



THE LAST DAYS

6

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.

REVELATION & ESCHATOLOGY

PART TWO

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Theme Statement

The theme of Revelation is found in Revelation 1:7: "Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. Even so. Amen."

I am convinced that the apocalyptic language in this passage must be applied to Christ's judgment-coming upon Israel, rather than to the Second Advent at the end of temporal history. The events of A.D. 70, like those associated with the collapse of Babylon, Egypt, and other nations, are typological foreshadowings of the consummational Second Advent.

Cloud-comings are frequent prophetic emblems in the Old Testament. They serve as indicators of divine visitations of judgment upon ancient, historical nations. God "comes" in judicial judgment upon Israel's enemies in general (Psa. 18:7-15; 104:3), upon Egypt (Isa. 19:1), upon disobedient Israel in the Old Testament (Joel 2:1,2), and so forth. To cite one example, Isaiah 19:1 says: "Behold, the LORD rideth upon a swift cloud, and shall come into Egypt: and the idols of Egypt shall be moved at his presence, and the heart of Egypt shall melt in the midst of it."

A coming of Christ in judgment upon Israel is clearly taught in parabolic form by Christ in Matthew 21:40, 41, 43, 45:

When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out [his] vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons.... Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.... And



when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them.

This surely speaks of the destruction of the Jerusalem of the chief priests and Pharisees of Jesus' day. And it will occur "when the Lord of the vineyard comes." This is the judgment-coming of Christ in A.D. 70.

For several reasons I am convinced that Revelation 1:7 also refers to His coming in judgment upon Israel.

First, this coming is a judgment-coming upon "those who pierced Him." The New Testament emphatically points to first century Israel as responsible for crucifying Christ. Israel forced the hand of the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, when the Jews cried out in John 19:15: "Away with him, away with him, crucify him." Pilate saith unto them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but Caesar.'" See also: Acts 2:22-23, 36; 3:13-15; 5:30; 7:52; 1 Thess. 2:14-15.

Second, Revelation 1:7 states that as a consequence of this judgment "all the tribes (phule) of the Land (he ge) will mourn." "The Land" is a familiar designation for Israel's Promised Land. And as is well known, Israel was divided into twelve tribes. In fact, Revelation 7 has the marking out of 144,000 from among the specifically designated twelve tribes of Israel before the winds of destruction blow upon the "land." When Revelation broadens the definition of "tribes" to incorporate non-Jews, it does not speak of "the land" (he ge), but "the nations" (ethnoi).

Third, Jesus even told the first century Jewish leaders that they would witness this judgment-coming. In Matthew 26:63-64 we read:

"But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, 'I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.' Jesus saith unto him, 'Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.'"

This coming, dealt with at length in Matthew 24:1-34 was to occur in His generation. Matthew 24:30 and 34 read:

"And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.... Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled."

Drawing this information together, along with the historical facts of the era, we learn that:

The Jewish War with Rome from 67 to 70 brought about the deaths of tens of thousands of the Jews in Judea, and the enslavement of thousands upon thousands more. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who was an eye-witness, records that 1.1 million Jews perished in the siege of Jerusalem.

But as awful as the Jewish loss of life was, the utter devastation of Jerusalem, the final destruction of the temple, and the conclusive cessation of the sacrificial system were lamented even more. The covenantal significance of the loss of the temple stands as the most dramatic outcome of the War. It was an unrepeatable loss, for the temple has never been rebuilt. The old covenant era was forever closed. Hence, any Jewish calamity after A.D. 70 would pale in comparison to the redemptive-historical significance of the loss of the temple.

Thematic Character

Before we can actually develop the flow of Revelation, we need to ascertain the identity of a major character in the drama presented: Who is the harlot identified in Revelation 17?

So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.... And on her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH (Rev. 17:3, 5).

Some have thought that the harlot is representative of the city of Rome

because she is here seen resting upon the seven hills and she is called "Babylon." But since the Beast itself is representative of Rome, it would seem redundant to have the woman representing the same. Neither does the name "Babylon" historically belong to either Rome or Jerusalem, and thus cannot be proof that the city is Rome rather than Jerusalem. I am convinced beyond any doubt that this harlot is Jerusalem.

First, in Revelation 14:8 "Babylon" is called "the great city." The first mention of "the great city" in Revelation 11:8, indisputably points to Jerusalem. There we read that it is the place "where also our Lord was crucified" (cp. Luke 9:31; 13:33-34; 18:31; 24:18-20).

Her greatness is in regard to her covenantal status in the Old Testament. "Jerusalem" appears in Scripture 623 times. She is called "the city of the great king" (Psa. 48:2; Matt. 5:35), "the city of God" (Psa. 46:4; 48:1; 87:3), "the joy of the whole earth" (Psa. 48:2; Lam. 2:15), and other such laudable names. She is even called "the great city" elsewhere in Scripture: "People from many nations will pass by this city and will ask one another, 'Why has the LORD done such a thing to this great city?'" (Jer. 22:8). "How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave" (Lam. 1:1).

Even pagan writers speak highly of Jerusalem. Tacitus calls it "a famous city" (Histories 5:2). Pliny the Elder writes that Jerusalem was "by far the most famous city of the ancient Orient" (Natural History 5:14:70). Appian, a Roman lawyer and writer (ca. A.D. 160), calls her "the great city Jerusalem" (The Syrian Wars 50).

Second, the Babylonian harlot is filled with the blood of the saints, according to Revelation 16:6; 17:6; 18:21, 24. For instance, Revelation 18:24 reads: "And in her was found the blood of prophets and saints, and of all who were slain on the earth." Of course, with the outbreak of the Neronian persecution, which had just gotten under way, Rome was stained with the blood of the saints. Yet Rome had only recently entered the persecuting ranks of God's enemies. Throughout Acts Jerusalem is portrayed as the persecutor and Rome as the protector of Christianity.[3] Furthermore, Rome was not guilty of killing any of the Old Testament prophets, as was Jerusalem. [4] Before his stoning, Stephen rebukes Jerusalem: "Which of the prophets have

not your fathers persecuted? And they have slain them who showed before of the coming of the Just One, of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers" (Acts 7:51-52).

In the context of the Olivet Discourse Jesus reproaches Jerusalem. Matthew 23:34-35 reads: "Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar."

Throughout Revelation it is the slain Lamb who acts in judgment upon His slayers, the Jews. "Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth" (Rev. 5:6; cp. 5:12; 13:8). This Lamb is mentioned twenty-seven times in Revelation.[5] And Jerusalem literally called down judgment upon herself for slaying the Lamb of God: "All the people answered, 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!'" (Matt. 27:25).

Third, the harlot is arrayed in the Jewish priestly colors of scarlet, purple, and gold described in Exo. 28.[6] These colors were also found in the Temple: Josephus carefully describes Jerusalem's Temple tapestry as "Babylonian tapestry in which blue, purple, scarlet and linen were mingled" (Wars 5:5:4). He does so while giving the color decor of the Temple much emphasis and elaboration.

The harlot even has a blasphemous inscription on her forehead that gives a negative portrayal of the holy inscription which the Jewish high priest wore. On the high priest's forehead we read: "Holy to the Lord" (Exo. 28:36-38). On the harlot's forehead we read: "Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth" (Rev. 17:5). And she has a gold cup in her hand, as did the high priest on the Day of Atonement, according to the Jewish Talmud.[7] Interestingly, the Temple's main door had on it golden vines with great clusters of grapes (from which wine is derived). The golden grape clusters on the vine were very prominent, being the size of a man (Josephus, Wars 5:5:4). These are suggestive of the golden cup to be filled with blood.

Fourth, there is an obvious literary contrast between the harlot and the chaste bride. This juxtaposition suggests an intentional contrast between the Jerusalem below (Rev. 11:8) and the Jerusalem above (Rev. 21:2). This is not unfamiliar to writers of Scripture (cp. Gal. 4:24ff.; Heb. 12:18ff.). When you compare Revelation 17:2-5 and Revelation 21:1ff the contrast provides a remarkable negative and positive image. And we must remember that the bride is specifically called the "New Jerusalem" from heaven (Rev. 21:1-2). Consider:

John is introduced to the harlot and to the bride in a similar fashion:

Revelation 17:1: "And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, 'Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters.'"

Revelation 21:9: "And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, 'Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife.'"

The two women are contrasted as to character.

Revelation 17:1: "Come here, I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters."

Revelation 21:9: "Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife."

The two women are seen in contrasting environments to which John is carried by the angel.

Revelation 17:3: "So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast."

Revelation 21:10: "And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God."

The dress of each is detailed and contrasted:

Revelation 17:4: "And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication."

Revelation 19:8; 21:11: "And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.... Having the glory of God: and her light [was] like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper

stone, clear as crystal."

Fifth, Jerusalem had previously been called by pagan names quite compatible with the designation "Babylon." In Revelation 11:8 she was called "spiritually Sodom and Egypt." Isaiah did the same to her in Isaiah 1 where he called Jerusalem "Sodom and Gomorrah." The idea is that rather than conducting herself as the wife of God, she had become one of His enemies like Sodom, Egypt, and Babylon.

The fact that the harlot is seated on the seven-headed Beast (obviously representative of Rome) indicates not identity with Rome, but alliance with Rome against Christianity. The Jews demanded Christ's crucifixion and constantly agitated against the Christians to get the Romans involved in their persecution (cp. Matt. 23:37ff.; John 19:16-16; Acts 17:7). (I have not completed my research yet, but I believe her being seated on the beast in a drunken state represents the female-superior position in sexual intercourse. She is a drunken harlot taking the lead in her immorality. In the drama of Revelation she is not engaged in just adultery, but in bestiality, as well.)

Thematic Flow

Now we are ready briefly to sketch the thematic idea of Revelation. Not only is Israel's destruction the focus of Revelation, but her judgment is set forth in an interesting and significant covenantal fashion.

Israel as the Wife of God. We must remember that in the Old Testament Israel was graciously taken by God to be His covenantal wife. Oftentimes the prophets mention the covenantal marriage relation between God and Israel.

Jeremiah 3:14: "Turn, O backsliding children, saith the LORD; for I am married unto you."

Ezekiel 16 portrays in beautiful poetic imagery, the husbandly love of God for Israel.

Ezekiel 16:8: "Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I sware unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God, and thou becamest mine."

Other passages alluding to the marriage covenant between God and Israel include: Isaiah 50:1; 54:5; 62:4; Jeremiah 3:20; 31:32; and Ezekiel 16:31-32.

As a covenantal action, Israel's marriage was formally established with proper witnesses. Deuteronomy 31:28 reads:

"Gather unto me all the elders of your tribes, and your officers, that I may speak these words in their ears, and call heaven and earth to record against them." See also: Deuteronomy 4:26; 30:19.

But as an unfaithful wife Israel chased after foreign gods, committing spiritual adultery against the Lord. This adulterous infidelity is portrayed in many Old Testament passages.[8] The old covenant prophets served as God's lawyers. As VanGemenen expresses it: "The prophets had spoken as God's covenant prosecutors, bringing God's charge and stating God's verdict." [9] On the basis of God's Law and before witnesses, they legally called upon her to return to her covenantal husband, the Lord God. They often brought a "case" (Heb.: *ribh*) against Israel, calling heaven and earth as witnesses in this heavenly court-room drama and as per the public confirmation of the covenant.

Isaiah 1:2: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me." Isaiah laments: "How is the faithful city become an harlot!" (Isa. 1:21a).

Hosea 4:1: "Hear the word of the LORD, ye children of Israel: for the LORD hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, because there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land."

Micah 6:2: "Hear ye, O mountains, the LORD's controversy, and ye strong foundations of the earth: for the LORD hath a controversy with his people, and he will plead with Israel." See also: Hos. 12:2

Ultimately, their work was futile in that Israel finally demanded the crucifixion of the Son of God, crying out: "We have no king but Caesar!"

The Divorce Decree Against Israel

The dramatic visions of Revelation are framed in such a way as to represent God's judicial divorce decree against Israel. Following upon that we witness her capital punishment for all sorts of sins, which flowed from her spiritual adultery.

In Revelation 4 God is seen seated on His judicial throne. Interestingly, God's throne is mentioned in eighteen of Revelation's twenty-two chapters. In fact, of the sixty-two appearances of the word "throne" in the New Testament, forty-seven of these are found in Revelation. The judicial element is strong in this book, including references

to judgments, witnesses, and the like.

In Revelation 5 a seven sealed scroll is seen in God's hand, while He is seated upon His throne of justice. The seven sealed scroll seems to represent God's "bill of divorcement" handed down by the Judge on the throne against Israel. It is known that divorce decrees were written out among the Jews in the biblical era: Deuteronomy 24:1, 3; Isaiah 50:1; Jeremiah 3:8; Matthew 5:31; 19:7; and Mark 10:4. It is equally certain that marriage was understood in terms of a covenant contract: Proverbs 2:17; Ezekiel 16:8; and Malachi 2:14. That the scroll in Revelation 5-8 would be a bill of divorcement is suggested on the following considerations.

First, in Revelation we have prominent emphases on two particular women, two women that obviously correspond as opposites to one another. The two women are the wicked harlot of the Beast (Rev. 17-18) and the pure bride of Christ (Rev. 21). As I have shown, they correspond with the earthly Jerusalem that was the scene of Christ's crucifixion (Rev. 11:8) and the heavenly Jerusalem which is holy (Rev. 21:10). The flow and drift of the book is the revelation and execution of the legal judgment (Rev. 15:3; 16:5-7) on the fornicating harlot.

Following this we witness the coming of a virginal bride (Rev. 21), obviously to take her place after a marriage supper (Rev. 19). This fits well with the Pauline imagery in Galatians 4:24ff, where he speaks of the casting out of the one wife (Hagar who is representative of the Jerusalem below) and the taking of the other wife (Sara who is representative of the Jerusalem above).

Second, the apparent Old Testament background for this imagery is found in Ezekiel and Leviticus. In Ezekiel 2:9-10 Israel's judgment is portrayed as written on a scroll on the front and back and given to Ezekiel. This corresponds perfectly with the scroll in Revelation 5:1. In Ezekiel 2ff the devastation of Israel is outlined, which corresponds with Revelation 6ff. In Ezekiel 16 Israel is viewed as God's covenant wife which became a harlot that trusted in her beauty and committed fornication (Eze. 16:15). This is the case with Jerusalem-Babylon in Revelation (Rev. 18:7). She is cast out and judged for this evil conduct. The reason for seven seals is found in covenantal imagery, as well. The seven seals on Revelation's scroll reflect the seven-fold covenantal judgment God forewarned Israel about in Leviticus 26:14-33. These judgments are threat-

ened against Israel, if she should forsake God. The seven-fold judgments in Leviticus have a strong influence on the judgment language of Revelation. When these seals are opened, the preliminary judgments begin.

Third, following the "divorce" and judgments associated with it, John turns to see the coming of a new "bride" out of heaven (Rev. 21-22). It would seem that the new bride could not be taken until the harlotrous wife should first be taken care of legally. John imports the imagery of the harlot, bride, and marriage feast; this is not being read into the text from outside. Thus, the imagery of divorce well fits the dramatic flow of the work.

The Execution of the Judgments

The punishment in God's Law for adultery is death (Lev. 20:10), which in biblical law was by stoning. So we discover huge hailstones raining down on Jerusalem in Revelation 16:21: "And there fell upon men a great hail out of heaven, every stone about the weight of a talent: and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail; for the plague thereof was exceeding great." This was accomplished historically by the tenth legion of the Roman armies:

The engines [i.e., catapults], that all the legions had ready prepared for them, were admirably contrived; but still more extraordinary ones belonged to the tenth legion: those that threw darts and those that threw stones, were more forcible and larger than the rest, by which they not only repelled the excursions of the Jews, but drove those away that were upon the walls also. Now, the stones that were cast, were of the weight of a talent, and were carried two furlongs and further. The blow they gave was in no way to be sustained, not only by those that stood first in the way, but by those that were beyond them for a great space. As for the Jews, they at first watched the coming of the stone, for it was a white colour. (Wars 5:6:3)

Now Israel is not only Jehovah's wife in the Old Testament, but she is to serve Him as a kingdom of priests ministering to the nations. Thus, she is represented in Revelation as being a harlot in priestly garments. Being such, another Old Testament Law comes to bear. Leviticus 21:9 warns, "The daughter of any priest, if she profane herself by playing the harlot, she profaneth her father, she shall be burned with fire." Consequently, we see reference to Israel's being burned with fire in Revelation 17:16: "And the ten horns which thou sawest upon the beast, these shall hate the whore, and shall

make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire."

Then, having legally disposed of Israel as an harlotrous, priestly wife, Revelation turns to consider a new bride. In Revelation 21 we see a city coming down out of heaven adorned as a spotless virgin bride for her husband. This new city is a New Jerusalem. This "New Jerusalem" is the Church, according to Galatians 4:21ff. and Hebrews 12:18ff.

Thus, the theme of Revelation is the execution of God's divorce decree against Israel, her subsequent capital punishment and cremation, followed by His turning to take a new bride, the Church.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that Revelation was written in about A.D. 65. I further believe that it speaks to the original Christian audience regarding difficulties they were facing and in explanation of the coming final removal of Jerusalem by God's wrath.

The book is to be understood preteristically, rather than futuristically. We learn this not only from the imminent expectation in the book, but also from its theme (which involves the judgment of the Jews) and due to its leading characters: Jerusalem (as a harlot) and Rome (as a Beast).

END NOTES

- [1] William Milligan, Discussions on the Apocalypse (London: Macmillan, 1893), p. 75.
- [2] Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church (3rd ed: (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 [1910]), 1:834.
- [3] See for example: Acts 4:3; 5:18-33; 6:12; 7:54-60; 8:1ff; 9:1-4, 13, 23; 11:19; 12:1-3; 13:45-50; 14:2-5, 19; 16:23; 17:5-13; 18:12; 20:3, 19; 21:11, 27; 22:30; 23:12, 20, 27, 30; 24:5-9; 25:2-15; 25:24; 26:21. See also: 2 Cor. 11:24; 2 Thess. 2:14-15; Heb. 10:32-34; Rev. 2:9; 3:9; etc.
- [4] Jer. 2:30; Matt. 5:12; 23:34, 35; Acts 7:52; 1 Thess. 2:15.
- [5] See: Rev. 5:6, 8, 12-13; 6:1, 16; 7:9-10, 14, 17; 12:11; 13:8, 11; 14:1, 4, 10; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7, 9; 21:14, 22-23; 22:1, 3.
- [6] Cp. Rev. 17:4-5 with Exo. 25:2, 4; 26:1, 31, 36; 27:16; 28:1-2, 5-12, 15, 17-23, 33.
- [7] Golden bowls were used elsewhere in the Levitical services. See: Exo. 25:29; 37:16, 17.
- [8] See: Isaiah 1:21; 50:1; 57:8; Jeremiah 2:2, 20; 3:1-20; 4:30; 11:15; 13:27; Ezekiel 6:9; 16:32; Hosea 1:2; 2:5, 7; 3:3; 4:15; Malachi 2:7.
- [9] Willem VanGemeren, The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p. 290.