

“Unraveling Revelation” Conference Notes

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Introduction

I attended a conference¹ about how to understand the Book of Revelation. Two scholars, one from Westminster Theological Seminary and one from a Baptist college (or seminary) spoke about what they considered to be the “key” to properly understand Revelation. Both of them turned out to merely defending their tradition’s essentially “amillennial” claims: that the “apocalyptic” literature of both Old and New Testaments are not describing events that are REALLY going to happen in earth history, but that they are sermons that use what are in fact parables, and that are put in that dramatic, frightening form in order to “shock” wayward Christians back to what they ought to be believing and practicing. I wrote this response to share with two good friends, who are also attending the conference

Comments on Part 1

I found the logic of both of those men to be a logic that is not sound for one who believes that God has inspired all of the literature in the Scriptures. It is exactly the logic that I was trained to use, and I followed it consistently to its logical, destructive, end point. Here is what disturbs me:

1. Both men said (in different ways) that John was not describing real history. The idea that symbols – even CRYPTIC symbols -- were being used is not at all at issue: John himself says that in Revelation 1 (yet even on that point, you cannot logically conclude that because symbols were being used at ONE place in the book that the ENTIRE book is to be explained that way; just because Jesus used parables does not prove that ALL of His utterances were parabolic, right?). The first speaker said that the “key” to understanding the book is to equate what John wrote with the prophets’ speaking/acting out parables and Jesus’ telling of parables. The second speaker said several times, with regard to what APPEARS to be prophetic foretelling of what SEEM to be historical events, that you should not “press the descriptions too hard” (if I remember his words correctly); he said that just because earthquakes are described several times does not mean that real earthquakes are being prophesied; that is because earthquakes (as well as stars falling from the heavens) are simply John’s “apocalyptic” way of saying “judgment is coming.”

¹ Conference sponsored by the Phoenix Seminary, January 15, 2016 to January 16, 2016, presented by Greg Beale and Tom Shreiner (<http://arizona.thegospelcoalition.org/events/event/18/unraveling-revelation/2016-001-15>.)

If John's Revelation is the only thing to be considered I MIGHT just shrug my shoulders and say "maybe" (actually, I wouldn't). But it is not the only thing to be considered. As speaker 2 himself pointed out, in Matthew 24, Jesus says some of the very same things that Revelation does. To be sure, our Master says that there would always be wars, rumors of wars, famine and earthquakes, etc. But AFTER saying that, in verses 21-29, he talks about a very specific series of events:

21 "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. 22 "And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened. ... 29 "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

So, if JOHN is merely using a [supposedly] "apocalyptic style" that need not be taken as referring to actual events, we logically MUST say Jesus is doing the same thing. Once again, on THEIR own authority, men are telling us to disregard supposedly "Spirit-inspired" texts which sure SEEM to refer to real future historical events, and instead impose upon them the label "apocalyptic literature" and turn them into parabolic sermons that say something other than what the text ACTUALLY is saying. They are, in effect, saying "trust ME, not what the words clearly SEEM to be saying." And thus begins yet again another "slippery slope". First we are given a [supposedly scholarly] reason to explain away John; but that logic next demands (whether or not THEY consciously intend to do so), that logic next demands that we do the same thing to Jesus Himself. That logic is dangerous and destructive.

2. The claim is made that John is merely using a common literary style, called "apocalyptic literature." And that is the supposed reason why we can turn what sure SEEMS to be prophetic foretelling into parabolic preaching that is only designed to shock wayward believers. I was told that regularly, yet no proof of it was ever given. The fact that later gnostic pseudo-Christians invented such stories is a VERY poor reason to attribute it to a disciple who has been taught to tell the truth in love.
3. John said he was "in the Spirit" on a specific Lord's Day, in a specific place: that sure SOUNDS like an actual event took place on that Lord's Day. He then said that JESUS began speaking to Him in the vision. Now, if John is merely "using a form of apocalyptic literature" you are saying that what JOHN says happened did not actually happen. Put whatever spin you like on it, but you are IN TRUTH saying John is a liar, describing what did NOT happen as if it really happened. On the other hand, if you accept that it was indeed true that JESUS was speaking and creating the vision, then you are actually saying that JESUS (rather than John) was merely using "apocalyptic style." If you are saying that the "Jesus said" stuff was also part of that "apocalyptic style" then, once again, you are IN TRUTH saying John is a liar. This is EXACTLY the logic that is used to turn Genesis 1-6 into a supposedly Spirit-inspired fairy tale, rather than a description of real history. It is dangerous: it is turning truth into fables, a practice against which

we are specifically warned: “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; 4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

4. Being good Protestants, they don’t even bother researching (and/or describing) what the first few post-apostolic Christians believed. And they believed that Revelation was describing real future history (though written in cryptic language). By the time of Eusebius, it was getting common to consider those early Christians as naïve (as Eusebius himself judged them). Luther and Calvin, and most Reformers did not believe that real events were being described: the traditions that trace back to them have continued in that assumption (and “assumption” is all that it is).

I don’t think that the O.T. and N.T. descriptions of end time events were even INTENDED to be figured out by those who lived in times before they happened. That kind of prophecy was given to give comfort to those actually going through the particular disturbing event(s) being described. Jesus said (regarding His prophecy of Judas’ betrayal): “Now I tell you before it comes, that WHEN IT DOES COME TO PASS, you may believe that I am He” (John 13:19). Further, when Jesus prophesied about their coming experience with the Holy Spirit, “Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 And He said to them, “IT IS NOT FOR YOU TO KNOW times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority” (Acts 1:6). I strongly suspect that the GOD-created vision given to John was given in the same kind of context. Even these two scholars (along with all the others I have ever seen or read) were often saying “I guess...,” “I suspect...,” “probably...”.

Comments on Part 2

This is the second email installment about that conference on the “Key” to the book of Revelation. I never thought I would be getting “worked up” about the interpretation of that book; I am not at all an end-time scholar. But a very destructive form of logic and biblical exegesis was being used at that conference, and – judging by the amount of applause – it was being well-received. It is that kind of thinking and Scriptural exegeses that is justifying the horrible disunity and apathy that exists within Christendom. So here goes:

In the book, [King Jesus Claims His Church](#), Finny Kuruvilla wrote the following:

“The clarity of Scripture – sometimes called by an older expression, the ‘perspicuity’ of Scripture – serves as a foundational interpretive key. Yet this doctrine is as challenging as it is foundational. ‘No confession concerning Scripture is more disturbing to the church than the confession of its perspicuity’ [Quoted from G.C. Berkouwer]. ...

“While the clarity of Scripture may be demanding, the church withers in its absence. Without the clarity of Scripture, Christian boldness and confidence evaporate” ...

“Childlike faith leads to clarity better than education or privilege (Luke 10:21).” [pages 72-73].

What those two scholars did yesterday was, to me, a perfect, if unusual, example of what Finny was warning us about. I say “unusual” because if there is any book in which we do NOT normally expect to

find “perspicuity” it is the Book of Revelation. But I was hoping that they would INCREASE its perspicuity, not DESTROY it altogether.

I do not expect to find ANYone who will be able to adequately decipher the symbolic objects and events described in Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation – not until we are in the period of time that each vision is being lived out. I came to the conclusion years ago that this is so because God WANTS it that way. In my previous email, I already commented on the two passages where Jesus talks to that effect (John 13:19 & Acts 1:6). Additionally, consider the end of Daniel: ‘Although I heard, I did not understand. Then I said, “My lord, what shall be the end of these things?” And he said, “Go your way, Daniel, **for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end.**” Many shall be purified, made white, and refined, but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand, but the wise shall understand’ (12:8-10). When God said “SHALL understand” He is clearly talking about some FUTURE time – even Daniel did not understand [fully?] the meaning of the vision that he himself wrote down for us. The fact that HE did not understand it is evidence that Daniel was not written in some “apocalyptic genre,” in which the author does know what is being written down because HE is the source of the [supposed] vision. I expect men with Ph.D.s to see that very basic truth, because it is staring them in the face when they read Daniel.

Even though I do not think it is possible, I am not at all opposed to people TRYING to figure out all the symbolism before the events they describe take place. And I fully expected to find these scholars coming down on one side or another of the “key” to interpreting Revelation (and the other books). What disturbed me was what they did to Jesus in the process, by asserting over and over that there really is no history at all being described by John. To them, this [so-called] “apocalyptic genre” is merely the use of dramatic metaphor to preach a sermon. In order to come to that conclusion they have to do some very selective choosing of Scripture.

Even though they kept saying that we must use Scripture to interpret Scripture, they were clearly quite selective in WHAT Scriptures they were willing to admit into evidence. For example, the SECOND half of Revelation 1:1 was admitted into evidence, where John says, “And He sent and SIGNIFIED it by His angel to His servant John,...”. He pointed out that that the Greek word (“semaino”) can mean “signify” as well as “make known”; this fact supports the idea that cryptic symbols can be used as the way that these truths are expressed. Given the centuries of debate about the meaning of the visions, no one can doubt the truth of that idea. And yet both of them equate THAT truth with the VERY different idea that the use of symbols means that real historic events are therefore NOT being described by those cryptic symbols. That is HORRIBLE logic, unworthy of high school senior, let alone a Ph.D. If they had only bothered to consider the FIRST half of that same verse (1:1): “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants **the things that must soon take place.**” This verse was written in plain language, before the introduction of any visions or cryptic symbols and does it not CLEARLY state that the very purpose of sharing with them these visions was so that “the THINGS that must soon TAKE PLACE” might be shown to them? What person on planet earth, after reading that plain language verse would NOT expect to find descriptions -- whether explained clearly or cryptically – of real events in the visions that follow? Yet that is what these scholars were asking us to believe.

Furthermore, they also found their spin on Daniel 2:31-45 to be evidence to support THEIR idea of “symbolic” (i.e., the vision of the image composed of gold, silver, bronze, iron & clay). Now, this vision is in truth supportive of the idea of the use of symbols to communicate truth. But, as the passage EXPLICITLY states, this vision was communicating HISTORICAL truth through the use of those symbols:

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"As for you, O king, thoughts came to your mind while on your bed, about WHAT WOULD COME TO PASS after this; and He who reveals secrets has made known to you WHAT WILL BE."

This kind of anti-history approach is not merely providing an alternate key to understanding; it is (in truth) trying to convince us that there IS NO key. All historic problems are resolved in "one fell swoop" by saying that there is no history being described. And in doing so, they are destroying what Finny called the perspicuity of Scripture.

In the first place, they are telling us to believe that John knowingly told us things that are not true: under the guise of his choice of a supposed literary technique, John was inventing a vision that he never actually had and telling us that Jesus said things that He never actually said. If you believe what they were saying you are IN FACT calling John a liar, whether or not that is your intention. And you are doing so on the "evidence" of an "apocalyptic literature" technique that is the result of invalid logic and the flimsiest of evidence (i.e., their bad idea that the use of symbols means that no real events are being described, as described above). Boy! Talk about selling your soul for a bowl of pottage!

In the second place, they are IMPLICITLY asking us to do the same thing to Jesus that they have EXPLICITLY done to John: to refuse to believe in what He says. I have already touched upon that idea in the previous email, regarding Matthew 24. In that passage, Jesus uses the same language as John's visions: earthquakes, stars falling from heaven, and an absolutely UNIQUE tribulation time, AFTER the period of wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes and tribulational suffering. If earthquakes and stars falling from heaven in JOHN do not mean real earthquakes and stars – and those scholars explicitly stated that – then earthquakes and falling stars must logically have the same value in what the Son of God said in Matthew 24. Any thinking child can draw that conclusion, even if Ph.D.'s cannot. And once I start believing THAT rubbish I am not only destroying the perspicuity of Scripture, I am inserting a barrier between Jesus and me – the very thing that got me into trouble in that previous life and which I promised never to do again. Dogs must not return to that which they have vomited out. We are not dealing with simple human mistakes here; we are dealing with those "doctrines of demons" mentioned in 1 Timothy 4:1. The effect of this kind of idea is to draw you further away from Jesus, whether or not it is done intentionally.

And, most sadly, I have never known anyone who explains away what is clear in the Word of God over one issue, to restrict this "explaining away" habit to simply that one issue. It provides a most convenient way of avoiding ANYTHING that you or your tradition want to avoid. Using that convenient procedure, the Eucharist is no longer the body and blood of Christ, God no longer wants us to speak in tongues and prophesy, we don't need to take seriously having all things in common that there may be "equality," we don't need to have give genuine "submission" to a TEAM of elders, wives don't need to submit to their husbands and call him "lord", "et cetera, et cetera, et cetera."

I hope you can see the significance if what they were doing at the conference. Whether it was intentional or unintentional does not matter: the effect will be the same if you believe it.

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