



Hi! This article is written partly to clarify my own thoughts and partly with the intention of provoking thought in others who may make the effort to read it. I hope you find it stimulating. Please feel free to give me feedback. Email: jthomson1955@aol.com

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Who's Who in Revelation

In recent Revelation studies in church the view was taken that the people of God described in Ch 4-20 is the Christian church. For those brought up with a dispensational understanding of the book this view is probably unusual, and not a little heretical. The following article attempts to persuade that it is the view indicated by the book itself.

The dispensational understanding of Revelation believes that Jesus takes the church to heaven at the beginning of Ch 4 (the rapture) and that the people of God from 4-20 is national Israel and those in the nations who are loyal to her now persecuted by the rest of the world.

This belief is deeply embedded and not an easy one to change. To begin with it requires intellectually a significant perspective shift. This shift is unlikely to take place without a willingness to study the book in some depth and to accept that other views may possibly be right; there is an intellectual barrier to the former and an emotional barrier to the latter. The Christian raised on a dispensationalist view of Revelation has two great fears that make him reluctant to question his belief. Firstly he has a natural horror of the 'great tribulation' with which Ch 4-20 deals and has no desire to think of this as something he may personally experience; non-dispensationalist understanding of the book teaches the church experiences this tribulation. Secondly, he has almost certainly been taught that a 'post-tribulation rapture' view of Revelation is heretical and consequently fears that even examining it is flirting with heresy if not apostasy. It is not easy to convince him that dispensational teaching has the least pedigree historically and that the vast majority of Christians for the vast majority of church history have held a quite different view. In addition, to embrace another view of prophecy is likely to make him *persona non grata* with his fellowship and so socially there is pressure to conform.

Is it worth invading another believer's theological comfort zone and trying to convince him he (speaking generically of course) is mistaken?

I think it is for I am convinced that Revelation has an important message to the church today much of which is lost if a dispensationalist understanding of the book is adopted. This article is written to try and persuade dispensationally inclined fellow Christians that the believers John describes in Ch 4-20 are Christian believers, in fact the church.

Revelation must be understood within the framework of the rest of the Bible.

The dispensational understanding of the Bible rests on a basic premise, namely that God works with two distinct peoples and two distinct programmes: he has an earthly people, Israel, and a heavenly people, the church. This belief profoundly influences the

interpretation of Revelation. It is outside the scope of this article to debate this issue. In line with most commentators I believe that God has but one people and one programme for history. I believe that true believers in ancient Israel (B.C.) and true believers in the professing church (A.D.) belong to the one people of God, Christ's 'one flock' (Jn 10) - John's New Jerusalem, the Bride of Christ in Revelation 20. OT believers are different from the NT church in the sense that they looked forward to the arrival of the Kingdom whereas NT believers by contrast are now experiencing the Kingdom. Here however the distinction ends. In the heavenly kingdom we are all one people - the New Jerusalem. I endeavour to demonstrate this in my article 'Dispensational Difficulties'.

The scope of this article is more modest; it is to examine the internal evidence in Revelation demonstrating that Ch 4-20, when speaking of faithful followers of the Lamb, is describing the church.

Firstly, a negative

The dispensational understanding of Revelation insists that when John in Ch 4:1 is taken up to heaven he acts as a symbol for the 'rapture' of the church. Without wishing to offend, this appears to be a completely gratuitous conclusion. There is no internal evidence that John is a symbol of anything here, and certainly none that he is a symbol of the church. This is a case of allowing theological assumptions to control exegesis; of reading into the text what one wants to be there rather than reading out of the text what actually is there (see 'Dispensational Difficulties'). If the dispensational interpretation of 4:1 is the internal basis in Revelation for thinking that John does not refer to the church from then until at least Ch 21 (with perhaps the exception of references to the 24 elders and the bride) then it is a very tenuous basis indeed.

Of course the evidence is not simply negative. There are overwhelming textual reasons for seeing the believers throughout the book as the church.

Textual support for seeing the church in 4-20

The internal textual evidence can be divided into three parts.

1. An examination of the titles for Christian believers used in parts of the book where all agree it is the church John or Jesus is addressing (Ch 1-3) shows that these titles are the same used of believers in the disputed chapters 4-20.

Servant. In both the introduction and the prologue the Christian believers John addresses are referred to as 'servants' (1:122:6,8). The Christians in the church at Thyatira are called servants (2:20). The New Jerusalem, the bride of Christ (presumably the church) describes believers as servants (22:4). This title of servant is however, regularly used throughout 4-20 to describe those who resist the beast and are martyred. (6:11; 7:4,15; 11:18; 10:7; 19:2,5,10).

Brethren/brothers. This is used in the prologue and epilogue to describe Christian believers (1:9; 22:9); it is used to describe believers in Ch 4-20 (6:11; 12:11; 19:10).

Witness Again used in prologue and chapters 2/3 to describe Christians (1; 22:13; 2:13) and in 4-20 to describe believers (6:9; 11:3).

Saint Describes Christians (2:21; 13:7,10; 8:3,4 19:8) and faithful believers in 4-20 (6:9; 11:18; 13:7; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 18:20).

Prophet. While at points Prophet may refer to OT prophets the title is used primarily to describe prophetic witness in the church, that is, Christian prophets (22:6,8; 2:19; 10:11;) It is again a title given to believers in Ch 4-20 (11:3,6,10,18; 16:6; 18:20,24; 19:10)

Lampstand. This is a metaphor for the churches in 2,3 (Cf. 1:20) and the two witnesses in Ch 11:4.

The expression '**the Word of God and testimony of Jesus**' is a description of Christians in their loyalty in the prologue (1; 2,9) and is used regularly of the faithful in 4-20 (6:9; 12:11,17; 14:12; 20:4).

Overcomer. An important title of the true believer in Revelation is 'overcomer' or 'conqueror'. In each church in Ch 2/3 a section of the letter is addressed to 'he who conquers'. The New Jerusalem is for the overcomer (21:7). This concept of being an overcomer is a key image of the faithful believers in Ch 4-20 (12:11; 15:2)

Christians are described as those '**in white robes made white in the blood of the lamb**' or variants of this phrase (22:14; 3:5; 3:18; 19:8,14). This language is used to describe the believers of the tribulation 4-20. (7:9, 14; 12:11; 16:15)

That the same titles are applied to Christian believers in Ch 1-3,21,22 and tribulation saints in Ch 4-20 is a compelling reason for treating both groups as the same. John gives us no reason to believe he is describing two different people. Had he so intended he surely would have indicated this by using different titles. By using the same titles he makes clear that it is the same group – the church - he is speaking of throughout.

2. Not only does he use the same titles for all believers throughout the book he also uses similar language to describe their experiences.

One theme that recurs in 4-20 is the theme of '**suffering, tribulation and martyrdom**'. (7:14). This is not exclusive to these chapters. John uses the same language of those who are clearly Christian in 1-3. (1:9; 2:9,22). The related theme of '**patient endurance**' describes Christians in 1-3 (1; 9; 2:2,3,19,3:10) and the believers of 4-20 (6:10,11; 13:10; 14:12).

3. Two literary pointers

The Churches - a base point

Any thoughtful reading of the book can scarcely fail to notice a strong literary unity between 2/3 and 4-20. The problems and difficulties the church faces in 2/3 (problems of persecution and apostasy) are precisely the issues that John deals with in symbol form in 4-20. He anticipates that what is already incipiently present in the experience of the church (2,3) will increase in intensity (4-20). The spiritually alert and faithful will resist and overcome these attacks (the overcomer).

The correspondence is obvious: consider the development of tribulation in Smyrna and the great tribulation in Ch 7; False prophecies in 2,3 and the False Prophet in Ch 13; Antipas the faithful witness and martyr and the witness and martyrdom of the faithful in 4-20; Jezebel the prototype of Babylon the whore; Nicolaitans and immorality and those outside the city in Ch 21,22. The list could easily be expanded. There is an exponential progression from 2/3 to 4-20.

The New Jerusalem – a climax

The New Jerusalem is the church, the bride of Christ. In literary terms the description of the New Jerusalem in 21,22 is the climax of the book. It is the hope, which makes all the difficulties of Ch 2-20 bearable. It speaks of perfect security, perfect society, perfect satisfaction and perfect splendour. These perfections are but the counterpart to all that the persecutions the true church has endured at the hand of the beast and all the seductions of Babylon she has resisted. They are the recompense for all she has suffered; her prize for being a faithful bride (19:6-9); the reward for overcoming. Indeed all the promises to the overcomers in 2/3 find their fulfilment in the New Jerusalem. Without the contrasting sufferings of Ch 4-20 the perfections of 21,22 would have no context and so be pastorally and literarily meaningless; they would exist in an historical vacuum. The presence of the New Jerusalem argues persuasively that the saints of the middle section are none other than the church.

Two apparent difficulties

OT language

It is sometimes asserted that the language of chapters 4-20 is not Christian language, it is OT language. This is true. John draws almost all his imagery from OT sources. In fact no NT book refers to or alludes to the OT more often than Revelation. However, this is no proof of some kind of retrogression to OT religion in 4-20. Indeed it is quite the opposite. John draws together the various strands of OT prophecy and reveals how they reach their integrated fulfillment. He demonstrates the unity between OT and NT.

In fact when he describes the seven churches in 2/3 (undeniably Christian territory) he also uses almost totally OT language. When he describes Jesus as the exalted Lord of the church in Ch 1 he again uses OT language. The New Jerusalem in Ch 21,22 is described entirely in terms of OT language and allusion yet all agree this is a description

of the church, the bride of Christ. There is therefore no reason to assume that the concentrated OT language in 4-20 means the writer is speaking of a group other than the church.

Indeed, although the frequency is less, the rest of the NT regularly uses OT imagery to describe the church and her experience (temple; heavenlies; New Jerusalem; husbandry; olive tree; vine; bride; new covenant; Sabbath rest; holiest; seed of Abraham etc. All this supposes that the NT church (the realized Kingdom) is the natural heir to OT promises. (See Dispensational Difficulties).

It is significant however that from time to time John in 4-20 uses explicitly Christian language to describe the suffering church Cf. 14:13. Such explicitly Christian language is not used in 2/3.

Symbolic language

The first thing that strikes the reader of Revelation is the bizarre and seemingly incomprehensible descriptions encountered. These are typical of apocalyptic literature. Revelation is not a straight description of history it is visionary language. John is describing heavenly visions he sees. These visions do not as such describe any historical situation. They are surreal pictures. They contain truth about reality, but that truth, to be related to history as we know it, must be deciphered and decoded.

Modern dispensationalists generally fail to recognise this. To be fair the original architects of dispensationalism (J. N. Darby and William Kelly) did appreciate the nature of apocalyptic literature. They recognised it must be understood symbolically. Modern dispensational writers however treat it as literal. It may, they concede, contain metaphorical language but it is generally to be understood literally. This is a mistake. The book insists on being treated symbolically. It should be treated symbolically unless there is good reason for reading it literally not vice versa. Right at the beginning we are told 'the seven lampstands are seven churches' and 'the seven stars are seven angels'. John is signalling the symbolic use of language. Indeed we are told a symbol can have more than one meaning (17:9).

Jesus is a Lamb and Lion. God sits on a throne surrounded by a sea of glass. Christ returns sitting on a white horse. In Ch 1 he has a sword coming out of his mouth. The beast has multiple heads. Satan is a dragon. Locusts have human faces and the hair of women. All this is symbolic not literal. Babylon is not a literal city that will be built in Iraq in the last days: it is a symbol for humanistic culture built in opposition to God. To first century Christians this culture was materialised in Rome. But it is seen in every city and culture that is idolatrous. It will reach its zenith in the final world society built on hedonistic and materialistic idolatrous values. Similarly 'the New Jerusalem' is not a literal city. It is certainly not literal Jerusalem. It is also called the bride of Christ. How can it be a bride and a city? Only by recognising, both are images; they are symbols to describe the heavenly glories and joys of the church.

The symbolism of Babylon and Jerusalem finds its roots in the OT and it is there the reader of Revelation must go to fill out the significance of the imagery as he must do with much of the imagery used in the book. Interestingly the picture of the New Jerusalem in Revelation draws heavily from Ezekiel's vision of the New Temple. Yet in John's Jerusalem there is no temple. The reason being that the city is itself a temple. It is a temple-city. John is reshaping Ezekiel's vision. He is not contradicting it. Ezekiel was describing for the people of his day, in language they could understand, the indescribable - John is shedding more light on that final glorious reality. He can do so through what the NT has revealed (Christ is the temple and the church is God's temple) but he too is describing the indescribable. To do this symbols are all that is open to him.

The vision of 144,000 from the tribes of Israel is not to be understood literally any more than any of the other visionary symbols. Israel here is a code word for the church. The highly stylised description makes this plain. The number 144,000 like most numbers in Revelation is symbolic. It is a multiple of 12 suggesting fulness and completion. The same multiples are used in the New Jerusalem description in Ch 21. There again they are symbolic numbers not literal. In fact the idea of a numbered people is used to teach the theological truth that the church is a people at war. Israel was numbered when she went into battle. (Cf. Ch 14). The descriptions in Revelation therefore have less to do with history, geography, and architecture than they have to do with theology. They describe in pictures profound theological truths, the kind of truths that the rest of the NT develops in more prosaic language.

Conclusion

These are some of the reasons why we are persuaded that the book of Revelation describes throughout the experience of the church. I do not expect everyone to be instantly persuaded, I certainly don't consider seeing things as I do as a mark of orthodoxy. All I hope to do is generate some further thought and study of this amazing book; if this article achieves this then it will have been worthwhile.