How should the Apocalypse be interpreted? (3)

Tony Benson

IN THE PREVIOUS two articles, reasons were given for interpreting the Apocalypse on Continuous-Historic lines, that is, as progressively fulfilled down the centuries from the first century until today and beyond. In this article we consider reasons advanced against fulfilling it in this way and for fulfilling it in other ways, in particular as a prophecy to be fulfilled during the time just before Christ returns.

Interpretation of symbols

There can be no doubt that the Apocalypse contains much symbolic language and that this symbolic language often has many links with other scripture, especially the Old Testament. It is sometimes said today that the Historic interpretation does not take sufficient account of these links, and that they strongly indicate that the fulfilment of the prophecy is in the days of Christ’s return. It is further argued by some that the links with the Old Testament indicate that the Apocalypse applies to the nation of Israel and not to the Gentile world.

Regarding the view that interpreters of the Apocalypse on Histonic lines do not take sufficient account of links with other scriptures, this may be true at times, but is often not justified. The prophecy of the sixth seal in Revelation 6:12-17 is particularly rich in quotations and allusions to earlier scripture. Far from neglecting this, Brother Thomas spends some fourteen pages discussing it in *Eureka*.

But do these references to earlier scripture indicate that the sixth seal is to be fulfilled at the time of Christ’s return? By no means. Isaiah 13:10 has similar language about the fall of Babylon to the Medes (see verses 17,19), and Ezekiel 32:7,8 about the fall of Egypt to Babylon (verse 11), both of which occurred well before the Apocalypse was given. And, on the basis of these two chapters, neither does the language apply exclusively to Israel, though undoubtedly such language is often applied to times when judgements come upon Israel.

The symbolic language about earthquakes and falling heavenly bodies in Revelation 6:12-17 must be interpreted in a way consistent with how such language is used elsewhere in Scripture. It is the language of overthrow and change, used of the overthrow of Gentile kingdoms as well as of Israel, and of past overthrow as well as the one to take place at Christ’s return. Under the usual Historic interpretation, the sixth seal is considered to have been fulfilled by the fall of paganism in the time of the Emperor Constantine the Great, 300 years after the time of Christ. This interpretation is entirely consistent with the way the symbolic language of the sixth seal is used elsewhere in Scripture.

A further point which should be borne in mind in considering the many links with other scripture to be found in the Apocalypse is that the New Testament changes the way the symbolic language of the Old Testament is used; the saints become the new Israel of God while the nation is in exile. For example, according to the Historic fulfilment, the woman of chapters 12 and 17 symbolises the church, in the latter chapter thoroughly apostate. In the Old Testament Israel is sometimes symbolised by a woman, but in the New Testament the figure becomes transferred to the ecclesia (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-33). The early chapters of the Apocalypse are addressed to the ecclesia, or specific ecclesias, and therefore the figure of the woman should be applied in a way consistent with this, the harlot of chapter 17 being the end result of the trend to apostasy warned against in chapters 2 and 3.

It is sometimes said that, if we allow ‘Scripture to interpret Scripture’, the meaning of the...
Apocalypse will become plain, and it will not be the Historic interpretation. Letting Scripture interpret Scripture is clearly the right thing to do, but those who have abandoned the Historic method have by no means arrived at a common conclusion. The sixth seal has been interpreted as applying to the overthrow of Israel and to the overthrow of all Gentile kingdoms, to the distant past (A.D. 70) and to things yet future to us. The sea beast of chapter 13 has been variously applied to a power oppressing the whole world, to the Arabs oppressing Israel and to Israel oppressing the Arabs. Rejecters of the Historical interpretation have interpreted the book in widely different ways; there is no simple straightforward interpretation of the book which has been discovered by those who reject the Historic interpretation.

Those who claim that the language of the sixth seal is such as to indicate that the fulfilment will be seen in the overthrow of Gentile kingdoms when Christ returns have a further difficulty. As shown in the previous article, it is not until the sixth vial of Revelation 16 that we have a clear message of warning to believers of Christ’s imminent return, and mainly literal language that links the sixth vial to Old Testament prophecies of the time of the end. Revelation 6 is much too early in the book for a prophecy of the overthrow of the kingdom of men at Christ’s return.

Why so much history?
A major reason why the Historic interpretation of Revelation is now opposed by some is the fact that of necessity a great deal of history is involved in presenting the interpretation. Surely, it is argued, God never intended us to need to know so much history to understand His Word, we should be able to understand it without resorting to the history books. Although apparently convincing, when carefully considered this argument is not a valid one; we clearly do need to know history if we are to understand Bible prophecy.

There is much prophecy to be found in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. Perhaps the strongest argument we have for convincing unbelievers that the Bible is indeed what it claims to be, the Word of God, is fulfilled prophecy. This is only the case, however, if we can show that Bible prophecy is fulfilled by events outside the Bible. But we can only do this if we know what happened in history. We need to know something about the four great empires represented by the metals of the image which Nebuchadnezzar saw before we can show how remarkably Daniel 2 was fulfilled; we need to know something of the history of the Jews—their exile and their restoration—in order to show people how remarkably Bible prophecy about the Jews has been fulfilled. We do need to know some history in order to be able to understand Bible prophecy, and it is not therefore a valid objection to the Historical interpretation of Revelation that a knowledge of history is required to understand it.

There is an additional point to be made here. Under the Futurist method of interpreting Revelation, by definition the fulfilment has yet to occur. Assuming for the moment that this is the correct way to interpret the book, when the fulfilment does start to occur it will be necessary to know what is happening in the world in order to be able to recognise the fulfilment, and today’s current affairs are tomorrow’s history. There is no difference in principle between using knowledge of current affairs gained from the media to interpret prophecy and using knowledge of history from books to interpret prophecy.

The problem is, of course, that it is much easier to pick up what is going on in the world today and apply it to Bible prophecy than it is to find out what went on in history and apply it to Bible prophecy. However, this is not an argument for saying that the Historic interpretation is wrong. There is nothing within the Apocalypse to indicate that the fulfilment would be in a short period at the time of Christ’s return. On the contrary, as pointed out in the first article, in accordance with Old Testament precedent, we should expect there to be prophecy covering the time from the first century to the return of Christ, and the natural understanding of the opening of the prophecy is that this is the case. On the assumption that there have been believers all down the ages, there will always have been some for whom some part of the prophecy would have been fulfilled in events current or recent to their own times.

In earlier times within our community, brethren and sisters, though less well-educated, seemed to have no difficulty with the idea of needing to know history to understand prophecy, yet today we have difficulty with it. I suspect the problem, partly at least, lies in what is now taught by way of history. At one time the idea was to teach in basic outline the major events which happened in the past, the rise and fall of
nations, battles and revolutions. Now the emphasis is on teaching social history, what life was like in a medieval village or how black slaves in America slowly obtained freedom and civil rights, for example. This is probably more interesting to most children, but it does not provide a framework against which to understand Bible prophecy, hence the reaction against the Historical interpretation.

Bible prophecy and Israel

Another argument used against the Historic interpretation of Revelation is that no place is found for Israel, yet the Bible is centred on Israel. (This argument also, of course, applies to some extent against those Futurist interpretations which give the book a worldwide fulfilment, although in practice such interpretations always find a prominent place for Israel for the simple reason that Israel is now such a presence in the world.) This argument has its appeal, for the Hope of Israel has always been one of our prominent and distinctive doctrines, and matters to do with the Jews, and more recently the State of Israel, have always been of great interest to us.

To some extent this argument has been addressed above in dealing with the interpretation of symbols, but needs to be extended to provide a full answer. Most Old Testament prophecy is about Israel for the simple reason that the Old Testament is centred upon the nation of Israel. Even then, however, we do get quite a lot of prophecy about the other nations of the Middle East which had an effect on Israel. Then, when Israel are out of the land, in exile in Babylon, the prophet Daniel, with them in Babylon, gave prophecies which are to do with the nations at large, with little, in some cases no, reference to things to do with Israel. This was relevant to their needs; from now on there were to be more Jews living outside the land than in the land.

When we come to the New Testament we have firstly the ministry of Jesus to the Jews, and when he gets to the end of his ministry, not surprisingly, he prophesies in the Mount Olivet Prophecy of the future of Israel. But by and large the Jews rejected the gospel, which was then preached throughout the Roman Empire, with the majority who accepted it being Gentiles. What Jesus prophesied concerning the fate of the Jews came to pass, and the process of their scattering into all nations for a long exile began. Jewish believers seem to largely disappear from the ecclesias, and the remnant of the Jewish ecclesia in Palestine separated itself and died out.

When the apostles came to the end of their task to spread the gospel throughout the Roman world, as foretold in Matthew 24:14 and confirmed in Colossians 1:23, to whom would we expect further prophecies to be given? Not to the Jews, who did not acknowledge the authority of the apostles, nor the position of Jesus as the Messiah, but to the ecclesia, increasingly made up of Gentiles. And so it was to a group of ecclesias in Asia Minor, estranged from the Jews (Rev. 2:9; 3:9), that the new revelation, the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ, was given.

But what was the subject of this new prophecy? Was it the coming judgements of A.D. 70? This supposes that the prophecy was given some time before A.D. 70, a much disputed point, and hardly likely, given the very different state of the Ephesian ecclesia at the time that the prophecy was given to that depicted in Paul’s letters to Timothy, written within six years of A.D. 70. Moreover, if it is a prophecy of Jewish matters, then where are the prophecies within the book of the long exile of the Jews and of their return after many hundreds of years?

Alternatively, is it a prophecy solely about what would befall the Jews in the last days? We must then ask what was the point of giving it to those who were not Jews and lived far from the land in space and time? Such would not have been something that met their needs then, nor would it have been related to their own situation. And where is the indication that it would not begin to be fulfilled until about 2,000 years later? It makes far more sense to accept that the prophecy is about the saints, largely Gentiles, and until very recent times largely to be found in the area then occupied by the Roman Empire. It was given to amplify the fairly brief outline of events to come given in Daniel, bridging the gap until Old Testament prophecy about the Jews in the last days began to be fulfilled, and also, in its later parts, prophesying the events of the time of the end from the viewpoint of believers in the Gentile world, and thus providing additional material to that found in the Old Testament.

Is it a dual-fulfilment prophecy?

It is sometimes suggested that the Apocalypse can be applied in more than one way, that the Historic fulfilment is valid, but that there is a further fulfilment in the last days. This idea is an attractive way out of the dilemma of deciding
what it applies to, but has a major difficulty attached to it which rules it out. Under the Historic interpretation the fulfilment eventually reaches the return of Christ, the establishment of the Kingdom and beyond. This cannot be fulfilled twice. There can therefore be no dual fulfilment of all the prophecy, only of part of it. At two points at least (since, as previously explained, there are two sequences in the prophecy, 6:1–11:18 and 11:19 onwards) the prophecy must cease to be dual fulfilment and become single fulfilment. There can be no dual fulfilment of continuous prophecies like those in Daniel and Revelation which run forward to the return of Christ and beyond.

(To be concluded)

The prophecy of Obadiah—about to be fulfilled

Trevor Radbourne

Obadiah is a prophecy of two halves. The first is a prophecy of Edom’s downfall. The second is a prophecy of the conquest by Israel of a greatly extended territory prior to and at the establishment of the Kingdom of God, when the prophecy of judgement on Edom widens into a judgement involving all nations.

Date
The book, I believe, was written about 605 to 600 B.C., slightly earlier than the date most commentators state. My reasons are as follows:

1 There are similarities between Obadiah vv. 1-9 and Jeremiah 49:7-22, where Jeremiah alludes to no less than eight of the verses in Obadiah. However, he does this in a scattered manner, interspersing them with his own material. This suggests that Jeremiah was quoting from an existing prophecy rather than vice versa. In this case Obadiah was not only a contemporary of Jeremiah, but his prophecy was slightly in advance of the date when Jeremiah 49 was written.

2 The prophecy is in fact warning Edom about its attitude to the conquest of Judah and Jerusalem by Babylon. It is true that the AV renders verses 11-13 in the past tense; for example, “thou shouldest not have looked”, and “neither shouldest thou have rejoiced”. However, commentators consider such renderings to be mistranslations, with the correct translation being “do not”. The RV, for example, translates the phrases as imperatives throughout, such as “look not thou”, “rejoice not”, and “neither speak proudly”.

This clearly indicates warning about future actions rather than reproof for past ones.

3 There is an absence of any allusion to Nebuchadnezzar’s conquest or the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. It is inconceivable that these would not have been mentioned if they had already occurred.

4 Most prophets give a short-term prophecy that would indicate to the hearers (particularly the priests, whose role it was to confirm their status as prophets) when it came true that they were indeed prophets of God. They would also give, of course, a prophecy with a longer-term fulfilment, often about the day of the Lord and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. So the message of Obadiah was initially directed to Edom, prior to the invasion by Nebuchadnezzar of Judah and Jerusalem, warning them not to gloat over the destruction of Judah, and warning them of similar and worse treatment if they did.

The reason for the book
Obadiah wrote this prophecy at God’s behest against Edom because of the long history of friction between the two nations. The nation of Edom was, of course, descended from Esau, who, having driven out the original Horites, occupied the land of Edom, or Mount Seir, at the time of the return of Jacob from Mesopotamia. Mount Seir was accordingly called the Mount of Esau. Esau and Seir appropriately both mean ‘hairy’ or ‘rough’, see Genesis 25:25.

Later, friction arose when the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land sought permission to pass through Edomite territory and this was re...