

~Introduction to Revelation, Part II--the theme~

By David Curtis

We began last week to introduce the book of Revelation. We discussed two basic issues that are keys to this book: When was it written? What is the proper approach?

We explored the question of the date that Revelation was written. The interpretation of Revelation hinges on whether it was written before or after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Strong internal evidence points to an early date view: Revelation was written in AD 65-66. According to the early date view, Revelation speaks of the birth pangs of the Kingdom, the end of Old Covenant Israel, and the beginning of Church history.

We also explored the proper approach to the book of Revelation. There are four basic views as to how to approach the book of Revelation. We focused our discussion on the two most popular views, the futurist and preterist views. The futurist view is undoubtedly the most popular today due to the influence of Dispensationalism. This view holds that the prophecies in the book of Revelation are yet to be fulfilled. We are looking at Revelation from the full preterist view: this view understands all of the prophecies in Revelation as having already been fulfilled. This view says that the great tribulation, the rapture, the resurrection, the judgement, the second coming of Christ is all behind us. According to preterists (full and partial), the great tribulation was the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army in 70 AD. This has been the belief of Christians throughout the history of the church until the last hundred years or so. We based our approach on the hermeneutical principle of audience relevance which asks: "What did the original readers understand the passage to mean?" If the book of Revelation was written to the Berean church, which is in Tidewater, what would you think when you read 1:1 & 3? Would you expect the events in the book to happen soon? Yes, you would and so did the original audience.

This brings us to the third key to Revelation--the theme. We began to touch on this last week; almost every commentary agrees that Revelation 1:7 is the theme of Revelation.

Revelation 1:7 (NKJV) "Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen."

This passage speaks of Christ's second coming in judgement on Israel. We noticed that 'cloud comings' in the Old Testament are frequently prophetic emblems of God's judgement on the nations. The coming spoken of in Revelation is to be upon those "who pierced Him." Who is that? The New Testament continually points out that those who pierced Christ were the first century Jews. Also, those who pierced Christ are "the tribes of the earth" (or the land), which refers to the promised land, or Israel. This book introduces its readers to the theology of judgement and specifically God's judgement sanctions against the nation of Israel.

Israel had crucified the Lord and publicly called God's judgement down on itself: "And all the people answered and said, 'His blood be on us and on our children.'" (Matthew 27:25). God's judgement on Israel in 70 AD matched their crime, the crucifixion of Christ. This crime was the worst in history so their punishment was also the worst in history. To call anything else "the great tribulation" is to downplay the

immensity of that generation's crime.

The Olivet discourse contains Christ's prophecy of the destruction of the temple and the tribulation. A number of Biblical scholars note that Revelation seems to be John's version of the Olivet Discourse and his expansion on it. Let us look first at a comparison of the Olivet Discourse and the Revelation. First of all, Revelation 1:1 says the events of the book are 'shortly to come to pass'. In the Olivet Discourse Christ says, "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place," (Matthew 24:34). Secondly, both mention the great tribulation:

Matthew 24:21: "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."

Revelation 7:14 And I said to him, "Sir, you know." So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

Finally, both mention the temple and its approaching destruction, even using the same terms.

Luke 21:24 "And Jerusalem will be trampled [pateho] by Gentiles [ethnos] until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled."

Revelation 11:2 "But leave out the court which is outside the temple, and do not measure it, for it has been given to the Gentiles [ethnos]. And they will tread [pateho] the holy city underfoot for forty-two months."

The Olivet Discourse, which forms the foundation of Revelation, has a strong focus on Israel's fate. John's gospel is the only one of the four gospels that doesn't include the Olivet Discourse -- John deals with it in the book of Revelation. The theological context of the Olivet Discourse begins in Matthew 21:19 where Christ curses the fig tree as He enters Jerusalem. Shortly thereafter, He gives the parable of the householder in Matthew 21:33. In this parable, He prophesies that "the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it," (Matthew 21:43). They knew that He spoke of Israel (Matthew 21:45). In Matthew 23 Jesus reproaches the scribes and Pharisees by calling them hypocrites (Matthew 23:13-15); in Matthew 23:31-36, He notes that Israel historically killed the prophets and now she is about to kill the Son of God. Matthew 23:36 speaks of "this generation", and in verses 37-38 the focus on Israel is indisputable. This is the context building up to the Olivet Discourse.

The very question that opens the Olivet Discourse concerns the temple:

Matthew 24:1& 2: "And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and His disciples came to Him for to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, there shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down."

The disciples respond by asking, "When will these things be?" The Greek word translated **world** [aion] in verse 3 is better translated **age**. The Jewish temple is at the heart of the Olivet Discourse; Matthew 24:15 refers to the Holy place.

Matthew 24:6 "And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet."

When have we not had wars and rumors of wars in history? What kind of sign is that? If you had lived in

the era known as the "Pax Romana", the era of the peace of Rome, this would have been a significant sign. Augustus inaugurated an Age of Peace in 17 BC. In the Roman Empire proper, this period of peace remained comparatively undisturbed until the time of Nero. The wars and rumors of wars in the Pax Romana immediately preceded the tribulation.

Matthew 24:14 says that the gospel would be preached to all nations.

Matthew 24:14 (NKJV) "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come."

Remember Jesus was a Jew speaking to Jews and Salvation was of the Jews. The early Christian church was made up of only Jews, it was approximately ten years after Pentecost when the first Gentiles were brought into the church without first becoming Jewish proselytes. It was the movement at Antioch that decided to begin Christian missions to "all the world" (Acts 11:19-30). The gospel was to go beyond Judaism before the end came. Scripture shows us that the gospel **was** preached to all the world in that age.

Colossians 1:5-6 (NKJV) "because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before, in the word of the truth of the gospel, which has come to you, as it has also in **all the world**, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth;"

Romans 1:8 (NKJV) "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of **throughout the whole world.**"

Matthew 24:15 speaks of the abomination of desolation.

Matthew 24:15 (NKJV) "Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand),

Josephus wrote, "When the temple was destroyed, Titus' army took the Roman emblem, an eagle with "SPQR," [the senate and population of Rome] on it into the Holy of Holies and set it up and bowed down in worship of Caesar." (*Wars, book 6, chapter 6, paragraph 1*). This was the final act of the abomination that makes desolate, but it began in the encircling of Jerusalem by the Roman armies, according to

Luke 21:20 (NKJV): "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near."

Matthew 24:16 warns those in Judea to flee when the abomination of desolation began. "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains."

Nero died in the middle of the war in June 68 AD, and Vespasian went back to Rome to fight to become the new emperor. During this time the Christians fled Jerusalem because they heeded the warning of Matthew 24:16; the Jews thought the respite was a sign from God of victory and they gathered in Jerusalem in great numbers. The Romans came back and destroyed the city.

Matthew 24:21 speaks of the great tribulation.

Matthew 24:21 (NKJV) "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."

When the Romans resumed the Jewish war, they were furious and came in with a vengeance. There was so much blood shed that it put out fires in the buildings. The people were cutting each other open to get the food that they had eaten, and mothers were roasting their own children. Notice what is said about this tribulation--nothing will ever equal it. The destruction of Jerusalem was far more than the fall of a Jewish city; it was the destruction and conclusion of Old Covenant Israel.

Matthew 24:28 refers to the gathering of the eagles.

Matthew 24:28 (NKJV) "For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together."

The eagle was the symbol of Rome. In other words, when Rome started gathering, Israel was a corpse.

Matthew 24:29 speaks of falling stars and darkened skies.

Matthew 24:29 (NKJV) "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."

This is common apocalyptic terminology taken from the Old Testament. Stars represent governments: Israel is fallen.

Matthew 24:30 tells us that the destruction of Jerusalem was a sign that Jesus had returned and was reigning with his saints in the kingdom.

Matthew 24:30 (NKJV) "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."

Matthew 24:31 refers to what many call the rapture.

Matthew 24:31 (NKJV) "And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

If you compare this with 1 Thessalonians 4: 15-17 you will see it is the same event. This is the gathering of the elect into the kingdom of God.

In **Matthew 24:32-34** Jesus said that these things would all take place in this generation--the one he was speaking to.

Matthew 24:32-34 (NKJV) "Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. 33 "So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near; at the doors! 34 "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place."

Some commentators have tried to make this say that this race (instead of generation) shall not pass until these things take place. Linguistically that is a stretch to say the least. The temple was destroyed within forty years (a biblical generation) of the Olivet discourse. Notice that he says "all these things" would take place in that generation; the rapture, 24:31; heaven and earth passing away, 24:34 ; and the Lord's second coming, 24:44.

Besides, if we use the word 'race' here, it makes no sense. Observe: "this **race** (Jews) will by no means pass away till all these things take place." If this is taken to mean the Jewish race, then after these things (no matter what you think they are) happen, the Jewish race WILL pass away. Do you see how it cannot be the word 'race' that is used here?

The focus of the Olivet Discourse is the destruction of Jerusalem at the second coming of Christ; Revelation simply expands on the Olivet Discourse. Not only is Israel's destruction the focus of Revelation but her destruction is set forth in an interesting fashion. She is being punished for adultery. In the Old Testament, Israel was considered the wife of Jehovah God.

Jeremiah 31:31 (NKJV) "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD.

Often the prophets mentioned the marital relationship between God and Israel. But Israel chased after foreign gods and was consequently accused of spiritual adultery. Finally Israel killed God's Son while crying, "We have no king but Caesar. His blood be on us and on our children." Revelation represents God's divorce decree against Israel as His unfaithful wife for spiritual adultery. In Revelation 4, we see God seated upon a judicial throne. God's throne is mentioned in eighteen of Revelation's twenty-two chapters. In fact, 'throne' occurs 62 times in the New Testament; 47 occurrences are in Revelation. There is a strong judicial undercurrent in Revelation.

In Revelation 5 God has in His hand a seven-sealed scroll which represents God's divorce decree against Israel. In Deuteronomy 24, God's law required that a writing of divorce be presented in case of divorce. Here God presents the divorce papers to Israel. The scroll, which is written on front and back, reflects the imagery of Ezekiel 2 where Ezekiel is handed a scroll that is written on front and back. In Ezekiel 2 this scroll has to do with lamentation and mourning upon Jerusalem. These two scrolls in Ezekiel and Revelation seem to be related.

The seven seals of the scroll reflect the seven-fold judgment of God that He warned Israel about in Leviticus 26:24: "then I also will walk contrary to you, and I will punish you yet seven times for your sins." The seven-fold judgments in Leviticus have a strong influence in the judgment language of Revelation throughout the book.

God's prescribed punishment for adultery is death by stoning (Leviticus 20). In Revelation 16:21 we read, "And great hail from heaven fell upon men, each hailstone about the weight of a talent. Men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, since that plague was exceedingly great." Israel is being stoned to death as an adulterous wife.

Israel is not only Jehovah's wife in the Old Testament, but she is also to serve Him as a priest. Thus in Revelation, Israel is represented as a harlot dressed in priestly garments. Since she is a priest, another Old Testament law comes into effect: 'The daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by playing the harlot, she profanes her father. She shall be burned with fire.' (Leviticus 21:9). We see Israel being burned with fire in:

Revelation 17:16: "And the ten horns which you saw on the beast, these will hate the harlot, make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire."

Having legally disposed of Israel at the end of Revelation, God takes a new bride, the church of Jesus Christ. In Revelation 21 after Israel's death we see a city coming down out of heaven adorned as a spotless virgin bride for her husband. Then we read of the marriage supper of the Lamb. This New Jerusalem is the church according to Hebrews 12:22.

Thus the theme of Revelation is the execution of God's divorce decree against Israel for her harlotries and adulterous relationships with other gods. She is put to death and God turns to take a new bride, which is the church, the spiritual Israel of God.

We have settled three keys to the book of Revelation: it was written before the destruction of Jerusalem and most of the prophesies refer to this event; the book centers around God's judgment of Israel by destroying it. The identities of the two main enemies in Revelation, ***the beast and the harlot***, provide other clues to the interpretation of Revelation.

The **beast** is one of the most dreaded images in Scripture. Everyone knows about his number, 666. Most commentators agree that the beast imagery in Revelation shifts between the generic and the specific. The beast in some contexts is a kingdom generically considered, and elsewhere it is a particular individual in that kingdom. In Revelation 13:8 John says the beast is a man, but in 17:11 the interpretive angel says that the beast is not only seven kings but an eighth.

The generic identity of the beast is the Roman empire of the first century. Jesus was crucified under the authority of the Roman empire and, the seven churches that Revelation is addressed to, lived in the Roman empire.

What about the specific identity of the beast? ***Who is Mr. 666 of Revelation 13:18?***

Revelation 13:18 (NKJV) "Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: His number is 666."

The beast of Revelation is none other than **Lucius Domitus Ahenobarbus**, who is better known by his adoptive name **Nero Claudius Caesar**. He is the only man who fits the bill as the specific and personal expression of the beast. Let us look at his qualifications.

The beast is identified by the number 666. In the ancient days alphabets served a two-fold purpose. Their first and foremost purpose was, of course, their service as letters. But letters were also assigned numerical values and thus served as numerals. The most familiar example of this dual function of alphabets can be found in the Roman numeral system. The Greek and Hebrew languages operated similarly. Nero Caesar, if spelled according to a Hebrew spelling (John and most of first century Christians were of Hebrew extraction) gives us precisely the value 666. ***Is it not remarkable that this most relevant emperor, who lived while those seven churches lived, and lived while John wrote, has a name that fits precisely the required sum? Is this a sheer coincidence, or an historical accident?*** Remember audience relevance.

What would have been the purpose of frustrating readers for two millennia who could not possibly identify a twentieth-century (or later) beast? Isn't it far more reasonable to assume that John's original readers understood him very well in his identification of the beast?

The character of the beast qualifies **Nero** for this role. He possessed a bestial nature. Nero often acted in horrible viciousness. According to Suetonius, Nero was a sodomite who is said to have castrated a boy named Sporus and married him. He enjoyed homosexual rape and torture. He killed his parents, brother, wife, aunt, and many others close to him. He so prostituted his own chastity that after defiling almost

every part of his body, he at last devised a kind of game: covered with the skin of some wild animal, he was let loose from a cage and attacked the private parts of men and women, who were bound at stakes.

Revelation 13:7 speaks of the power given to the beast to make war with the saints. Nero was the first of the imperial authorities to persecute Christianity. **Tacitus** records the scene in Rome when the persecution of Christians broke out: "*And their death was aggravated with mockeries, insomuch that, wrapped in the hides of wild beasts, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or fastened to crosses to be set on fire, that when the darkness fell they might be burned to illuminate the night.*" Revelation 13:5 says that the beast would continue 42 months. The Neronic persecution was instituted in 64 AD and lasted until his death in June 68 AD, which is three and a half years, or 42 months. **Nero fits the bill for the role of the beast.**

The beast is to die by a sword according to Revelation 13: 10 & 14. Do you know how Nero died? According to Suetonius, he "*drove a dagger into his throat, aided by Epaphroditus, his private secretary.*" Nero killed with the sword and was killed by the sword.

Revelation 17:3 tells us that the beast is red. The red color may be indicative of the bloodshed caused by the beast. But Suetonius writes of the legend associated with Nero's ancestral parentage, which explains why he had a red beard.

The beast's number is 666; in Hebrew, Nero's name adds up to 666. The beast is an awful character; Nero had a beastly character. The beast made war with the saints for 42 months; Nero persecuted Christians for three and a half years. The beast dies by the sword; Nero killed himself with a dagger. The beast is red; Nero had a red beard, which was very unusual in those times. Evidently the beast of Revelation is Nero. Remember, John told his readers, those first century Christians who lived in Asia Minor, that these things were to "shortly come to pass." We, twenty-first-century Christians, are not to be looking for some terrible beast to arise and bring great tribulation to believers as this has already happened during the time of Nero and the first-century Christians.

The second enemy in Revelation is the **Harlot**, Revelation 17:3-6.

So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet colored beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: And upon her fore head was a name written, **MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.** And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration.

Since the woman is seated upon the seven-headed beast and is called Babylon, some have thought she represents the city of Rome. But since the beast itself is Rome this would be redundant; Babylon is used to refer to an enemy of God, which in this case is Jerusalem.

There are several reasons to identify the harlot as Jerusalem. The Harlot is called Babylon. Babylon is called the great city in Revelation 14:8; Revelation 11:8, which is the first mention of the great city, refers to the place where our Lord was crucified, which was Jerusalem. She is great because of her covenantal status in the Old Testament. Jerusalem had previously been called by pagan names comparable to Babylon, as in Revelation 11:8, "spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt". This is because she acts like God's enemy. In Isaiah 1:9-10, God calls Jerusalem 'Sodom and Gomorrah' because of her sinfulness.

The harlot is filled with the blood of the saints according to Revelation 17:6, 16:6, and 18:21&24.
Throughout the book of Acts, Jerusalem is portrayed as the persecutor of Christianity.

Acts 7:51-52 (NKJV) "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers."

In the Olivet Discourse context, Jesus said in Matthew 23:34-36,

"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. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation."

The harlot is arrayed in Jewish priestly colors according to Revelation 17:4. Exodus 28 prescribes these colors for the High Priest. The High Priest also wore a tiara on his forehead that said, "holiness unto the Lord" (Exodus 28:36-38). This harlot has a blasphemous tiara on her forehead, Revelation 17:5. She was supposed to be holy to the Lord but she has become the mother of harlots.

There is an obvious literary contrast between the harlot and the bride that comes down out of heaven. If we compare Revelation 21 & 17, we see two women: one is a harlot, the other a bride; one is Jerusalem that is above, the other is Jerusalem from below. Paul talked about these two Jerusalems in Galatians 4:25-26 (NKJV): "... Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children; but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all."

Notice how John is introduced to the harlot, and notice how he is introduced to the bride. They are negative mirror images.

Revelation 17:1 (NKJV) "Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and talked with me, saying to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great **harlot** who sits on many waters,"

Revelation 21:9 (NKJV) "Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the **bride**, the Lamb's wife."

The harlot is seated on the seven headed beast which obviously represents Rome. This indicates not identity with Rome but some form of alliance with Rome. The Jews were the ones that demanded Christ's crucifixion. When Pilot wanted to turn Jesus loose because he found no guilt in him, the Jews said in:

John 19:15 (NKJV), "But they cried out, "Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!" Pilate said to them,
"Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar!"

The Jews were siding with Caesar against Jesus. The Jews constantly agitated against the Christians to get the Romans involved in their persecution. In Acts 17:7, the Christians were accused by the Jews as those who preached another king contrary to the decrees of Caesar. The harlot is seated on the beast because Jerusalem depended upon Rome to persecute the Christians.

Revelation was obviously written before Nero's death in 68AD. The prophecies of this book have been fulfilled. It was written about things which would take place shortly after its writing. It deals with the persecution of believers under Judaism and Rome and predicts God's judgement upon these enemies of the church. Its purpose, therefore, is to strengthen and encourage believers in time of trial.

This book is to be understood preteristically rather than futuristically. In doing so, you avoid the wild speculation of interpreting everything in the daily news as a sign of the times. Our country is not getting worse because it is the end times, it's getting worse because Christians are neglecting their calling. We are to be salt and light. We are to call our world to faith in Jesus Christ. I think that futurism causes a pessimistic attitude about the future and it blinds believers to the wonder of the New Covenant. Those believers who continue to look for a future second coming that will be "soon" set themselves up for disappointment and heartache. Take a look at history for the proof!

Proverbs 13:12 (NKJV) "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, But when the desire comes, it is a tree of life."

Our hope and desire **has** been realized in the second coming of Christ, the tabernacle of God is with men, He dwells with us. We live in the glories of the New Covenant age.