

Rescuing the Book of Revelation from ‘End-Time’ Madness: Studies in Eschatology

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This brief study will apply the age-old principle of ‘scripture interpreting scripture’, rescuing Revelation and its judgements from the folly of ‘newspaper exegesis’ and the ‘end-time’ madness that looks for fulfilment in the latest war or natural calamity. Understanding the overarching biblical narrative of redemptive history, through the covenant, is the key, as we shall see momentarily.

These judgements can be simply listed as the Seven Seals (Chs. 4-7), the Seven Trumpets (Chs. 8-14) and the Seven Chalices (Chs. 15-22). Chilton’s thesis in the interpretation of Revelation is founded on the pattern of the covenant lawsuit. He says, “... 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.”^[1] The Biblical covenant, through which God relates to His people, as shown by Meredith Kline, has a striking resemblance to the ancient peace treaties of the Near East.^[2] The fivefold form of these treaties embraced a: 1. Preamble (identifies the Lordship of the great king); 2. Historical Prologue (covers the king’s previous dealings with the vassal and the blessings bestowed); 3. Ethical Stipulations (lays out the vassal’s obligations within the covenant); 4. Sanctions (outlines blessings and cursings); 5. Succession Arrangements (deals with continuity of the relationship over the future generations).

Chilton, again, points out, “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.”^[3] These five parts are: (1) Preamble: Vision of the Son of Man – Ch. 1; (2) Historical Prologue: The Seven Letters – Chs. 2-3; (3) Ethical Stipulations: The Seven Seals – Chs. 4-7; (4) Sanctions: The Seven Trumpets – Chs. 8-14; (5) Succession Arrangements: The Seven Chalices – Chs. 15-22. To understand fully the four sevenfold judgements of Revelation we must consider how John’s prophecy relates to Leviticus 26. Similar to Deuteronomy 28, this chapter shows the blessings (v. 1-13) if Israel obeys and the cursings (v. 14-39) if she disobeys. These cursings are arranged in a pattern: four times in this chapter God says, “I will punish you seven times for your sins” (26:18, 21, 24, 28). Without going into the reasons for the symbolical significance of these numbers (four & seven), God is simply saying to Israel that if she disobeys, a full and complete judgement will come on her. It is a matter of history that these judgements fell upon Israel in A.D. 70. Revelation expands on this imagery, dividing itself into four sets of seven: Seven Letters, Seven Seals, Seven Trumpets and Seven Chalices. It is, therefore, argued that the judgements of Revelation follow the formal structure of the covenantal curse in Leviticus, and that the prophecy is a declaration of God’s covenant wrath against Israel.^[4]

In the Seven Letters, Christ, as the High Priest, stands in the midst of the Seven Churches, to trim their wicks, bringing redemptively the judgements of God (1:12, 13). Thus, being the *Prologue* of the covenant, the vassal is exhorted to repentance and renewed obedience in view of the king’s blessings and rewards. This is the import of the pastoral letters to the Seven Churches.

The Ethical *Stipulations* of the Covenant are covered in the Seven Seals. Central to this is the sanctuary where the king’s subjects come to worship. The concern here is for the consecration of God’s people. Thus, John, at the opening of this section ascends to the throne-room which provides the vantage point for the remainder of the prophecy: the judgements that are bound on earth are first bound in heaven. The imminent judgements on Israel all proceed from the throne of God.

The Covenant *Sanctions* are announced through the Seven Trumpets, declaring the judgements of Deuteronomy 28 are about to be poured out upon Israel for her rejection of Christ. The eagle-cherub with his cry of ‘Woe’, is an echo of Deut. 28:49 (cf. Christ’s sevenfold ‘Woe’ of Mt 23). The eagle being a symbol of both covenant blessing (cf. Ex 19:4; Deut 32:11) and cursing (cf. Jer 4:13; Hab 1:8) is connected to the blowing of the trumpets.

Finally, the issue of Covenant *Succession* is dealt with in the pouring forth of the Seven Chalices. This is the issue of disinheritance for the unfaithful and inheritance for those who remained true to the covenant obligations (cf. Deut 31-34; Mt 21:43-44; 23:36-38). Deuteronomy 32 is the Lord's song of witness against ungrateful and unfaithful Israel. In chapters 15 and 16 of Revelation the tabernacle is opened, and the priests go forth to pour chalice judgements on Israel for her spiritual harlotry which is the chief crime that called forth the song of witness. The Great Harlot (unfaithful Israel) is judged in chapter 17 and then the promise of covenant succession is made to the faithful Bride, his true heirs (Jew and Gentile), in the New Covenant, incorporated in the New Jerusalem. (Chs. 19-21).

As can be seen, the covenant structure of the divine-human arrangement not only serves as the central nervous system of Scripture but also rescues the church from "end-time" madness. It equips her to accurately interpret God's ways and movement in history. Based on God's covenant dealings, she is, thus, enabled to speak prophetically into the contemporary situation, of both the church and the wider culture.

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References

- [1]D. Chilton, "The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation", (Ft Worth, Texas: Dominion Press, 1987), p. 11
- [2]Meredith G. Kline, "Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy", (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).
- [3]Chilton, *op. cit.*, p. 15
- [4]*ibid*, p. 17

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