

Johannine Studies

Lecture 12 Study Notes – April 22, 2008

1. History of Interpretation – The history of interpretation of the book of Revelation goes back as far as Old Testament prophecy itself. As we have seen, Jewish apocalyptic literature and later on Christian apocalyptic literature have emerged from the earlier prophetic tradition. However, in prophetic literature the focus is on the people's transgressions and foretelling the Lord's renewed favor if they repented and further woes and problems if they did not.
2. The prophets in general saw the struggle between good and evil as an individual and corporate matter; the apocalyptic writers saw it in cosmic terms. The prophetic literature would spell out in no uncertain terms what the problem was and how God was going to deal with it. Apocalyptic literature was born of crisis but the problem, pathway and sometimes even the outcome of the upheaval would be hidden from those not in the know.
3. Therefore, the word apocalypse itself means "an unveiling of that which is hidden." Unfortunately for the readers of the previous generations, there has not always been a complete unveiling that has led to an accurate and complete understanding of the literature. This less than complete unveiling has led to a long diverse history of interpretation which we can only give a tip of the hat to.
4. The eschatological hopes of the church have always been, and will continue to be, one of the core concerns of the Christian faith. Paul was convinced that Jesus would come for the second time before the first generation of believers died (1 Thess. 4: 17; 1 Cor. 15: 51-52). Peter did his best to encourage his listeners who evidently were being laughed and scoffed at because Jesus had not already come (2 Peter 3). But the hope that Jesus would come soon did not and has not died with the passing of first and second generation Christians.
5. From the study of history, we learn that around 170 CE an individual named Montanus proclaimed himself the Holy Spirit incarnate and said that the Last Judgment was at hand, and asserted that the "New Jerusalem" that John prophesied about would soon descend in Phrygia (Asia Minor close to Ephesus and Pergam).
6. Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon, wrote in the late second century a book called "Against Heresies" which concluded with a survey of so-called Christian apocalypses and his own prophetic timetable in which he said just like there were six days of creation and a day of rest, history would extend itself six thousand years, ending with Christ's return and the millennium, the holy seventh day. So the belief in a millennium rein was coming to the forefront as early as late second century. It is interesting that much of what we believe and understand about the Second Coming of Jesus is built around "the millennium" which is only mentioned in Revelation 20.
7. Victorinus, the late third century Bishop of Pettau (present day Austria) was a confirmed millennialist. He wrote the earliest surviving commentary on the Book of Revelation that we have (resource: *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* by Paul Boyer page 47).
8. However, like now millennialism had its critics. Origen (writing around 185 -254 C.E) interpreted the prophecies allegorically saying that the Antichrist was symbolic of evil, the thousand year reign described a spiritual reality achieved in the souls of individual believers (Boyer, page 47).

9. As Christianity established itself in the Roman Empire, the literal strand of millennialism faded. After all an embattled Christian faith once sustained by its apocalyptic hope became the religious faith of record in the Roman Empire with Constantine.
10. Around the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century, a preeminent theologian of the early church by the name of Augustine came to the forefront and became arguably the most influential theologian in the history of the church—both present and future. He rejected the literal interpretation of his day as being “coarse sensuality” and argued that one should read biblical apocalyptic literature allegorically like Origen had centuries before. He believed that Revelation was a kind of allegory of Christian life: Satan was bound whenever one turned to God; the New Jerusalem came down whenever one received God’s grace. According to David Barr, Augustine maintained a part of material reading: he saw the millennium as an actual period of a thousand years between the first and second coming of Christ. Thus the end would come around year 1000. He could say that because the reign of Christ and binding of Satan was occurring in each believers heart (*Reading the Book of Revelation* by David Barr page 3). When the end did not come a 1000 BC, the established reading of the book lost some of its popularity.
11. However about 200 years later, a Christian mystic by the name of Joachim (Wa-a-keem) of Flora wrote on Easter Sunday in 1183, after years of intense biblical study, that “I suddenly perceived in my mind’s eye something of the fullness of this book and of the entire harmony of the Old and New Testaments.” The result was a massive work of the interpretation of Revelation called “Exposition of Revelation.”
12. Joachim saw three overlapping ages, each identified with a figure of the Trinity: the age of Law, presided over by God the Father, the age of Grace, inaugurated by Jesus’ birth; and a future Age of the Spirit, in which, after Antichrist’s defeat, righteousness will prevail and mankind will devote itself to spiritual contemplation (Boyer, page 52).
13. According to Boyer, the Trinity theme of history anticipates in rudimentary form the dispensationalism popularized by British and America prophecy writers in which segments of history are divided into a series of divinely ordained ages or dispensations (Boyer, page 52). His writings had an enormous impact on medieval religious thought and has indirectly influence much of our eschatology today.
14. In thirteenth-century Germany, apocalypticism , social unrest, struggled between the papacy and territorial struggles held that Frederick II, who ruled from 1220 to 1250 was the Emperor of the Last Days, who would usher in the Millennium. He died in 1250 and the legend took a new form: He was the departed ruler to return at the end of time to reform the government and establish a reign of righteousness. Frederick, according to some, would reappear on a white horse and establish a thousand year reign. In Italy there was another myth that came to light. The German ruler would return to life as the great antichrist. Many times down through history, rulers have announced that they were the ones who could and would usher in the period peace and prosperity for 1000 years. However, what is savior to one is an antichrist to another.
15. It is important to note that there is nothing really new in our understanding prophecy. “Modern day scenarios are in fact undated versions of very ancient ones.” For example, Irenaeus, writing in the second century, taught that the Antichrist will reign on earth “for three years and six months,” precisely the time period mentioned by Hal Lindsey and other folks like him (Boyer page 55).
16. Next week we’ll pick up on a brief history of eschatology after the reformation.

17. Turn to Revelation 20. I wonder why so much has been written and said about something that is only mentioned in one chapter of the Bible? It might be that the notion of peace, extended peace for long period of time, has eluded and fascinated mankind for as long as its violent past has existed. Who knows, but one thing is for sure much has been said about the millennium.
18. **Postmillennialism-**
- a. Kingdom of God is already present now in an earthly fashion. The rule of the millennial is that of Augustine—a spiritual rule of Christ in people’s heart. It is not something that will be cataclysmically introduced in the future. For the postmill, the 1000 year reign is symbolic in nature.
 - b. The post people believe that there will be a conversion of the nations prior to Christ’s return. The preaching of the Gospel will be taken worldwide and meet with favorable reception. Why, prophecy dictates it (Isaiah 45: 22-25). Jesus also said that the gospel will be universally preached before His second Coming (Matthew 24:14). Premills see the preaching as extending to all nations, but not be very successful. The Great Commission that Jesus gave His disciples certainly creates the expectation that the preaching is going to be done and it is going to be done successfully.
 - c. Expectation of a long period of peace termed the millennium. There is not expected to be literal 1000 year reign, it could be more or less.
 - d. There is gradual growth in degrees of righteous that accompanies the Kingdom. The Kingdom is not just thought of being a future heavenly reality, but a present earthly reality. It is arriving by degrees, almost imperceptibly. Matthew 13 records four parables that deal with the Kingdom of Heaven as a process of growth. This growth is gradual and may take a long, long time.
 - e. However, before the return of Christ, there will be a flare-up of evil occurring with the antichrist.
 - f. The millennium will end with the personal, bodily return of Christ.
 - g. Afterwards, the Lord’s return will be followed by the resurrection of “all righteous and unrighteous- and the judgment of all, and their assignment to one of two ultimate and permanent states (*A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making sense of the Millennium by Millard J. Erickson, page 58*)”

Pros of Postmill

1. They give a lot of attention to genuinely Biblical theme-Kingdom of God.
2. They encourage activism on the part of believers.
3. Promote a spirit of optimism (Jesus did promise power to those who would bear the Gospel, Acts 1:8).
4. The Kingdom of God is broader than the church. Wherever the will of God is done there is the Kingdom.

Cons of Postmill

1. The world is not necessarily getting better. The percentage of Christians in the world is not increasing. We are not the fastest growing religion in the world.
2. In fact, Postmills usually neglect scripture passages that portray the spiritual and moral conditions as worsening in the end times (Matt 24:9-14).
3. Like most of us, the Postmills are guilty of supermarket theology (just picking up what you want and leaving the rest behind).
4. In seeing the reign of God as everywhere, they don’t always discriminate between good and evil. For example, some saw the kingdom being fulfilled even through Nazism.