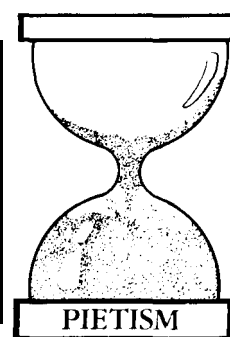


# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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## BEFORE DISPENSATIONALISM FELL

### A Response to Dr. Robert L. Thomas (Part 1)

by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., Th. D.

#### The Dispensational "WORLD"view

On previous occasions I have mentioned the desperation moves of Classic Dispensationalists. The writings of Progressive Dispensationalists are pummeling the WORLD (Walvoord, Ryrie, Lindsey, Dyer) of Classic Dispensationalism like the wayward Shoemaker-Levy Comet recently battered Jupiter. (Both events are exciting to watch.) Though emitting similar levels of hot gases, I am persuaded the bigger hole will be left in the Classic Dispensational WORLD than on Jupiter,

Consequently, the Pre-Trib Study Group has been formed. It holds annual meetings in an attempt to regroup and to defend the house of Classic Dispensationalism. These old-timey dispensationalists are desperately attempting to beat the wolves from both their front door (Reconstructionists) and their back door (Progressive Dispensationalists). (Technically the analogy is confusing. Reconstructionists are sheep in wolves clothing.) The house that Darby and Scofield built is becoming a low rent district. The wolves are huffing and puffing and blowing the house down.

Now, to my point. Dr. Robert L. Thomas is a dispensationalist professor at John MacArthur's dispensationalist Master's Seminary. Thomas has also written a commentary on Revelation for Moody Press entitled Revelation 1-7: *An Exegetical Commentary*. From what I understand it is not a Lindsey or LaHaye type of work, with a connect-the-dots approach to newspaper reading/biblical exposition. Apparently it is a competent, scholarly contribution to the field of Revelation studies. I have tried to get a copy of the book at the local Christian bookstores and by writing Dr. Thomas, but to no avail. I assume it is out of print.

Nevertheless, I have a friend named Tommy Ice (1 kid you not: Tommy and I are friends!) who sent me a copy of a paper Dr. Thomas presented as a front door defense of Classic Dispensationalism. The paper is entitled "An Assessment of Kenneth L. Gentry's Internal Evidence for Dating Revelation" (hereinafter "RLT," for Robert L. Thomas). As you may surmise from its title, I was immensely interested in receiving a copy of the lecture. The paper was delivered to the December 1993 meeting of the Pre-Trib Study Group. In this and perhaps another issue or two, I will be responding to some of Thomas' arguments. He has some careful arguments that deserve a careful response. As Meleis Gloriosus says in "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to a Forum": "Even I'm impressed."

Due to time pressures now, I cannot respond in this series in the depth that I would like. I hope to do so later. But I will at least acquaint my reader with some objections to my approach to the dating of Revelation, and provide a tentative response. I will do so via a seriatim survey of this paper. All page references will be to the paper as sent to me by Tommy Ice,

In this article I will get two introductory matters out of the way.

#### Some Things are Better Left Unsaid

His first sentence was well-presented and without controversy. I marvelled at its structure and delighted in its accuracy. Unlike Hal Lindsey who constantly mangled Rushdoony's name, calling him John Rousas Rushdoony (*The Road to Holocaust*), Thomas had my name nicely spelled and in order. Neither did he assign me any degrees I do not have, or place me at institutions that do not exist, or have me reading particular scholarly authors as a child, as House and Ice did with North, DeMar, and Bahnsen in their book (*Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?*). Unlike Hunt who thinks we have dismissed heaven from our theology (*Whatever Happened to Heaven*), Thomas succeeds in presenting my major focus accurately: "Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., makes evidence derived from exegetical data of the Apocalypse his major focus in building a case for dating Revelation prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70" (RLT, 1). I read all the way through this first sentence and was satisfied I was not reading Hal Lindsey (I saw no Elmer's Glue spots surrounding newspaper clippings.)

It was not until I got to his second sentence that I felt any disappointment in his presentation (although his paper is an excellent critique deserving of a careful response). Thomas writes: "Even though acknowledging that other advocates of either a Neronian and Domitianic date for Revelation's composition find no direct evidence within the book for assigning a date, [Gentry] proceeds to find 'inherently suggestive and positively compelling historical time-frame indicators in Revelation'" (RLT, 1).

Even though formally true, that which he does not say is significant. Especially given his audience: the Pre-Trib Study Group. They are accustomed to reading headlines from the newspapers and writing strange books as a result. Thus, Dr. Thomas should have clarified this statement. To paraphrase Doc Holliday in "Tombstone" you might be thinking: "Well, Ken, what on earth do you mean?"

Thomas' statement takes a common Classic Dispensational approach: it *suggests* (it does not demand) that I am a voice crying alone in the wilderness. The impression his statement leaves is that despite my confessing that (all? most?) "other" early date advocates "find no direct evidence within the book for assigning a date," I charge on ahead with my argument. It would seem I am all alone with my "peculiar interpretations" in Revelation (cf. RLT, 10).

When I looked up the page reference cited from *Before Jerusalem Fell* (hereinafter BJJF), an interesting situation arose.

The sentence of mine that he partially quotes reads: "Thus, despite Kiddie, Guthrie and others of the late date school, and those such as Hort of the early date school, there do seem to be both inherently suggestive and positively compelling historical time-frame indicators in Revelation."

Notice that in the very sentence cited I name only Hort as an early date advocate who discounts specific internal indicators. Of course, I speak in the plural: '(those such as Hort.)' I try to be careful not to paint a false picture, If I only mentioned Hort and lacked any sort of plural possibility, then some keen critic would point out additional early date advocates agreeing with Hort. I would then be soundly flogged in print as one careless with the sources; or worse yet, as a deliberate deceiver, But there is more.

In the next few sentences I *specifically align myself with noteworthy early date advocates on the matter*, I simply am not alone in this matter, as one might suppose from Thomas' statement. Let me begin quoting my very next sentence and those that follow

"It is remarkable that whereas Kiddie, for instance, may absolutely deny the presence of internal indications, others no less scholarly - may just as strongly assert the contrary. The internal historical evidences compel the noted F. W. Farrar to be 'all but certain' as to the date of the book. [Moses] Stuart feels the same certainty of conviction when he writes: 'If there be anything certain in the principles of hermeneutics, it is certain that they decide in favour of a reference to Judea and its capital in Rev. vi-xi. The very fact, moreover, that the destruction of Jerusalem (chap. xi) is depicted in such outlines and mere sketches, shows that it was then *future*, when the book was written. It is out of all question, except by mere violence, to give a different interpretation to this part of the Apocalypse.'

"[James] Macdonald argues that 'it will be found that no book of the New Testament more abounds in passages which clearly have respect to the time when it was written.' Historian [George] Edmundson writes that 'the Apocalypse is full of references to historical events of which the author had quite recently been himself an eyewitness at Rome, or which were fresh in the memories of the Roman Christians with whom he had been associating.' He chooses a pre-A.D. 70 date and states dogmatically that "the witness of the contents of the book itself, as will be shown, amply justifies such an assertion." Torrey vigorously asserts not only the clear existence, but also the weightiness, of the internal evidence for determining Revelation's date: 'The positive indications of an early date are numerous, definite, and all pointing to the same time.' In Revelation are 'plain and very definite historical allusions'" (BJF, 119, emphasis added).

I certainly hope that I have my own contributions to make in Revelation studies, but I do stand on the shoulders of others. And not simply other Reconstructionists. This is an issue that transcends Ken Gentry, and Reconstructionism.

The problem with Thomas' introduction is akin to the response an early date advocate gets in general discussions: "Yeah. But isn't modern scholarship unanimous against the early date view?" The answer is resolutely, "No!" Their numbers pre-dominate, but ours form a significant minority.

And ours are growing and gaining a hearing.

### The Question of Method

Thomas is concerned about my "general methodology" which "deserves attention." He argues that my "first tactic is to create an environment of what may be called 'virtual reality.'" "I call Gentry's use of it an experience in 'back-to-the-future' manipulation." My approach will "render many incapable of distinguishing it from reality itself"(RLT, 1).

What is this manipulative tactic? How does it function as a literary lobotomy?

According to Thomas: Gentry "does this by stating his correct view first, then often following it up with a long list of writers to support that view. 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 has experienced what he is intended to experience by way of positive evidence does the author turn to evaluate some of the weaknesses of that viewpoint. By this time, the merits of other viewpoints have become lost in the shuffle" (RLT, 1).

I would like to make two comments in defense of my method: First, this was my doctoral dissertation (though with some smoothing out for more popular consumption). I was writing primarily to an "audience" of readers who knew the issues.

Second, I was attempting to "be up front" by letting the reader know where I was headed with my argument, By laying out my position first rather than springing it later, I was being honest. I was not creating the "virtual reality" of a supposed wrestling through the issues *while* the reader watched. I already had my research done. The reader, I would think, should appreciate my being above board. This is a common enough scholarly practice. Many dispensational works, even, state their position and then defend it.

Also, as I develop my case with the full knowledge of my reader he could note objections *as he read through my material the first time*. He did not have to get 300 pages into it, thump his head, and utter, "So that's what he is up to! Now I will have to go back and re-read his argument so that I can critique it!" The reader knows exactly what I am doing early on (and in a long-standing debate). I was employing a presuppositional approach, setting the evidence in array for the reader's informed analysis.

### Conclusion

I do hope to be able to spend an article or two more on this important matter of conflict between Classic Dispensationalism and Reconstructionism. Thomas has an excellent critique of my book, a critique my readers should be interested in and that deserves a response. See you next month!

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'I have the following Revelation studies available from me at 46 Main Street, Conestee, SC 29636: Set #3, "Interpreting Revelation," 5 tapes, \$23. Set #4, "Seminar Survey of Revelation," 4 tapes, \$20; seminar notebook, \$2. Set #11, "Postmillennialism and Preterism," 4 tapes, \$20. Set #36, "Revelation and Eschatology," 1 tape, \$5. Paper: "Book of Revelation and Eschatology," #3.

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