

Article of the Month – March 2014

Missions & Eschatology (10) – Revelation

By Steef van 't Slot, Ph.D.

There are too many interpretations of this book to list. One reason may be that we have not progressed far enough into the last days to clearly see where we are heading. We may not yet have passed the ‘beginning of birth pains’.¹ As time progresses, our understanding of the Revelation, its proper interpretation of events and their sequential order will probably grow. Maybe we will even see an increasing consensus as to its true meaning.

Meanwhile we should question the *consequences* of our view on Revelation. Is our understanding lulling us to sleep because we expect an imminent rapture? Or does it prompt us to action, because we can speed up the Lord’s coming² by holy living and by preaching the Gospel to the ends of the earth?³ Our eschatological doctrine will either be proven or denied by our involvement in world missions. If we believe that Christ will not return until there are believers from ‘every tribe, language, people and nation’,⁴ we will do all we can to make that happen in our lifetime!

To witness the return of Christ may be a great incentive to motivate us into world missions participation. What could bless the world more than His return?

If the Church were going to be raptured in 4:1 there would be little use for her to know what happens on earth during her absence; Revelation would cease to be a Church-book and become one for ‘left-behind’ unbelievers – with nobody to explain it.

Revelation is a prophecy, expressed in images that need interpretation and should be compared with other prophetic Scriptures to find a consistent explanation.

It becomes more complicated when we see *new* images in Revelation: ones we have not encountered before. We must be careful not to read into the text what is not there. It must be understood that a Theology of Missions is not the place to treat Revelation exegetically; yet some explanation and interpretation is unavoidable. Here are some examples:

- The way Jesus is being described reminds us of what Daniel wrote;⁵
- Jesus explains the meaning of the lampstand and the stars Himself;⁶
- The sharp double-edged sword that comes out of His mouth is His Word.⁷

¹ Matt. 24:8; Mark 13:8. Birth pangs increase (crime, disease, war) and natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, famines, droughts etc.) hit earth. We may be between Rev. 6:11 and 12, between the 5th and the 6th seal. We may interpret 6:12-14 as natural phenomena or as pictures of spiritual realities, but the world population’s general fear (v. 15-17) is not visible yet; neither did we experience 7th seal phenomena yet

² 2 Pet. 3:12

³ Matt. 24:14

⁴ Rev. 5:9; 7:9

⁵ Compare Rev. 1:12-20 with Dan. 7:13

⁶ Rev. 1:20

⁷ Eph. 6:17b; Heb. 4:12

There is no doubt about the *presence, use of and earlier occurrence* of images which describe spiritual realities as examples for proper interpretation. A danger in explaining this book is to *assume* things for which there is no textual proof. Think for instance about the *consequences* of the Rapture. Some believe that cars and planes will crash, killing millions. No text points into that direction. We may not overstep the line between biblical data and human assumption, ‘going beyond what was written’.⁸

The book was very important to the churches in Asia. They were persecuted heavily.⁹ Many issues, relevant to them, are addressed¹⁰ but their significance stretches further. Revelation could be seen as a prophetic preview of Church history with, at the time, most of it still to come. It addresses the *suffering Church of all ages* – including that of the last days. The true Church of Christ will always suffer: in the last days that persecution will be committed mainly by the apostate church, the whore of Babylon.

That reality is illustrated well by ‘Foxe’s Book of Martyrs’,¹¹ but there are hundreds more, written in the 2nd half of the 20th century¹² and more recent ones.¹³ One of the often denied goals of the book of Revelation therefore, is *to prepare the Church to survive in the midst of persecution* to ‘stand firm to the end’¹⁴ and to ‘not love their lives unto death’.¹⁵

From a world missions perspective it is clear that ‘the end’ will not come until the Gospel has been preached to the ends of the earth.¹⁶ These areas will only be reached through great suffering of sending churches and big sacrifices of missionaries. A certain number of martyrs is even *required* before the end comes.¹⁷ Many churches day-dream about the rapture without getting involved in reaching the unreached. But Christ’s words are not multi-interpretable: no preaching to the ends of the earth means no ‘End’ (i.e. the completion of the Great Commission *by Christ’s disciples* – who else?), without whom there can be no rapture, because all Great Commission Christians will be gone by then.

From a Pastoral perspective, whoever decides on his position regarding a ‘pre-trib, mid-trib or post-trib’ rapture, must answer the question: ‘Is it better to *be* prepared for persecution and *not* have to face it, or to *not* be prepared and *yet* have to face it?’ It is better to *be* prepared and be proven wrong, than to *not* be prepared and fall away because of wrong convictions. Jesus said to His *disciples*: ‘*You* will be handed over to be *persecuted* and *put to death* and *you* will be *hated by all nations* because of Me. At that time *many* will *turn away* from the faith ... the love of *most* will grow cold’.¹⁸ The exegetical question of a ‘pre-, mid- or post-trib’ is not as relevant as the pastoral one. Are we ready to face the worst? It is not a question of right or wrong, but of who will stand firm to the end or fall away!

⁸ 2 Cor. 4:6

⁹ Rev. 1:9; 2:3,9-11,13

¹⁰ Chapters 2 & 3

¹¹ Chadwick, Harold J., *The New Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, Bridge – Logos, Gainesville Florida, USA, 2001

¹² E.g. titles by Richard Wurmbrand, the brothers Haralan and Ladin Popov, Brother Andrew, Jan Pit, etc.

¹³ E.g. Yun, *The Heavenly Man* (2002) and *Back to Jerusalem* (2003) with Paul Hattaway and probably the most important: *Blood and Sorrow* by Taylor, Reimer & Van der Meer (eds.), WEA-MC, 2012

¹⁴ Matt. 10:22; 24:13

¹⁵ Rev. 6:9-11; 12:11

¹⁶ Matt. 24:14

¹⁷ Rev. 6:11b

¹⁸ Matt. 24:9,10,12 (italics mine)