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RUSHDOONY AND THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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Those who read Dr. Rushdoony's 1970 commentary on Revelation come to realize that he doesn't regard the book as applying to the destruction of Jerusalem

in 70 AD. He adopted an *idealist* perspective on the book, which can be disorienting to readers who assume that the only serious choice is between dispensational premillennial theology and preterist postmillennialism (and by *preterist* we mean partial preterist). But God's people shouldn't be deprived of the opportunity to consider all the available scriptural evidence concerning this issue.

Dr. Rushdoony's own position evolved between 1970 and 1994 (when he published his *Systematic Theology*). His ongoing studies convinced him to return to Benjamin Warfield's approach to eschatology, which he had adhered to as a younger scholar but was pressured into rejecting. He recognized the pressure tactics that imposed "an amillennial hangover" on his postmillennialism.

Idealism as applied to Revelation basically regards the visions as applying to large spans of time, multiple centuries in fact, but not necessarily in chronological sequence. It sees the visions as different ways of symbolically framing the battle—and victory—of Christ against His opposition, from one end of time to the other. Revelation sweeps through history and sweeps us up with it.

FIRST PRINCIPLES

One of the key principles is to look for *continuity* in Scripture. If an idea is repeated throughout Genesis into the Psalms and the Prophets, it would be irresponsible to toss it out once we get to the New Testament, as if God had revised His promises.

In Isaiah 8:20 we read, "To the law and the testimony: if they speak not according to these, it is because there is no light in them." This informs us that *any* new revelation, to be valid, must align with the law and the testimony. The earlier revelation governs later revelation: there are no sudden dislocations, let alone the erasing of previous revelation. God doesn't repent of anything He has revealed (I Sam. 15:29), as "the man from God that came from Judah" was dismayed to learn when a prophet convinced him that God had shifted gears (I Kings 13), costing him his life.

Jesus Christ asserted that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). If God's words contradicted one another, *it would be impossible* to live by every word, but God is not the author of confusion (I Cor. 14:33).

Even the supposed "shifting of gears" with the priesthood after Christ came was already baked into Abraham tithing to Melchizedek in Genesis 14:20 (as explained in Hebrews 7 and Zechariah 6:12-13), while Jeremiah depicts the New Covenant as entailing the writing of God's Law

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on the minds and hearts of His people.

This becomes important when we consider the extent of God's blessings upon the earth. Note the following divine promises and consider their scope (total) and locale (upon the earth).

"and in thee shall *all* the families of the earth be blessed." (Gen. 12:3b)

"Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and *all* the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?" (Gen. 18:18)

"And in thy seed shall *all* the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice." (Gen. 22:18)

"and in thy seed shall *all* the nations of the earth be blessed;" (Gen. 26:4b)

"and in thy seed shall *all* the families of the earth be blessed." (Gen. 28:14)

"*All* the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the Lord; and *all* the families of the nations shall worship before Thee." (Ps. 22:27)

"Yea, *all* kings shall fall down before Him; *all* nations shall serve Him." (Ps. 72:11)

"*All* nations whom Thou hast made shall come and worship before Thee, O Lord; and shall glorify thy name." (Ps. 86:9)

"... and *all* nations shall flow unto it." (Isa. 2:2b)

"The Lord hath made bare His holy arm in the eyes of *all* the nations; and *all* the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God." (Isa. 52:10)

"And there was given Him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that *all* people, nations, and languages, should serve Him..." (Dan. 7:14a)

"For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in *every place* incense shall be offered unto my name, and a *pure offering*..." (Mal. 1:11)

"... And in thy seed shall *all* the families of the earth be blessed." (Acts 3:25)

"... In thee shall *all* nations be blessed." (Gal. 3:8)

When considering how to interpret later passages of scripture, like the book

of Revelation, we should be governed by these oft-repeated promises, for all scripture is subject to prior scripture.

TRANSFER OF SOVEREIGNTY

Dr. Rushdoony brings out the fact that John's prophecy depicts the *transfer of sovereignty* from the usurpers of history to the enthroned Christ. This transfer is an inexorable, inevitable one: only things built on the Rock will survive the storms of history. Intrinsic to these depictions is the transfer of lordship from the false gods to the True God.

Rushdoony therefore devotes chapters to "Inheritance of the False Heirs" (Rev. 8),¹ "The Dispossession" (Rev. 14),² and "The Great Shaking" (Rev. 16)³ to focus on the ongoing transfer of sovereignty. This theme reaches its climax in history when every knee bows.

Rushdoony is not alone in seeing Revelation this way. Richard Bauckham concurs:

Revelation's theme is the transfer of the sovereignty of the whole world from the dragon and the beast, who presently dominate it, to God, whose universal kingdom is to come on earth.⁴

Bauckham then contrasts a pessimistic interpretation of that transfer to a "much more universalistic hope for the conversion of the nations to the worship of the true God, which is typical of late Old Testament prophecy..."⁵ He argues for the latter, devoting a hundred pages to this topic in a chapter entitled "The Conversion of the Nations."⁶

Bauckham's comment on Revelation 4 dovetails with Rushdoony's view:

[T]his vision prepares for the implementation of God's sovereignty on earth, where it is presently hidden and contested by the powers of evil. In other words, the kingdom of God is to come on earth, as it already exists in heaven.⁷

John's intent is seen as embracing the entirety of Christ's claims over His inheritance. The Book of Revelation is understood as applying to vast spans of time, embracing multiple empires over the centuries. Idealism uses this wider lens, seeing John's prophecy as different ways

of looking at the big global picture rather than being focused on the divorce of Israel in 70 A.D.

THE BEAST OF REVELATION

Today's popular preterist interpretations see the seven heads of the Beast as a series of Roman emperors: the Beast's time scale is consequently a short one. While Dr. Rushdoony didn't agree with this approach, he subsidized research conducted by scholars who promoted it, believing the question too important to deplatform differing positions.

The dominant viewpoint in idealism is to see the seven heads of the Beast as representing consecutive kingdoms over the known world, beginning with Egypt (Israel's first mortal enemy in the time of Moses). The Beast's second head would be Assyria, Israel's second mortal enemy as attested by Isaiah, while heads three through six correspond to Daniel's four kingdoms: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Macedonia, and the Roman Empire. When we read about the sixth head "that now is," it would therefore refer to the Roman Empire rather than a specific Caesar. Finally, the seventh head represents a divided sovereignty: many nations arise after Rome but none become a one-world empire.

If there is to be a conversion of the nations, it would happen to the seventh head, the head that is active today comprising a multitude of nations. We will see later that such a conversion is actually predicted in Revelation 17.

John also described an eighth beast "that was one of the seven." Preterist scholars have their preferences for how to parse this detail (e.g., Dr. Kenneth Gentry speaks of a "double referent" in this connection). Does this detail fit into an idealist model of Revelation?

Under idealism, the eighth beast can be identified with Babylon, viewed from a religious aspect. It would represent the degenerate church over the ages. And Babylon is conspicuously present in the later parts of Revelation. This would have implications if Babylon "was one of the seven," as idealism expressly identifies the Beast's third head with political Babylon

as specified above. Accordingly, Babylon is present twice in the vision: politically as the third head, religiously as the eighth beast. Babylon *was* (as third head), *no longer is* (at the time of the sixth head) "and yet *is*" (as Babylon viewed religiously rather than politically). This would reinforce the identification of the heads offered above.

We today would be living in the time of the seventh head of the Beast. Idealism drops most of Revelation directly in our laps, as opposed to assigning its prophecies to events twenty centuries ago, or at some point in our future, or to some other point in church history.

MULTIPLE APPEARANCES OF GOSPEL VICTORY

In idealism, the book of Revelation is seen as viewing the span of time it describes from different aspects, perspectives, or vantage points. As Caird observed,

John is like an expert guide in an art gallery, lecturing to students about a vast mural. First he makes them stand back to absorb a general impression, then he takes them close to study the details.⁸

Expositors have discerned that Revelation is divided into sections, and *where* you position the seams between sections affects the meaning. The seams can be arranged to obscure the global victory of the gospel, or they can be arranged to make it manifest.

Not only are the seams important, so are the details relative to each section. For example, Revelation 15 refers to seven vials in which the *entirety* of the wrath of God is placed. Bauckham observes how the Song of Moses "is framed by the account of the preparation of the seven angels to pour out the seven last plagues, which complete the wrath of God on the sinful world (15:1, 5-8)."⁹ If the visions were sequential, we would expect no more wrath after the seventh vial is poured out, but as this is not the case, we must regard the visions as running in parallel, since "God's wrath against Babylon (Rev. 17 & 18) cannot be later than the last plagues, in which 'the wrath of God is accomplished' (Rev. 15:1)."¹⁰ This passage is about the pouring out of God's wrath, so it excludes the time after the world has been fully converted—when wrath is no longer due.

Which brings us to the question: where in Revelation do we see the victory of the gospel, the conversion of the nations to Him? If idealism is true, we would expect to see the victory repeated in subsequent sections of Revelation. Bauckham sees exactly that:

Old Testament prophets had foreseen that all the nations will finally acknowledge God's rule and worship him (allusions to some such prophecies will be made in later parts of Revelation).¹¹

The victory is most clearly stated in Revelation 11:15, but it also occurs at Revelation 8:1, 15:4, 17:16, and 20:7-9 (not 1-6!). Bauckham argues for Rev. 14:14-16 connoting gospel victory as well.

SILENCE IN HEAVEN

Heaven is a noisy place due to the wrath of God being poured out on the earth, but the half-hour of silence in Rev. 8:1 is a detail that scholars stumble over. Bauckham, an otherwise reliable guide, goes astray by hunting for extrascriptural insights.¹² The chapter break is already faulty and misleading, as Carpenter “greatly regretted.”¹³ As Keener noted, “scholars debate the meaning of the silence in 8:1.”¹⁴ Tonstad's summary of the options is a fair one, appealing to *scripture* (Isaiah 52:13-15) to exposit the verse, but falls short in grappling with its context:

And then—one of the strangest verses in the Bible! ... Without a doubt, “the seventh seal” springs an ambush on the most watchful reader. Most interpreters see it as a signifier of *continuation*, not as *completion* and *climax*, but there is no consensus regarding the meaning of the silence. The two categories most in favor are as far apart as “judgment” and “prayer.”

... These options, as noted, seek the meaning of the silence in the *continuation* of Revelation's story. They veer from best practice by failing to give the OT the requisite billing.¹⁵

Tonstad is right in seeing a climax at Rev. 8:1, catching the flaws in alternate views, but misses the actual sense of that climax. If there weren't a better exposition available, Tonstad's view would prevail

since it emphasizes Christ's victory by appeal to Isaiah 52:13-15, speaking of

a path that runs contrary to all expectations and yet turns out well. “Look, my servant shall succeed,” is an appropriate translation for the person described (Isa. 52:13); His success too, is depicted in the currency of silence (52:15).¹⁶

Tonstad arrives at a conclusion consistent with the principles adopted (having respect unto the OT references):

By this logic, “the seventh seal” does not lack content even though it is often seen that way. It signals completion, not continuation. Heaven's half an hour of silence is a measure of the impact of “the Lamb in the middle of the throne” (7:17; 5:6).¹⁷

But the real meaning is that the wrath of God, which fills heaven with thunders and noise, has ceased to be agitated at Rev. 8:1 and no longer pours out upon the earth. As Ramsay observes, “There is silence in heaven. No more lightnings, and thundering, and voices out of the throne.”¹⁸ The silence is the silence of peace: God is finally at peace with the world. “There is no peace, saith the Lord, to the wicked” (Isa. 57:21) and this peace presupposes the total absence from the earth of the wicked.

Contra Dennis Johnson, who states that “this silence is the calm before the storm,”¹⁹ it is actually the calm *after* the storm. Alfred Plummer argues that we shouldn't translate the text as *there followed a silence* but more precisely, and strikingly, *a silence became*—which, though jarring in English, carries the sense that “*a silence became* where there had not been silence previously.”²⁰ Plummer adds:

The seer, in his vision, after beholding a succession of events, experiences a pause—complete silence for the space of half an hour. This time would appear almost interminable in such circumstances... The whole is thus completed; the seer is called away to review the ages once more—to behold new visions, which shall impress more fully, and supplement, the truths which the visions of the seals have, in a measure, revealed.²¹

Such a view of the half-hour of silence is not new. William Lee points out the

currency of the position among much earlier expositors than himself:

Vitringa takes the *half-hour* to mean the *long* state of peace (“per *longum* temporis intervallum”) which the Church is to enjoy under the Seventh Seal.²²

Vitringa [speaks of the] figure of that long duration of the Church’s peace, and happy condition on this earth, of which the emblem is that silence of “*half-an-hour*” in heaven, under the Seventh Seal.²³

JOHN OWEN ON THE DESTRUCTION OF BABYLON

When expanding on the translation of the nations into Christ’s Kingdom, John Owen provides a fascinating insight from Revelation 17 which (apart from David Brown’s parallel take) is almost always missed or misunderstood. As Owen notes, commentators “will accommodate the words of a text to their own apprehension of the sense and matter thereof,”²⁴ and he applies this warning to the misunderstanding of the *metathesis* (translation) of heaven and earth. The example he provides in Revelation pinpoints the victory laid out in the text, one that’s routinely papered over out of custom or tradition:

In Rev. 17:12, the kingdoms of the west “receive power one hour with the beast.” Verse 13, in their constitution and government at first received, “they give their power to the beast,” and fight against the Lamb. Verse 14, the Lamb with His faithful and chosen ones overcomes them. There their heaven and earth is shaken. Verse 16, their power is translated, new-molded, and becomes a power against the beast, in the hand of Jesus Christ.²⁵

In Revelation 17:16, “the ten horns which thou sawest upon the beast,” being now shaken, changed, and translated in mind, interest, and perhaps government, “these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate”—are instrumental in the hand of Christ for the ruin of that antichristian state which before they served—“and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire.”²⁶

One is almost tempted to say that the multitude of nations symbolized on

the seventh head will one day enforce the first table of the Law against false worship. Who saw *that* coming?

THE “REDEMPTIVE INGATHERING” OF REV 14:14

We often see a fusion of the two distinct harvests described in Revelation 14:14-20, but this is an error. One harvest is of the regenerate (vv. 14-16) and the other of those deserving wrath (vv. 17-20). The harvest “of the earth” in verse 14 is a “redemptive ingathering,” a term Tonstad borrows from Craig Koester.²⁷ The distinction between the harvest of the earth (grain) and the vintage of the earth (grapes) is made robust in Bauckham’s discussion, who not only brings forward evidence from Joel 3:13 and Mark 4:29 but, more importantly, the earlier context at Rev. 14:4.

Of the 144,000 ... it is said that “they have been ransomed from humanity as first fruits (*aparché*) for God and the Lamb” (14:4) ... The first fruits were the first sheaf which was taken from the harvest before the rest was reaped, and which was then offered to God as a sacrifice (Lev. 23:9-14). The connection between the first fruits of 14:4 and the reaping of the whole harvest in 14:14-16 would be obvious to any Jew, who was unlikely to be able to use the image of the first fruits without implying a full harvest of which the first fruits are the token and pledge. Thus the martyrs, redeemed *from* all the nations, are offered to God as the first fruits of the harvest *of* all the nations, whose reaping is depicted in 14:14-16. This must mean that the image of the grain harvest is not an image of judgment, but an image of the gathering of the converted nations into the kingdom of God.²⁸

The details of John’s vision have “a universal sense, as the gathering of the nations of the earth into the kingdom of God.”²⁹ “Reaping is always a positive image of bringing people into the kingdom (Mark 4:29; John 4:35-38).”³⁰ Bauckham notes that “the actions depicted” would be “very familiar to ... ancient readers” who would “immediately notice that Revelation’s picture of the grain harvest does not

proceed to the processes which symbolized judgment, while that of the vintage does.”³¹

REVELATION 11:15 AND 15:4

Revelation 11:15 openly predicts that all the world's nations have become Christ's Kingdom. Expositors spill a lot of ink attempting to evade anything approaching a literal sense of this climactic prediction. No such event occurred prior to 70 A.D., and futurists (who teach that Revelation 13 follows Revelation 11) have to explain how Christ's Kingdom fell in love with the Beast. The idealist view, however, has nothing to explain away here: Revelation 11:15 marks the climax of the church's historic development in the world, and John then doubles back to paint another picture of the inter-advent period.

That all the world's kingdoms have truly become Christ's genuine disciples and are His redeemed peoples is already implicated in Rev. 11:13, as Bauckham notes:

There should be no doubt that the end of 11:13 ... refers to genuine repentance and worship of God by the pagan world which is symbolized by the great city. The expression corresponds closely to the positive response that is invited by the angel in 14:7 [and] to the response to God which characterizes the worship of all the nations in 15:4... [John's restricted usage of the key terms] should make it quite clear that the city of 11:13 is not Jerusalem, and those who are brought to worship the true God are not Jews but pagans.³²

Of course, Rev. 15:4 also reiterates the same imagery of gospel victory, teaching that “all nations shall come and worship before thee.” So here again we have outcroppings of the universal, total expansion of God's Kingdom on the earth placed strategically throughout the book of Revelation, precisely where non-idealists don't expect to find them: for them, these are discordant details that need to be explained away. But idealists see how they all tie back to Genesis 12:3.

A QUICK LOOK AT REVELATION 20:7-9

Most Christians think the millennium of Revelation 20:1-6 is where Christ's

Kingdom reaches its height, but treating the next three verses as *following chronologically* wreaks havoc on *all* the promises previously confirmed in Revelation, not to mention those in Isaiah 2:4, 9:7, Psalm 72:6, etc. Idealists apply the principle that prior references in Revelation guide subsequent references, and this is true of the concept of the “little season” (*chronon mikron* of Rev. 6:11, *micron chronon* of Rev. 20, and *oligon kairon* in Rev. 12:12). On this view, all of these symbols refer to the *same thing*: our short life on earth in the period between the advents.

Our life on earth is short, “a vapor that appears for a little while” (James 4:14). “Remember how short my time is: wherefore hast thou made all men in vain?” (Psalm 89:47). The thousand years only applies to disembodied souls (“I saw the souls of them...”) and refers to the intermediate state, and the relationship symbolized by the little season contrasted to the thousand years is depicted by Paul twice in didactic language:

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment [little season] worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory [thousand years]; (2 Cor. 4:17)

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time [little season] are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us [thousand years]. (Rom. 8:18)

The little season represents our life on earth, individually and collectively, and one feature of it is that fire continually pours out onto the earth, consistent with Daniel 7:10, which states that “A fiery stream issued and came forth from before Him.” This fire is a symbol for God's wrath, and embodies the truth taught by Paul that “The wrath of God IS being revealed *from heaven* against ALL unrighteousness” (Rom 1:18). Fire is the symbol of His wrath, of His purifying actions. “Great is the rage (literally *glowing fire*) of the Lord which has poured itself upon us, because our fathers have not observed the word of the Lord, to do according to all that is written in this book” (2 Chron. 34:21). The Messiah is *like a refiner's fire* (Mal. 3:2; see also Isaiah 4:4-5 and Matt. 3:11-12).

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In his lectures on Revelation, William Milligan provides ample evidence that the little season of Rev. 20:7-9 refers to the entire Christian era.

It is, in short, the time between the First and Second Coming of our Lord. *The period so often sought in the thousand years of verse 2, is really to be found in the "little season" of verse 3.*³³

On this hypothesis, we're living in the era depicted in Rev. 20:7-9 when the providential wrath of God will ultimately purge the earth of Christ's enemies until there aren't any more to destroy, other than death itself. "The kingdom of God cometh not by observation" (Luke 17:20). The Kingdom's advance, like a glacier's movement, is both imperceptible and inexorable. This, then, again points to the same victory motif that reappears throughout Revelation, reinforcing the promises made back in Genesis.

CONCLUSION

The holistic nature of idealism as it seeks to do justice to God's promises has explanatory power. This is why Dr. Rushdoony's contributions hold a unique place in Revelation scholarship, providing additional layers of insight missed by others. His audio lectures are recommended for those looking to dig deeper.

There is total victory woven throughout the book of Revelation. A holistic approach to scripture will reveal it, yet approaches to scripture that obscure or dismiss that witness continue to be popular. Christians should be concerned that Jeremiah's indictment might still hold: "Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that steal my words every one from his neighbor" (Jer. 23:30). 🏰

1. R. J. Rushdoony, *Thy Kingdom Come: Studies in Daniel and Revelation* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, [1970] 1998), pp. 149-152.
2. *ibid*, pp. 175-180.
3. *ibid*, pp. 185-188.
4. Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (London, England: T. & T. Clark/A Continuum Imprint, 1993), p. 242.
5. *ibid*, pp. 242-243.
6. *ibid*, pp. 239-337.
7. *ibid*, p. 249.

8. G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1966), p. 106.
9. Bauckham, p. 307.
10. Caird, p. 104.
11. Bauckham, p. 274.
12. *ibid.*, 70-83. He does the same with Revelation 6:11, omitting scriptural parallels while mining dubious parallels from apocryphal books, pp. 48-56.
13. W. Boyd Carpenter in *Ellicott's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, n.d.), vol. 8, p. 569.
14. Craig S. Keener, *The NIV Application Commentary: Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), p. 253.
15. Sigve K. Tonstad, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), p. 137.
16. *ibid*, p. 138.
17. *ibid*.
18. James B. Ramsay, *The Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth Trust: [1873] 1977), p. 328.
19. Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), p. 136.
20. Alfred Plummer in Spence & Exell, ed., *The Pulpit Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950 reprint), vol. 22, section on Revelation, p. 229.
21. *ibid*, p. 230. Mangina mentions Henry Swete's view that "Half-an-hour, though a relatively short time, is a long interval in a drama, and makes an impressive break between the Seals and the Trumpets." Mangina himself adopts the weaker conventional views, however. Cf. Joseph Mangina, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), p. 118.
22. William Lee, "Revelation," in F. C. Cook, ed., *The Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, [1850-1853] 1981, vol. 10, p. 605.
23. *ibid*, p. 806.
24. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, [1850-1853] 1991), vol. 8, p. 257.
25. *ibid*, p. 257-258. Owen sought at least one antipapal application of the text, p. 262, unnecessarily restricting his own exposition.
26. *ibid*, p. 262.
27. Tonstad, p. 211.
28. Bauckham, p. 291-292.
29. *ibid*, p. 293.
30. *ibid*.
31. *ibid*.
32. *ibid*, pp. 278-279.
33. William Milligan, *The Revelation of St. John* (London: MacMillan, 1887), p. 214. His sixth lecture containing this discussion extends from page 193 to 233.



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