John’s day the posture was very different...

Now, I want to ask my friendly hearers if it is not as literally fulfilled before our eyes as anything can be? Are not all nations engaged in this mode of warfare? Do they not kill men with fire and smoke and brimstone?... Do you not know that this is just ignited gunpowder?...

Could an uninspired man, in the last of the first century, have told of this matter?

Unless we see the Book of Revelation as a Covenant document — i.e., if we insist on reading it primarily as either a prediction of twentieth-century nuclear weapons or a polemic against first-century Rome – its continuity with the rest of the Bible will be lost. It becomes an eschatological appendix, a view of “last things” that ultimately has little to do with the message, purpose, and concerns of the Bible. Once we understand Revelation’s character as a Covenant Lawsuit, however, it ceases to be a “strange,” “weird” book; it is no longer incomprehensible, or decipherable only with the complete *New York Times Index*. In its major themes at least, it becomes as accessible to us as Isaiah and Amos. The Book of Revelation must be seen from the outset in its character as Biblical *revelation*. The grasp of this single point can mean a “quantum leap” for interpretation; for, as Geerhardus Vos made clear in his pathbreaking studies of Biblical Theology, “revelation is connected throughout with the fate of Israel.”

The Covenant Lawsuit

God’s relationship with Israel was always defined in terms of the Covenant, the marriage bond by which He joined her to Himself as His special people. This Covenant was a legal arrangement, a binding “contract” imposed on Israel by her King, stipulating mutual obligations and promises. Meredith Kline has shown that the structure of the Biblical Covenant bears striking similarities to the established form for peace treaties in

the ancient Near East. This is how it worked: After a war, the victorious king would make a covenant with his defeated foe, making certain promises and guaranteeing protection on condition that the vassal-king and all under his authority would obey their new lord. Both lord and vassal would swear an oath, and they would thenceforth be united in covenant.

As Kline explains, the standard treaty-form in the ancient world was structured in five parts, all of which appear in the Biblical covenants:

1. Preamble (identifying the lordship of the Great King, stressing both his transcendence [greatness and power] and his immanence [nearness and presence]);
2. Historical Prologue (surveying the lord's previous relationship to the vassal, especially emphasizing the blessings bestowed);
3. Ethical Stipulations (expounding the vassal's obligations, his "guide to citizenship" in the covenant);
4. Sanctions (outlining the blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience);
5. Succession Arrangements (dealing with the continuity of the covenant relationship over future generations).

One of the best examples of a document written in this treaty-form is the Book of Deuteronomy, which Kline examines in detail in his *Treaty of the Great King*. (Recently, Kline's analysis has been considerably augmented in the more theologically oriented work of Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper*.) Kline's exposition shows how Deuteronomy naturally divides into the five covenantal sections:

Deuteronomy

1. Preamble (1:1-5)
2. Historical Prologue (1:6-4:49)
3. Ethical Stipulations (5:1-26:19)
4. Sanctions (27:1-30:20)
5. Succession Arrangements (31:1-34:12)

If a vassal kingdom violated the terms of the covenant, the lord would send messengers to the vassal, warning the offenders of coming judgment, in which the curse-sanctions of the covenant

would be enforced. This turns out to be the function of the Biblical prophets, as I mentioned above: They were prosecuting attorneys, bringing God's message of Covenant Lawsuit to the offending nations of Israel and Judah. And the structure of the lawsuit was always patterned after the original structure of the covenant. In other words, just as the Biblical covenants themselves follow the standard five-part treaty structure, the Biblical prophecies follow the treaty form as well. For example, the prophecy of Hosea is ordered according to the following outline:

Hosea

1. Preamble (1)
2. Historical Prologue (2-3)
3. Ethical Stipulations (4-7)
4. Sanctions (8-9)
5. Succession Arrangements (10-14)

Like many other Biblical prophecies, the Book of Revelation is a prophecy of Covenant wrath against apostate Israel, which irrevocably turned away from the Covenant in her rejection of Christ. And, like many other Biblical prophecies, the Book of Revelation is written in the form of the Covenant Lawsuit, with five parts, conforming to the treaty structure of the Covenant.

In order to grasp the five-part structure of Revelation, we must first consider how St. John's prophecy is related to the message of Leviticus 26. Like Deuteronomy 28, Leviticus 26 sets forth the sanctions of the Covenant: If Israel obeys God, she will be blessed in every area of life (Lev. 26:1-13; Deut. 28:1-14); if she disobeys, however, she will be visited with the Curse, spelled out in horrifying detail (Lev. 26:14-39; Deut. 28:15-68). (These curses were most fully poured out in the progressive desolation of Israel during the Last Days, culminating in the Great Tribulation of A.D. 67-70, as punishment for her apostasy and rejection of her True Husband, the Lord Jesus Christ.) One of the striking features of the Leviticus passage is that the curses are arranged in a special pattern: Four times in this chapter God says, "I will punish you seven times for your sins" (Lev. 26:18, 21, 24, 28). The number seven, as we will see abundantly

throughout Revelation, is a Biblical number for completeness or fullness (taken from the seven-day pattern laid down at the creation in Genesis 1). The number four is used in Scripture in connection with the earth, especially the Land of Israel; thus four rivers flowed out of Eden to water the whole earth (Gen. 2:10); the Land, like the Altar, is pictured as having four corners (Isa. 11:12; cf. Ex. 27:1-2), from which the four winds blow (Jer. 49:36); the camp of Israel was arranged in four groups around the sides of the Tabernacle (Num. 2); and so on (see your concordance and Bible dictionary). So by speaking of four seven-fold judgments in Leviticus 26, God is saying that a full, complete judgment will come upon the Land of Israel for its sins.

This theme is taken up by the prophets in their warnings to Israel:

And I shall appoint over them four kinds of doom, declares the LORD: the sword to slay, the dogs to drag off, and the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy. (Jer. 15:3)

Thus says the Lord GOD: I shall send My four evil judgments against Jerusalem: sword, famine, wild beasts, and plague to cut off man and beast from it! (Ezek. 14:21)

The imagery of a sevenfold judgment coming four times is most fully developed in the Book of Revelation, which is explicitly divided into four sets of seven: the Letters to the Seven Churches, the opening of the Seven Seals, the sounding of the Seven Trumpets, and the outpouring of the Seven Chalice. In thus following the formal structure of the covenantal curse in Leviticus, St. John underscores the nature of his prophecy as a declaration of covenant wrath against Jerusalem.

The four judgments are preceded by an introductory vision, which serves to highlight the transcendence and immanence of the Lord – precisely the function of the Preamble in the covenantal treaties. As we read through the four series of judgments, we find that they also conform to the treaty outline: The Seven Letters survey the history of the covenant; the Seven Seals have to do with the specific stipulations set forth in the corresponding section of the covenantal treaty; the Seven Trumpets invoke the covenant sanctions; and the

angels of the Seven Chalice are involved in both the disinheritance of Israel and the Church's succession in the New Covenant. Thus:

Revelation

1. Preamble:
Vision of the Son of Man (1)
2. Historical Prologue:
The Seven Letters (2-3)
3. Ethical Stipulations:
The Seven Seals (4-7)
4. Sanctions:
The Seven Trumpets (8-14)
5. Succession Arrangements:
The Seven Chalice (15-22)

St. John has thus combined the four-part Curse outline of Leviticus 26 with the familiar five-part outline of the Covenant Lawsuit. The intersection of a fourfold and fivefold curse is related to another dimension of Biblical imagery, relating to the laws of multiple restitution. Exodus 22:1 commands: "If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for the ox and four sheep for the sheep." James B. Jordan explains the symbolic aspects of this case law: "These are the animals which particularly symbolize humanity in the sacrificial system. They are, thus, repeatedly set forth as preeminent analogies for men (cf. e.g., Lev. 22:27, with Lev. 12).

"We should note here that the verb used in Exodus 22:1, 'slaughter,' is used almost always with reference to men. Ralph H. Alexander comments, 'The central meaning of the root occurs only three times (Gen. 43:16; Ex. 22:1; 1 Sam. 25:11). The root is predominantly used metaphorically, portraying the Lord's judgment upon Israel and upon Babylon as a slaughter.' This again points to a basic symbolic meaning of this law."

Jordan goes on to show that in Scripture the ox primarily represents the office-bearer in Israel, while the sheep represents the ordinary citizen, and especially the poor man. Fourfold restitution is thus required for the crime of oppressing the poor, and fivefold restitution is

required for the penalty of rebellion against authority. The Covenant Lawsuit is structured in terms of the penalty of fivefold restitution, since the rebels against the covenant are revolting against their divinely ordained authority; and St. John brings the lawsuit against Israel because she has rebelled against Jesus Christ, her Lord and High Priest (Heb. 2:17; 7:22-8:6).

But Christ was also a sheep, the sacrificial Lamb of God (John 1:29; Rev. 5:6, 9). He was wrongfully sold (Matt. 26:14-15), and was treated "like a lamb that is led to *slaughter*" (Isa. 53:7). Moreover, the early Christians were largely poor, and were persecuted, oppressed, and slaughtered by the wealthy and powerful of apostate Israel (Matt. 5:10-12; Luke 6:20-26; James 5:1-6). Unbelieving Israel thus brought upon herself all the penalties and curses of the covenant, including fourfold and fivefold as well as double restitution (Rev. 18:6). (It is also worth repeating what Ralph Alexander said about the word *slaughter* in Exodus 22:1: "The root is predominantly used metaphorically, portraying the Lord's judgment upon Israel and upon Babylon as a slaughter." As we will see, St. John brings these ideas together, metaphorically calling the apostate Jerusalem of his day *Babylon the Great*.) The Great Tribulation, culminating in the holocaust of A.D. 70, was the restitution demanded for its theft and slaughter of the Old Testament prophets, of the New Testament martyrs, and of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 21:33-45; 23:29-38; 1 Thess. 2:14-16); and these motifs are built into the very structure of Revelation, the final Covenant Lawsuit.

All this is further emphasized by St. John's use of the prophetic Lawsuit terminology: the accusation of harlotry. Throughout Scripture, Israel is regarded as God's Wife; the covenant is a marriage bond, and she is expected to be faithful to it. Her apostasy from God is called adultery, and she is identified as a harlot. There are numerous examples of this in the prophets:

How the faithful city has become

a harlot, she who was full of justice!
Righteousness once lodged in her,
But now murderers. (Isa. 1:21)

For long ago I broke your yoke
And tore off your bonds;
But you said: I will not serve!
For on every high hill
And under every green tree
You have lain down as a harlot. (Jer. 2:20)

Your fame went forth among the
nations on account of your beauty, for it
was perfect because of My splendor which I
bestowed on you, declares the Lord God.
But you trusted in your beauty and played
the harlot because of your fame, and you
poured out your harlotries on every passer-
by who might be willing. (Ezek. 16:14-15)

Do not rejoice, O Israel, with exultation
like the nations! For you have played the
harlot, forsaking your God.
You have loved harlots' earnings on every
threshing floor. (Hos. 9:1)

Throughout Scripture, it is Israel whom the prophets characteristically condemn as a harlot. Accordingly, when St. John brings lawsuit against Israel for her rejection of Christ, the greatest apostasy of all time (cf. Matt. 21:33-45), he appropriately calls her "the Great Harlot . . . the Mother of the harlots and of the abominations of the Land" (Rev. 17:1, 5). There are other indications within the structure of Revelation that it is a Covenant Lawsuit against Israel. The four seven-fold judgments are arranged in general conformity to the order of Jesus' prophecy against Jerusalem in Matthew 24.

Thus the Seven Letters (Rev. 2-3) deal with false apostles, persecution, lawlessness, love grown cold, and the duty of perseverance (cf. Matt. 24:3-5, 9-13); the Seven Seals (Rev. 4-7) are concerned with wars, famines, and earthquakes (cf. Matt. 24:6-8); the Seven Trumpets (Rev. 8-14) tell of the Church's witness to the world, her flight into the wilderness, the Great Tribulation, and the False Prophet (cf. Matt. 24:14-27); and the Seven Chalice (Rev. 15-22) describe the darkening of the Beast's kingdom, the destruction of the Harlot, the gathering of eagles over Jerusalem's corpse, and the gathering of the Church into the Kingdom (cf. Matt. 24:28-31).

"But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that her desolation is at hand. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are in the midst of the city depart, and let not those who are in the country enter the city; because *these* are the days of vengeance, in order that *all things which are written may be fulfilled*." Luke 21:20-22