

Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"

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THE GENTRY HERMENEUTIC

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

This is my third installment in response to the excellent critical analysis of my book *Before Jerusalem Fell* (hereinafter BJJF) by Master's Seminary professor Robert L. Thomas. His non-Lindseyish (i.e., careful and insightful) critique is entitled: "An Assessment of Kenneth L. Gentry's Internal Evidence for Dating Revelation" (presented December, 1993, to the Pre-Trib Study Group) (hereinafter: RLT).

I resume my response where I left off in the October newsletter.

The Old Hermeneutics Ploy

Thomas' second major section in his critique is entitled "Hermeneutical Pattern." He opens this section with these words: "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" (RLT, 2). Below, I will cite his objections and give brief responses to each, I regret that a lack of space prevents a full response,

Symbolic v. Figurative Numbers

Thomas complains: Gentry "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" (RLT, 2).

Thomas is correct as to my understanding of the general use of numbers in Revelation. But please note that I *explain why* I believe that generally large numbers are symbolic and smaller numbers literal. I show that the *seven* churches (Rev. 1-3) are specifically named and add up to exactly seven historical churches. I note that Rome is literally on *seven* hills. These small numbers seem indisputably literal,

But when one comes to large *perfectly rounded and cubed* numbers, there is every reason to believe that a symbolic function might be necessary. The number 144,000 in Revelation 7 is derived by drawing *exactly* 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes. The numbers are generated by cubing ten (the number of quantitative perfection) to become 1000 and then multiplying that by the number of the tribes of Israel (which are literally *twelve* tribes). This maneuver is so obviously mathematically produced, so obviously unnatural as to demand numeric symbolism.

The time frame of 1000 years in Revelation 20 is also generated by cubing ten. And we know that Scripture *definitely* uses the cube of ten (1 000) as a non-literal device (e.g., Deut. 7:9; 32:30; Psalms 50:10; 84:10; 105:8). Why not here in this

highly figurative book?

Revelation defies hard and fast, global principles. In Revelation 13, the beast has seven heads. In Revelation 17:11 the eighth head *is* the beast! Examples could be multiplied.

Interestingly, Alan Johnson, a dispensationalist commentator on Revelation, notes that there were literally seven churches addressed, but when he gets to the 144,000 he shifts from literalism to figurativism: "By 144,000 he signifies the sealing of *all* or the *total* number of God's servants who will face the Great Tribulation."¹ Go get him, Dr. Thomas! Thus, I am not alone in wrestling with the difference between the big numbers and the small numbers. But I do *explain* my general principle; I do not just leap back and forth with no word of explanation.

Kings and Kingdoms

Thomas: Gentry "rejects the equation of 'kings= kingdoms' in 17:10, 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" (RLT, 2; citing BJJF, 163-64, 310-316).

I do not believe Thomas has properly understood me here. My summary statement reads: "There is a very important sense in which the revival of the Empire under Vespasian, was a revival under 'an eighth,' who is 'of the seven.' It is the same Roman Empire that is brought to life from the death of Civil War" (BJJF, 316).

My point is: The beast/empire "dies" when its sixth head receives a mortal wound; the beast/empire "revives" when its "eighth" head gives it life. I am not saying the eighth head is a *kingdom*, but is the ruler that gives life to the kingdom. Naturally when a head dies (sc. king, ruler), the body dies (sc. kingdom, empire). But the head is not the body.

The 144,000 Revisited

Thomas: "When discussing the 144,000, this author is uncertain at one point whether they represent the saved of Jewish lineage or the church as a whole [BJJF, 223-24]. Yet just ten pages later they are definitely Christians of Jewish extraction . . . [BJJF, 233]" (RLT, 2).

Having re-read my statements on pages 223-24, I can see why Thomas might be confused. But my actual position is consistent throughout BJJF and the book of Revelation: *the 144,000 represent saved Jews*.

I write of the era of John's writing Revelation 7: "This must be an early stage of Christian development when Christianity still understood and presented itself as true Judaism.,,,

Christians are still designated as the true Jews, the fullness of the Twelve Tribes of Israel" (BJF, 223). By these statements I did not intend to include non-Jewish Christians, although obviously Gentiles were increasingly flowing into Christendom, I was simply pointing out that in Christianity's earliest days (pre-A.D. 70) it thought of itself in terms of its Jewish heritage.

The fact is the 144,000 (= Jewish Christians in Israel) are presented as a perfect number (of Jews). This seems to me to indicate that this perfect number of Jews teaches that Christianity is supplanting old Israel and is, in fact, the True Israel, which is opposed by the apostate Israel of Judaism. After the fall of Israel, Christians (Jews or otherwise) would be less inclined to think of their new religious faith as a "new Israel," but would see it as a distinct, new religion that stands on its own two feet,

The Tribulation

Thomas does score on his next complaint - at least on one element in it. He writes: "The forty-two months of 11:2 is the period of the Roman siege of Jerusalem from Spring 67 till September 70, according to Gentry. A bit earlier [Gentry] 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. 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. 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, so John predicted a forty-two month period of persecution (1:3:5) that was already partially past when he wrote. This is indeed a puzzling picture" (RLT, 3).

Out of the several shots Thomas here fires at my position, only one does score. But it is an important one. My mind made a mental slip on the basis of similar terminology; I equated two facts on the basis of similarity of terminology.

In my understanding of Revelation, Revelation 1:9 *cannot* refer to "the Great Tribulation" of Revelation 7:14. John is banished to Patmos by Nero under the Neronic Persecution of Christians (Revelation 13); He is not banished during God's judgment on Israel in the Jewish War (Rev. 6ff). The Neronic Persecution begins before the Jewish War and ends shortly after the Jewish War begins, as the dates given above by Thomas correctly note,

In one place in BJF (p. 234; and in *The Beast of Revelation*, p. 150) I erroneously equate "the tribulation" of Revelation 1:9 with "the Great Tribulation" of Revelation 7:14 (and Matthew 24:21). This is an outright error. The Great Tribulation is upon the Jews and is "the Day of the Lord" against them (cf. Acts 2:16-20; Rev. 6:16-17). The Neronic Persecution is a time of "great trouble," a "tribulation" for the Christians. Elsewhere in BJF my mention of Revelation 1:9 keeps the two distinct (pp. 42, 139, 143, 150, 201, 240).

The Neronic persecution is "tribulation"; the Jewish War is "the Great Tribulation." The two "tribulations" have different foci (Christians v. Jews) and purposes (divine testing v. divine wrath) and are at different times (A.D. 64-68 v. A.D. 67-70) and places (Rome focus but empire wide v. Jerusalem focus but larger reverberations),

But what of his other charges? Though understandable, given his dispensational framework, they do not score. I do hold that the Neronic Persecution consumed the same amount of time as the Jewish War: three-and-one-half years. This does not necessitate that they are the *same event*. After all, Christ's ministry on earth also covered the same amount of time (Luke 13:6-9). But it is not to be *identified with* that other time frame. Elijah's withholding rain from Israel lasted the same amount of time (James 5:17), but is not the same time frame. Similarity does not demand identity. Do we follow the liberal in assuming Christ's cleansing of the temple at the beginning of His ministry (Jn. 2) is really the same event presented as a cleansing at the end of His ministry (Mt. 21)? They are remarkably similar! But they are not identical.

Thomas wrongly makes reference to Revelation 13:5-7 as if it contains the words "the great tribulation" (he puts these words in quote marks). His dispensationalism requires that Revelation 13 make reference to the Great Tribulation; the text is silent in that regard. He has erroneously read "the great tribulation" into Revelation 13. This could be a mental slip on his part.

Thomas mistakenly charges that I locate the Neronic Persecution "in the Roman province of Asia." I do not limit it to the province of Asia. I argue that it begins in and focuses on Rome (as I clearly indicate), but it also spills over into the wider Roman empire, including the province of Asia.

Thomas alleges pandemonium in my dealing with the two, three and one half year periods in Revelation (Rev. 11:2-3; 13:5). But the separating of these two periods is not a matter of simple theological necessity, it is *contextually justified* (after all, they do not sit side-by-side within a couple of verses of each other).

Furthermore, such a distinction is argued by other scholars of much greater note than me. For example, see Moses Stuart in his famous *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (New York: Allen, Merrill, Wardwell, 1845), vol. 2, pages 218-219; 279-280.

Thomas asks: "So which is it? Is John writing during 'the great tribulation' of 64-68 or the one of 67-70?" I respond: John is writing of both events (though understanding the correction of my misapplication of the "Great Tribulation" to Rev. 1:9),

Thomas' puzzlement that John "predicted a forty-two month period of persecution (13:5) that was already partially passed when he wrote" does not have to be a "puzzling picture." The Neronic Persecution had already begun: this is demanded by the fact that John writes under imperial banishment. The prophetic import of the point is at least two fold: (1) It provides a theological explanation of what is happening (for the benefit of beleaguered Christians), And (2) it provides them comfort in knowing that it will end after only three-and-one-half years.

Now look at this: I'm out of room! See you next month! But before I go: I am doing research for another postmillennial project. Do any of you have any historical references to postmillennialism in antiquity that I might not be aware of? If so, I would appreciate your sending them to me at the address following: Ken Gentry, 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636, Thanks. And happy trails to you!

¹ Alan F. Johnson, *Revelation in the Bible Study Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 88; cp. 38 for the seven churches,