

THEONOMY AND THE DATING OF REVELATION

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In 1989, a well-known spokesman for the theonomist camp, Kenneth L. Gentry, published a work devoted to proving that John the Apostle wrote Revelation during the sixties of the first century A.D. Basing his position heavily on Rev 17:9-11 and 11:1-13, he used internal evidence within the book as his principal argument for the early date. His clever methods of persuasion partially shield his basic motive for his interpretive conclusions, which is a desire for an undiluted rationale to support Christian social and political involvement leading to long-term Christian cultural progress and dominion. If the prophecies of Revelation are yet to be fulfilled, no such progress will develop—a prospect the author cannot accept. Inconsistency marks Gentry's hermeneutical pattern. Predisposition keeps him from seeing the book's theme verse as a reference to Christ's second coming. His explanation of Rev 17:9-11 is fraught with weaknesses, as is his discussion of 11:1-2. Two major flaws mar Gentry's discussion of John's temporal expectation in writing the book. Besides these problems, five major questions regarding Gentry's position remain unanswered.

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Theonomist¹ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., makes evidence derived from exegetical data within the Apocalypse his major focus in building a case for dating the book prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.² Though acknowledging that other advocates of either a Neronian (i.e., in the 60's) and Domitianic date (i.e., in the 90's) for Revelation's composition find no such direct evidence within the book, he proceeds to find "inherently suggestive and positively compelling historical time-frame indicators in Revelation."³ He uses the contemporary reign

¹Theonomy—also known as "dominion theology" and "Christian reconstructionism"—is a worldview that foresees a progressive domination of world government and society by Christianity until God's kingdom on earth becomes a reality. Its eschatology is essentially that of the postmillennialism so popular around the beginning of the twentieth century.

²Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell, Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989) 113, 116.

³*Ibid.*, 119.

of the sixth king in 17:9-11 and the integrity of the temple and Jerusalem in 11:1-13 to exemplify arguments that are "virtually certain" proof of a date some time in the sixties.⁴

Before a look at his exegesis of these two passages and several others, however, Gentry's general methodology deserves attention.

METHOD OF PRESENTATION

His first tactic is to create an environment of what may be called "virtual reality." This phenomenon is becoming very popular in this day of computer-generated illusionary data. I call Gentry's use of it an experience in "back-to-the-future" manipulation.

About a year ago, I went with one of my sons and two of my grandsons on what was then the new "Back to the Future" experience on the lot of Universal Studios in Burbank. I call it an "experience" for the lack of a better term. It was not a "ride" such as most attractions at Six Flags or Disneyland, because we never left a small room in which we originally sat down. We were in an automobile-type enclosure with a very complicated dashboard. We were enclosed on three sides in the dark room with only a three-dimensional screen in front of us. When our back-to-the-future experience began, all we could see was the screen with its images portraying our "movement" through time and near collisions with all kinds of objects including dinosaurs, cliffs, large buildings, vehicles, and the like. To enforce this, our auto-like enclosure was bumping around, pitching up and down, rolling side-to-side, and leaning in synchronization with what we saw on the screen. It was a very realistic experience, but it was not real. All the apparent movement made my son sick at his stomach. I attribute this to his right-brain orientation. It did not bother me at all, however, because I rested in the reality that I was still in a small room enclosed in a larger building and had never left that room. In fact, I experienced the attraction again later in the day, but this time at the request of and in the company of my two grandsons only.

⁴Ibid., 118-19.

Gentry like others of the reconstructionist movement is a master in using words to take his readers back to the future, i.e., in creating virtual reality that many will not distinguish from reality itself. He does this by stating his "correct" view first,⁵ then often following it up with a long list of writers to support that view.⁶ This has the effect of blinding the reader on three sides so that he can see only what Gentry wants him to see in front of him. Only after the reader's exposure to the positive evidence for his view does the author turn to evaluate some of the weaknesses of that viewpoint.⁷ By this time, the merits of other viewpoints have become lost in the shuffle.

Behind this exegetical methodology lies a preunderstanding that controls the whole process. In about the last thirty years it has become increasingly fashionable among some evangelicals to factor the step of preunderstanding or hermeneutical self-consciousness into the interpretive process,⁸ but to others, such as myself, to do so confuses the picture by making what has traditionally been known as application partially determinative of one's understanding of the historical-grammatical meaning of Scripture. Gentry tries to shield his preunderstanding from view most of the time, but it shows itself once early in the book and then in the book's concluding remarks.⁹ After quoting Ryrie's words about the inevitable misery that the future holds for the world, he writes, "If such is the case, why get involved?"¹⁰ He associates cultural defeatism and retreatist pietism with assigning a late date to Revelation and wants to date the book before A.D. 70 so as to have biblical support for the implementation of long-term Christian cultural progress and dominion.¹¹

This probably reflects his basic motivation for the early dating of Revelation: a desire for an undiluted rationale to support Christian social and political involvement. He is looking for an escape from the tension between the cultural mandate given to Christians and a

⁵E.g., *ibid.*, 153-54.

⁶E.g., *ibid.*, 30-38, 168, 200, 296 n. 50. Many citations in these lists are not from primary sources.

⁷E.g., *ibid.*, 203-12.

⁸E.g., Craig A. Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 30.

⁹Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 5 n. 12, 336-37.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 5 n. 12.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 336-37.

realization that the prophecy of Revelation dictates that the culture will inevitably go downhill despite the best efforts of God's people to reverse the trend. No one can deny that Christians are to be good citizens by doing everything they can to make this world a better place, but the fact remains that evil will eventually prevail until the end of history when Christ returns. This is apparently a paradox with which Gentry cannot live, so his exegetical methodology moves in a direction that finds Revelation's prophecies of a decaying society fulfilled in the era up to and including the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

HERMENEUTICAL PATTERN

As Gentry weaves his case for Revelation's early date, the absence of a consistent set of hermeneutical principles is evident. It is most conspicuous in a number of inconsistencies that emerge in different parts of the treatment. He does not interpret the same passage in the same way from place to place, or within the same discussion differing principles take him in different directions regarding his mode of interpretation.

For instance, he accepts the principle of the symbolic use of numbers, but only for large, rounded numbers such as 1,000, 144,000, and 200,000,000. Smaller numbers, such as seven, are quite literal.¹²

Again, he rejects the equation of "kings = kingdoms" in 17:10,¹³ but in a later discussion of the *Nero Redivivus* myth in 17:11, he identifies one of the kings or heads of the beast in 17:10 as the Roman Empire revived under Vespasian.¹⁴ The latter is part of his strained attempt to explain the healing of the beast's death-wound.

When discussing the 144,000, Gentry is uncertain at one point whether they represent the saved of Jewish lineage or the church as a whole.¹⁵ Yet just ten pages later they are definitely Christians of Jewish extraction, because he needs evidence to tie the fulfillment of Revelation to the land of Judea.¹⁶ This provides another example of his lack of objective hermeneutical principles to guide interpretation.

The forty-two months of 11:2 is the period of the Roman siege of Jerusalem from early spring 67 till September 70, according to Gen-

¹²Ibid., 162-63.

¹³Ibid., 163-64.

¹⁴Ibid., 310-16.

¹⁵Ibid., 223-24.

¹⁶Ibid., 233.

try.¹⁷ A bit earlier he finds John, even while he is writing the book, already enmeshed in the great tribulation (1:9; 2:22), a period of equal length and apparently simultaneous with the Roman siege.¹⁸ In a discussion of 13:5-7, however, he separates the Neronic persecution of Christians which constituted "the great tribulation" (13:5-7) from the Roman siege of Jerusalem in both time and place, dating it from 64 to 68 and locating it in the Roman province of Asia.¹⁹ So which is it? Is John writing during "the great tribulation" of 64-68 or the one of 67-70? Later still, he assigns 65 or early 66 as the date of writing,²⁰ so John predicted a forty-two month period of persecution (13:5) that was already partially past when he wrote. This is indeed a puzzling picture.

Another puzzling discussion concerns the raising of the beast from his death-wound. At one point Gentry identifies Galba as the seventh king of 17:10, in strict compliance with the consecutive reigns of Roman emperors.²¹ But suddenly he skips Otho and Vitellius to get to Vespasian who is the eighth and shifts from counting kings with his identification of the healing of the beast's death-wound as Rome's survival from its civil war in the late sixties.²² This is enough to dash in pieces any effort to decipher a consistent pattern of hermeneutics, because such is nonexistent.

So much for preliminaries and generalities. The attention of the remainder of this essay will be on individual passages, with special attention to Gentry still, but with a few side glances at other reconstructionists.

INDIVIDUAL PASSAGES

The Theme Verse

All, including Gentry and Chilton,²³ agree that the theme verse of Revelation is Rev 1:7: "Behold, He comes with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all the families of

¹⁷Ibid., 250-53.

¹⁸Ibid., 234.

¹⁹Ibid., 254-55.

²⁰Ibid., 336.

²¹Ibid., 158, 208.

²²Ibid., 310-16.

²³Ibid., 121-23; David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance* (Fort Worth, TX: Dominion, 1987)

the earth will mourn over Him." But these two theonomists do not refer this to the second coming of Christ. Rather they see it as referring to the coming of Christ in judgment upon Israel, so as to make the church the new kingdom.²⁴ To reach this conclusion, they must implement special proposals regarding "those who pierced Him," "the tribes of the earth," and "the land."

"*Those who pierced Him.*" Blame for the piercing of Jesus falls squarely and solely on the shoulders of the Jews, according to Gentry.²⁵ He cites a number of passages in the gospels, Acts, and Paul to prove this responsibility, but conspicuously omits from his list John 19:31 and Acts 4:27 which involve the Romans and Gentiles in this horrible act.²⁶ This determines for him that the book's theme is the coming of God's wrath against the Jews.²⁷

By limiting the blame for Christ's crucifixion to the Jews, Gentry excludes from the scope of the theme verse any reference to the Romans whom he elsewhere acknowledges to be the chief persecutors of Christians.²⁸ He also includes the Romans elsewhere as objects of this "cloud coming" of Christ,²⁹ and yet does not give the Romans a place in the theme verse of the book.

"*The tribes of the earth.*" Without evaluating any other possibility, Gentry assigns *φύλη* (*phyl*) the meaning of "tribe" and sees in it a reference to the tribes of Israel.³⁰ This interpretation has merit because that is the meaning of the term in the source passage, Zech 12:10 ff., and in a parallel NT passage, John 19:37.³¹ The problem with

²⁴Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* 64; Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 131-32.

²⁵Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 123-27.

²⁶Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1—7, An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992) 77-78. Even Chilton allows a reference to Gentiles here (*Days of Vengeance* 66).

²⁷Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 127.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 144.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 143, 144.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 127-28.

³¹William Lee, "The Revelation of St. John," in *The Holy Bible*, ed. by F. C. Cook (London: John Murray, 1881) 4:502; J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, Pelican, 1979) 67; G. V. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, HNTC (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 18; James Moffatt, "The Revelation of St. John the Divine," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. by W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 5:339-40; J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1961) 44.

the way Gentry construes it, however, is that if this refers to Israel, it is a mourning of repentance, as in Zechariah, not a mourning of despair as he makes it.

For this to be a mourning of despair as the context of Revelation requires (cf. 9:20-21; 16:9, 11, 21), *phyl* must be taken in the sense of "family" and must refer to peoples of all nations as it does so often in the Apocalypse (cf. 5:9; 7:9; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6).³² This is the only way to do justice to the worldwide scope of the book as required by such verses as 3:10, which even Gentry admits refers to the whole Roman world.³³ The sense of a mourning of despair throughout the whole earth is the sense Jesus attaches to the words in His use of the Zech 12:10 ff. passage in Matt 24:30.³⁴

"*The land.*" The reconstructionists actually take "the tribes of the earth" to be "the tribes of the land," i.e., the land of Palestine.³⁵ It is true that *g* (*g*) can carry such a restricted meaning, but special support in its context of usage is necessary for it to mean this. The acknowledged worldwide scope of Revelation already cited rules out this localized meaning of the term in 1:7.

So Gentry strikes out on the three pitches which he himself has chosen in the theme verse of Revelation. He also leaves other unanswered questions regarding this alleged "cloud coming" in the sixties. He identifies the cloud coming against the Jews as the judgment against Judea in 67-70.³⁶ Against the church that coming was the persecution by the Romans from 64 to 68.³⁷ The cloud coming for Rome was her internal strife in 68-69.³⁸ But nowhere does he tell what the promised deliverance of the church is (e.g., 3:11). It appears to be a question without a clear-cut answer as to how this "cloud coming" could be a promise of imminent deliverance for God's people. All he can see in it is judgment against them and the "privilege" of being clearly distinguished from Judaism forever. He finds covenantal and redemptive import for Christianity in the collapse of the Jewish

³²Alan F. Johnson, "Revelation," in *EBC*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 12:423.

³³Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 143 n. 27.

³⁴For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Thomas, *Revelation 1—778-79*.

³⁵Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 128-29; Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* 66.

³⁶Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 143.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 144.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 144-45.

order,³⁹ but this falls short of a personal appearance of Christ to take the faithful away from their persecution.

The Sixth King

As mentioned above, one of the two internal indicators that make the early date "virtually certain" is the identity of the sixth king in 17:9-11.⁴⁰ Gentry first uses the "seven hills" of 17:9 to indicate that Rome or the Roman Empire is in view.⁴¹ Then he concludes that the seven kings of 17:9 (Greek text; 17:10 in English) are seven consecutive Roman emperors.⁴² He lists ten kings, beginning with Julius Caesar (49`44 B.C.) and continuing with Augustus (31 B.C.`A.D. 14), Tiberius (14`37), Gaius or Caligula (37`41), Claudius (41`54), Nero (54`68), Galba (68`69), Otho (69), Vitellius (69), Vespasian (69`79).⁴³ The sixth in this series is Nero, so because 17:10 says "one is," he concludes that John must have written the book during Nero's reign.⁴⁴

Gentry faces four objections to his theory that the sixth king is Nero,⁴⁵ but except for the fourth one, to which this discussion will return shortly, bypasses the exegetical crux of the issue. Regarding the seven hills, he assumes without consideration of any contrary evidence that they tie the beast to the city of Rome, but is this a valid assumption? The formula introducing this explanation, "Here is the mind that has wisdom" (17:9a; cf. 13:18a), indicates a need for special theological and symbolic discernment to comprehend it. Gentry's proposal requires only a basic knowledge of geography and numbers, not a special God-given wisdom.⁴⁶ Further, it is hard to see any connection between the topography of Rome and seven of its emperors.⁴⁷ Vv. 9-10 refer to the scope and nature of the beast's power, not to the physical layout of a city.⁴⁸ No single historical city, particularly Rome,

³⁹Ibid., 144.

⁴⁰Ibid., 146.

⁴¹Ibid., 149-51.

⁴²Ibid., 151-52.

⁴³Ibid., 152-59.

⁴⁴Ibid., 158.

⁴⁵Ibid., 159-64.

⁴⁶Lee, "Revelation" 4:744; Johnson, "Revelation" 12:558.

⁴⁷George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 227.

⁴⁸Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (New York: Harper, 1940) 349.

can meet all the characteristics John speaks of in Revelation 17`18.⁴⁹ The added expression, "They are seven kings," seems to require that an identification of the mountains or hills be of a political rather than a geographical nature. Strangest of all, though, is Gentry's unfulfilled obligation to explain what a reference to Rome is doing in the midst of a chapter dealing with Babylon, which he takes to represent Jerusalem.⁵⁰ The best he can do is theorize that the harlot's riding on the beast is an alliance between Jerusalem and Rome against Christianity.⁵¹ To support the existence of such an alleged alliance, he cites Matt 23:37 ff.; John 19:16-16 [sic]; Acts 17:7, none of which support his theory.⁵² Rome's prolonged siege and destruction of Jerusalem from the late 60's to 70 hardly gives the impression of any alliance.

The harlot sits upon or beside the seven mountains (17:9), just as she sits upon or beside "many waters" (17:1). Since the "many waters" are a symbol explained in 17:15, analogy would dictate that the seven mountains are also symbolic and not literal hills.⁵³ The very next clause in 17:9 explains the symbolism of the seven mountains: they are seven kings or kingdoms. As noted above, Gentry as part of his answer to the fourth objection to the Neronian identification rejects the equating of kings with the kingdoms they rule, but later he incorporates such an equation into his explanation of the identity of the eighth head.⁵⁴

Besides the tenuous nature of Gentry's use of the seven hills, his conclusion that Nero is the sixth or "the one [who] is" also faces serious obstacles. The greatest obstacle is his need to begin counting "kings" with Julius Caesar. He tries to defend this by citing several ancient sources,⁵⁵ but the fact is that Rome was a Republic, ruled by the First Triumvirate, in the days of Julius Caesar and became a Principate under Augustus and the emperors that followed him.⁵⁶ Neither does Gentry attempt to explain the thirteen-year gap between Julius Caesar's death and the beginning of Augustus' reign. They were not consecutive rulers as he makes them out to be. The exclusion of Julius

⁴⁹Ladd, *Revelation* 228.

⁵⁰Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 240-41 n. 26.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Lee, "Revelation" 4:744.

⁵⁴Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 163-64, 310-16.

⁵⁵Ibid., 154-58.

⁵⁶*Collier's Encyclopedia* 20:180, 190.

Caesar makes Nero the fifth instead of the sixth "king." Another good reason for not making Nero the sixth is that it eliminates the necessity of making Galba the seventh and seeing the eighth as the revived Roman Empire rather than an individual king. This scheme is fraught with hermeneutical difficulties.

Gentry's further use of 666 to prove that the first beast of chap. 13 is Nero, he admits, is only corroborative and cannot stand alone,⁵⁷ so the efficient course is to turn now to his second major item of internal evidence to prove an early date of writing.

The Contemporary Integrity of the Temple

Gentry finds indisputable evidence in Rev 11:1-2 that the temple was still standing and that the destruction of Jerusalem was still future when John wrote the book.⁵⁸ He goes to great lengths to prove that it was the Herodian temple of Jesus' day by locating it in Jerusalem, and to show that it does not serve as a symbolic representation of the church.⁵⁹ Yet he gives no attention to the possibility that this may be a future literal temple.

He is quite defensive of his hermeneutical methodology in handling these two verses, a method that involves a mixture of figurative-symbolic and literal-historical.⁶⁰ He takes the measuring to represent the preservation of the innermost aspects including the *naos* (*naos*, "temple"), altar, and worshipers and the casting out (*ekbale*) as indicative of the destruction of the external court of the temple complex. The former or inner spiritual idea speaks of the preservation of God's new temple, the church, while the latter or material temple of the old covenant era will come to destruction. In other words, v. 1 is figurative and v. 2 literal. In yet other terms, the *tn nan to ueo* (*ton naon tou theou*, "the temple of God") and *t uysiastrion* (*to*

⁵⁷Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 198. "Fanciful" is the best description of some of Gentry's hermeneutical methodology to prove that 666 refers to Nero. He concludes that the beast who is Nero, like Satan himself, is a serpent because in English and in Greek (*XJS* [*chxs*]) pronunciation of the number "sounds hauntingly like a serpent's chilling hiss" (215). He adds that the middle number-letter even has the appearance of a writhing serpent: *j* (*x*) (*ibid.*). Another means of identifying Nero as the beast is his red beard that matches the color of the beast (17:3) (217).

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 165-69.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 169-74.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 174-75.

thysiastrion, "the altar") are symbolic and *tn aln tn jvuen to nao* (*tn auln tn exthen tou naou*, "the court outside the temple") is literal.

Gentry justifies the radical switch in hermeneutical approaches by appealing to Walvoord and Mounce, whom he says combine literal and figurative in this passage also.⁶¹ He cites Walvoord's silence regarding John's literally climbing the walls of the temple to get his measurements and Mounce's reference to the necessity of a symbolic mixture in interpreting the passage. What Gentry does is drastically different from these two, however. He wants a figurative and literal meaning for essentially the same terminology. For example, he assigns the term *naos* both a literal and a symbolic meaning in consecutive verses. In fact, he refers the temple and the altar to literal structures earlier⁶² and to the spiritual temple of the church a few pages later.⁶³ This compares to changing the rules in the middle of the game. Any interpretation can win that way.

His response to objections to his interpretation of 11:1-2 includes an assigning of a pre-70 date to Clement of Rome's epistle to the Corinthians, though its accepted dating is in the 90's. He does this because Clement speaks as though the temple were still standing. Then Gentry has a lengthy discussion of the silence of the rest of the NT regarding the destruction of Jerusalem,⁶⁴ during which he apparently accepts dates prior to 70 for all four gospels, including the Gospel of John, and the rest of the NT canon.⁶⁵ This theory creates further problems for his case, with which he does not deal and so this discussion will not either.

Gentry does not venture an explanation of how John, isolated on the Island of Patmos so many miles from Jerusalem, can visit the literal city to carry out his symbolical task of measuring the temple. He seems oblivious to John's being in a prophetic trance (4:2) to receive this and other revelations in this visional portion of the book. His task in 11:1-2 is the first of his assigned duties to perform following his recommissioning at the end of chap. 10 (10:11). So he is not to transport himself physically across the Mediterranean Sea to Judea, but "in spirit" he is already there.

One cannot quarrel with the conclusion that John's visional

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid., 169-70.

⁶³Ibid., 174.

⁶⁴Ibid., 181-92.

⁶⁵Ibid., 182-83.

responsibility of measuring points in its fulfillment to a literal temple, but it is not the Herodian temple of Jesus' day. It is a future temple to be rebuilt just before Christ's second advent (cf. Dan 9:27; 12:11; Matt 24:15; 2 Thess 2:4). It indeed will be a literal temple, but without symbolic meaning such as Gentry assigns. His idea that the temple and the altar of v. 1 represent the church leaves no room to identify the worshipers in the same verse. His approach to symbolism is inconsistent and self-contradictory. This aspect of the description as well as v. 2 shows that the entire description is on Jewish ground and is not part Jewish and part Christian.⁶⁶

John's measuring of the temple is clearly not for the purpose of obtaining dimensions, but for the sake of acquiring information necessary for his new prophetic task. That information comes in the sequel to the command to measure and cast out, in the description of the two witnesses in 11:3-14.⁶⁷ The two witnesses in association with the sanctuary, the altar, and the worshipers enjoy God's favor (11:5-6, 11-12), but their Gentile foes who oppose and kill them eventually experience a devastating earthquake because of God's disfavor (11:13). So the measuring is an object lesson of how entities favored by and opposed to God will fare during the period of Gentile oppression of Jerusalem that lies ahead during the period covered by the remainder of John's prophecies.

Temporal Expectation of the Author

One other temporal feature that Gentry magnifies is the emphasis of Revelation on the nearness of Christ's coming (Rev 1:1, 3, 19; 22:6, 7, 12, 20). He faults those who refer this to Christ's second advent, noting that the "shortly" or "soon" that characterizes the coming is hardly a suitable way to speak of the already 1900-year interval that separates that coming from the writing of Revelation.⁶⁸ His solution is to refer the book to the imminence of the events to come upon the Jews, the church, and the Roman Empire during the decade of the sixties, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.⁶⁹

At least two flaws mar his theory. The first is that his

⁶⁶J. A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse*, 3 vols. (New York: Charles C. Cook, 1909) 2:159; Ladd, *Revelation* 152.

⁶⁷Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 4 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1903) 4:657.

⁶⁸Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 133-37.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 142-43.

placement of the coming of Christ to the church precedes his date for the writing of the book. The coming of Christ for the church, he says, is the Neronic persecution of A.D. 64-68,⁷⁰ but John did not write the book until 65 or early 66.⁷¹ This "coming" was not imminent; it was already in progress.

The other flaw is that of setting time limitations on how long "soon" must be. If the NT makes anything clear, it is that no one knows the day or hour of Christ's coming (e.g., Matt 24:42, 44; 25:13; Mark 13:32). That coming will be like a thief in the night (Rev 3:3) so as to catch everyone by surprise, but according to Gentry's scheme, it was quite predictable. Jesus' teaching about His coming occurring in "this generation" (Matt 24:34) is no exception to this rule,⁷² because He made that statement in the same context of confessing ignorance as to the time of His own coming.

The teaching of Christ's imminent return is not about setting a time limit on when He will come. It is about teaching an attitude of expectancy that provides motivation for a godly lifestyle. Paul expected Christ's return during his lifetime (1 Cor 15:51; 1 Thess 4:15, 17) and this was proper. Yet Paul did not lay down strict guidelines that Christ had to come before he died.

For Gentry, "soon" means already (i.e., Christ's coming for the church), in two years (i.e., Christ's coming for the Jews), and in four years (i.e., Christ's coming for the Roman Empire). If this were correct, in itself it illustrates that "soon" is a relative term with a good bit of elasticity. The Apocalypse computes time either relatively to the divine apprehension as here and in 22:10 or absolutely in itself as long or short (8:1; 20:2). God is not limited by the time constraints that are so binding on man (2 Pet 3:8), so man cannot be impatient in limiting the time span covered by "soon."⁷³

A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

Gentry's book itemizes a number of other supposed supports for the early date, but admits in most cases that these are only corroborative of his main proofs and have no independent value.⁷⁴

⁷⁰Ibid., 144.

⁷¹Ibid., 336.

⁷²Contra *ibid.*, 131.

⁷³Cf. Thomas, *Revelation 1—7* 54-56.

⁷⁴E.g., Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 220-21, 246 n. 44.

Throughout most of the work he gives the impression that he uses two criteria of independent value in dating the book, Nero as the sixth king of 17:10 and the existence of the temple and Jerusalem contemporary to the writing of the book. Yet when he arrives near the end he speaks of the "wealth of internal considerations for an early date."⁷⁵ His wealth of considerations consists of only two, both of which are useless in demonstrating his case, as pointed out above.

This discussion of internal criteria for dating the book of Revelation would not be complete without posing some questions that Gentry does not answer satisfactorily in his book.

(1) How is it that the "cloud-coming" of A.D. 70 involves no personal coming of Christ (Matt 24:30; 26:64; Rev 1:7; 2:5, 16, 25; 3:3, 11, 20; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20), but the "cloud-coming" at the end of history does (Acts 1:11; 1 Thess 4:13 ff.)?⁷⁶ In the first place, where did Christ distinguish between two such comings, and in the second place, where did He say that He would personally appear at one and not at the other? The answer to both questions is "nowhere." Such a distinguishing between two future comings is the product of a dominion-theological distortion of NT teaching, not of sound exegetical practice.

(2) How could John dwell on the prosperity of the church in Laodicea when the city had been completely destroyed by an earthquake only five years earlier? Gentry responds to this problem by suggesting that Laodicea's wealth was spiritual and not material, by supposing the possibility of a quick rebuilding, and by theorizing that the earthquake did not impact the sector of the city where the Christians were.⁷⁷ A careful exegesis of 3:17, however, shows that Christians in the city thought their material prosperity was equivalent to spiritual prosperity, not that they were spiritually rich while materially poor. The possibility of a quick rebuilding contradicts the facts. The rebuilding effort was still in progress as late as 79 when a gymnasium that was part of the rebuilding effort was completed.⁷⁸ Also an abrupt numismatic poverty marks this period in all the cities of the Lycus district of which Laodicea was a part. This too illustrates

⁷⁵Ibid., 329.

⁷⁶Cf. *ibid.*, 122-23.

⁷⁷Ibid., 319-22.

⁷⁸Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, JSNT

the prolonged effect of the destructive earthquake.⁷⁹ As for Gentry's theory that part of the city was spared the devastation that affected the whole district, this is pure speculation that belies the available facts.

(3) Did the ministry of John overlap that of Paul in the churches of Asia? Gentry's reconstruction of the chronology of the period would require this. If John wrote in 65 or early 66, he must have been in Asia for at least five years prior to that to have unseated Paul as the authoritative apostle for the region and to have gained the respect of Christians throughout the whole province. It would have been necessary for him to have been there long enough to become a problem for Nero too, resulting in his exile to Patmos some time after 64. Paul visited Ephesus at least once after this (A.D. 65), following his release from his first Roman imprisonment (1 Tim 1:3). Yet after leaving the city, he left Timothy in charge of the church and made no reference to the presence of John the Apostle and his influence on the church. If John had been there and had taken charge, why would Paul return to Asia? The answer is that he would not have, but he did so John had not yet arrived in Asia.

(4) When did John arrive in Asia? According to the best tradition, John was part of a migration of Christians from Palestine to the province of Asia just before the outbreak of the Jewish rebellion in A.D. 66, so he did not arrive there before the late sixties.⁸⁰ A Neronian dating of the book would hardly have allowed time for him to settle in Asia, replace Paul as the respected leader of the Asian churches, and be exiled to Patmos before Nero's death in 68. Gentry does not respond to this problem, but his dating of the book in 65 or 66 renders its apostolic authorship impossible.

(5) What was the condition of the churches of Asia during the sixties, that portrayed in Paul's epistles to Ephesians (A.D. 61), Colossians (A.D. 61), and Timothy (A.D. 65 and 67) or that in John's seven messages of Revelation 2-3? Recognizing true apostles and prophets had become a problem in the latter (e.g., 2:2, 20), but the former epistles give no inkling of this kind of a problem. In Paul's epistles to this area, false teaching regarding the person of Christ was a crucial issue (e.g., Col 1:13-20), but not so in John's seven messages. A need in Paul's epistles was strong emphasis on Christian family roles (e.g., Eph 5:22-6:9; Col 3:18-4:1; 1 Tim 6:1-2), but John's messages do not touch this subject at all. A prominent danger in John's messages is the

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Thomas, *Revelation 1—722*.

Nicolaitan heresy (2:6, 15), but Paul's epistles say nothing about it. Differences of this type are almost limitless, the simple reason being that Paul's four epistles and John's seven messages belong to decades separated by twenty years. Gentry responds to this problem only superficially,⁸¹ and therefore ineffectively.

A FINAL REVIEW

It has been impossible to deal with all the peculiar interpretations of dominion theology in the Apocalypse, because the proposed topic has been the internal evidence for dating the book. Probably when Gentry completes his forthcoming commentary, *The Divorce of Israel: A Commentary on Revelation*,⁸² further works of refutation will have to deal with Babylon a symbolic title for Jerusalem,⁸³ why the seven last plagues are not final,⁸⁴ why 19:11-16 is not the second coming of Christ to earth,⁸⁵ why the state pictured in 21:9`22:5 is the church age and not the future eternal state,⁸⁶ and the like. This recently revived postmillennial movement is very aggressive and will continue its efforts to win converts from among both premillennialists and amillennialists.

Meeting its challenge will call for patient exegesis of the separate texts, the kind that requires much time. Yet it is vital to spend this time in the text if the truth of the Word of God is to prevail over propagated error. May this be a call to all to handle the Scriptures carefully in the face of this and many other threats that tend to disfigure the face of Christian doctrine here at the end of the twentieth century. Though human efforts are feeble, may God help His servants to do a good job in what He has put them here to do.

⁸¹Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 327-29.

⁸²Cf. *ibid.*, 241 n. 26.

⁸³Cf. Joseph R. Balyeat, *Babylon, The Great City of Revelation* (Sevierville, TN: Onward, 1991) 49-142.

⁸⁴Cf. Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* 383-84

⁸⁵Cf. *ibid.*, 481-89.

⁸⁶Cf. *ibid.*, 535-73.