

## Review: “Another Look at Chilton’s *Days of Vengeance, Journey 3:2* (March-April, 1988)

By Greg Bahnsen

The revival of Biblical postmillennialism which we are witnessing in our day will be sustained only if it is fueled and fortified by diligent attention to the Scriptures. That is what makes so noteworthy a major publication of a commentary on the book of Revelation, such as David Chilton’s *The Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987). The author devotes nearly 600 pages to exposing the text and theology of this “closed book,” and we must appreciate his labors—as well as the generosity of Dr. North in subsidizing them.

Since the study of Revelation is a special interest of mine, I am often asked for a brief evaluation of David Chilton’s commentary. This issue of *Journey* affords the opportunity to reply once in writing (saving personal repetition). Because the author and I are friends, because we share a common eschatological perspective, and because he sat through a year of my sixty-five lectures on Revelation (delivered a decade ago), many assume that his approach to Revelation is something I would commend. The reviewer in *Journey* (Nov-Dec 1987) saw it as “sound” biblical interpretation, indeed “a brilliant work.” Reluctantly, I cannot share either assessment. Here let me suggest another look.

There are, unquestionably, many encouraging and helpful things about David’s commentary. First, it is a modern restatement of a preterist and postmillennial interpretation of Revelation. Second, specific comments on a number of particular verses are accurate and insightful (e.g., 7:10, where the ascription of salvation to the Lamb is contrasted to claims of the Roman state). Third, in terms of “packaging,” the book is aptly titled, beautifully illustrated, and clearly written. Nevertheless, the hermeneutical excesses and errors of the commentary will prove far more detrimental to postmillennialism than any of its isolated virtues can redeem. Consider three fatal flaws.

### Interpretive Maximalism

A commentary on holy Scripture must be appraised, not only for what it concludes (its harmony with the Bible’s system of doctrine), but likewise for the *way it handles* the word of God (its interpretive method). This is the cardinal area of offense in *Days of Vengeance*. David admits to consciously trying to simulate the hermeneutical style of James Jordan’s designated “interpretive maximalism” (IM).

IM claims to be in tune with patristic hermeneutics, holding that “everything in Scripture is symbolic.” Those benefited with “sufficient imagination” can allegedly see the significance in the “literary architecture” of particular Biblical texts—the way the story is told, even its minor details, what its imagery has in common with other stories, the number of times words are repeated, etc. (pp. 36-37). For instance, because doorposts could be likened to legs, Jordan claims that the passover blood smeared on doorposts corresponds to the blood of circumcision—which in turn is equivalent to the tokens of virginity from the wedding night (I am not kidding; cf. *The Law of the Covenant*, pp. 82-83, 252-258). Jordan finds esoteric meaning in the fact that the word “another” is used exactly six times in Judges 17:1-6. Karl Hubenthal’s book review of Jordan’s commentary on Judges in *Journey*: May-June, 1987) duly criticized this as *allegorizing* the text. Jordan’s “defense” in the Nov-Dec *Journey* was two-fold: (1) Cassuto also reasons in this way [so what?], and (2) this was an ancient literary device.” Well, the ancient world certainly did sport many heretic, esoteric, and especially allegorical works (e.g., Philo), but I find it strange that Jordan makes the Bible one of them! IM leaves the interpreter with an unsure game of “guessing” (as the end of Jordan’s letter admits), rather than a confident “Thus saith the Lord.”

David’s commitment to the imaginative guesswork of IM renders his commentary on Revelation unsound. Take as one example his treatment of Rev. 7:1-8 (the revealing of the 144,000). The text says that winds are inhibited from hurting “the earth, the sea, or the trees” (vv. 1, 3). David mistakenly claims that the change from genitive to accusative case for “tree” in v. 1 is meant to draw “special attention” to that word. In fact, the change of case simply pertains to the use of the Greek preposition *epi*: the wind blows “upon” the earth and sea (*epi* with genitive), but blows “against” the trees (*epi* with accusative). What makes this more than an embarrassing error in Greek grammar is the “special attention” David now gives the word “trees.”

He suggests that, since trees are figures for righteous men elsewhere in Scripture, the protection of trees in Rev. 7:1 symbolizes the protection of God’s people. The suggestion is open to obvious criticism. (1) We may not take for granted that figures of speech have the same referent in every Bible occurrence (e.g., both Jesus and Satan are called “lions”; cf. the multiple use of “stars” in Revelation). Why don’t trees represent the monarchs (Dan. 4:10, 22) or—“maximally”—all of the above? (2) David’s “maximal interpretation” of Rev. 7:1-3 is plainly arbitrary. Not only trees, but also “earth and sea,” are there protected. He tells us elsewhere that the sea symbolizes heathen nations who hate the Lord (pp. 318, 327). Following his logic, should we infer that Rev. 7 speaks of God protecting not only the righteous (trees), but also the heathen (sea), from judgment? (Actually, David also takes the sea to represent ethnic Gentiles and the abyss of hell: pp. 251, 317. Are either being protected from the “wind” of God’s judgment according to Rev. 7:1-3?)

David’s IM moves from the arbitrary to the outrageous when, in explaining the “seal” placed upon the foreheads of the 144,000 (Rev. 7:3-4), he alludes to the protective marking of Ezekiel 9:4 and claims that it symbolized “the sign of the cross”! Error is laid upon error to reach this height of imagination. (1) the philological error (exposed by Fairbairn: Ezek. 9:4 speaks of an indefinite “mark,” not the Hebrew letter *tav*). (2) the orthographic error: if the ancient *tav* was different from what we recognize today, it was shaped more like an x, not an upright t(cross). (3) the historical error: Jews of Ezekiel’s day would have in mind a form or shape associated with Roman crucifixions of a later age. (4) the hermeneutical error: there is no legitimate category of “quasi-prophecy”; this is simply Tertullian’s reading something *back into* the text. (5) the liturgical error: the Bible does not condone the “sign of the cross” as having religious (superstitious) significance for Christians anyway.

Example after example of IM’s “imaginative” approach to biblical interpretation could be given. The heavenly Woman of Rev. 12 is taken as “astrological symbolism” for zodiacal Virgo, with the sun mid-bodied and the moon under foot, thus pinpointing the birth of Jesus as sundown on September 11, 3 B.C. Matthew is said to have used three sets of 14 in his genealogy of Jesus because 14 is the numerical value of David’s name. The “bowls” of Rev. 15:7 are treated as chalices (despite the word being the same as in 5:8 and different from “cup” in 14:10) to make them appear as “negative sacraments.” These kinds of flaws and misreading make the commentary unreliable for the reader. Hermeneutical excesses like those of Hal Lindsey (whom David roundly ridicules) are not less serious when they stem

from the other end of the eschatological spectrum. We must all realize that, while creativity is a virtue in an original author, it is a crime in an interpreter.

## Pandemonium of Literary Structuring Devices

Has David understood the book of Revelation as a literary whole? It would not appear so since he cannot decide what kind of structure or outline it follows. "Maximalizing" his interpretation, he claims (pp. 13-24) that the book is patterned according to all of the following: (1) a five-part covenant scheme, and (2) the four sets of seven curses in Leviticus 26, and (3) the Olivet Discourse of Matthew 24, and (4) the prophecy of Ezekiel, and (5) the early church's paschal liturgy! By no stretch of the imagination does this make literary sense. The conflicts and complexities would have produced chaos in John's mind and proved nothing but confusing to his hearers (to whom the book was read). The way one interprets a text is strongly influenced by the context within which he perceives it, and David has no clear conception (or, alternatively, far too many conceptions) of the literary pattern of Revelation. In this connection there are also a host of detail mistakes made by David:

- (1) the monumental error is his artificially imposing "the covenantal structure advocated by Ray Sutton (*That You May Prosper*, Tyler: I.C.E., 1987) upon the text of Revelation like a Procrustean bed. Sutton's thesis is anything but convincing. He holds that the biblical covenant has "five parts" dealing successively with principles" pertaining to (1) transcendence/immanence, (2) hierarchy, (3) ethics, (4) sanctions, and (5) continuity. Sutton sees this five-point pattern repeatedly set forth in Scripture like a master principle of organization: allegedly the ten commandments are really two sets of these five "principles" [commands #3 and #8 being the "ethical" portion?], books of the Bible (Deuteronomy, Psalms, Matthew, Romans) follow this same five-point outline, and Biblical teaching on the family, church and state each fall into this same five-point scheme. But anyone with a modicum of imagination can devise other "ways to cut the cake" (some with "Trinitarian" threes, some with "perfect" sevens, etc.) and then filter Biblical material through the preconceived grid—with an artificiality and adequacy equal to Sutton's. You see, Sutton's five-point outline does not arise inductively from a study of the text of Scripture itself. Moreover, it is not even clear what each of five "parts" (or principles") represents in his scheme: are they literary genres, successive portions of a document, theological topics, specific theological theses, or just what? Sutton is so vague here that his position is simply untestable. If the five "principles" are an ordered scheme of *specific* doctrinal assertions that outline a discourse, they are certainly not repeated as such throughout Scripture even in passages explicitly dealing with the "covenant"); you can be sure somebody before Sutton would have noticed anything that clear. If they are only vague theological *themes* which might be touched upon in a wide variety of ways, there is nothing important or unique about Sutton's five-point scheme. And to hold that the five-part succession of these broad themes outlines books of the Bible is almost silly—as we see when Sutton makes the whole fourth "part" of Romans to be only two verses in chapter 16! It is a shame that David tried to squeeze Revelation into this artificial five-part outline.
- (2) But David also has a four-part outline for Revelation! He finds a pattern of "sevenfold judgment coming four times" in Leviticus 26 and says it is "fully developed" later in Revelation—a lamentable *faux pas*. What occurs four times in Lev. 26 is not seven-fold *judgment* itself, but rather the *statement* of God that He will punish seven-fold. But even overlooking that, how can David reconcile his five-part and four-part outlines for Revelation? Can the same pie be completely divided into four and completely divided into five pieces? For an advocate of IM, yes! David claims (pp. 17-18) that John actually "combined" the four-part curse outline and the five-part covenant lawsuit—because, after all, restitution in the law of God is both four-fold and five-fold. Is that clear? Well, there is another step. According to Jordan's incredible symbolism, four-fold for restitution was for oppressing the poor (Christ as sheep) and five-fold for rebellion against authority (Christ as Lord). Therefore, to everyone's surprise, Revelation is actually *structured* to communicate a *combination* of the multiple restitutions in Ex. 22:1 for Jesus in *both* his capacities as poor and royal. This is too bizarre to be taken seriously by any literary critic.
- (3) David's pandemonium of structuring devices leads him into embarrassing contradictions. (What else would one expect?) Consider the letters to the seven churches in Rev. 2-3. One the Lev. 26-pattern,

David makes them to be one of the four sets of seven-fold *judgment* in Revelation. On the covenant-pattern, David makes them the “historical prologue” part of the covenant document—the statement of *gracious blessing* historically enjoyed by the vassals under the lord of the covenant! Well, then, how should we interpret Rev. 2-3, as curse or as blessing? They are hardly the same (theologically or as literary genres).

- (4) Here is another example of an amazing chain of dubious reasoning (pp. 20-24). Revelation follows Ezekiel “step by step” [as well as Lev. 26 and Matt. 24?]. Such “level pegging” is a feature of lectionary use. Both Ezekiel and Revelation can be divided into “about fifty units” [fifty? Previously it was five, then four]—which is also about the number of Sabbaths in the years. *Therefore*, Revelation was intended for lectionary use as a series of liturgical readings in the church through the year, accompanying the reading of Ezekiel! Even if we forgive the mathematical inaccuracies (52 sabbaths per year) and arbitrariness (why 50 units instead of 40 or 55?), how does it follow from the rough numerical correspondence of literary units to weeks in a year that Revelation is a liturgical lectionary? This may be suggested by the interpreter’s personal interests and life-setting, but it is not suggested by the text of Revelation itself! There is quite a logical leap from saying Revelation was read aloud in church (Rev. 1:3, like Colossians, cf. 4:16 to saying it was read as a liturgical lectionary!
- (5) Sadly, David dismisses the book of Revelation’s *own* internal indicators of how it is structured: the three-fold outline in 1:19 (past vision, present situation, things to occur hereafter: cf. 4:1) and the literary devise of two prophetic “scrolls”—the seven-sealed scroll about the fall of Israel (5:1ff.) then the small scroll about the fall of the Roman Empire (10:2, 9:11; cf. 13:7). It is simple, clear, and found inductively.

## Misidentification of Key Characters

Finally, any commentary on Revelation which incorrectly interprets major figures in the book cannot be condoned or commended to others. This is the bottom-line failure of David’s book. It is a misreading of God’s book.

For instance, who is “Babylon, the harlot” about whom John “wondered with great wonder” in Rev. 17? God apparently wanted us to get this right; His angel undertook to “tell the mystery” of the woman (v. 7). Yet David’s commentary still misses the obvious. The angel identifies the harlot as “the great city which reigns over the kings of the earth,” a city set on seven hills (17:9, 18); she is the international commercial center of the ancient world (chap. 18). Given historical context, this is clearly a reference to Rome. But because David comes to these passages with a preconceived interpretive scheme, he awkwardly tries to make Babylon the harlot out to be Jerusalem! David’s strange rejoinder to the objection that the description of the harlot-city does not historically fit Jerusalem is that Revelation “is not a book about politics; it is a book about the Covenant” (p. 442). (*David* sure gets a lot “about politics” from this book when he wants to!) But the facts remains that “Covenant” literature does not, as such, justify historical error. Jerusalem never “reigned over the nations (even given the contrived reference to Ex. 19:6) and certainly was never—even “covenantally”—the principal importer of goods (even slaves) indispensable to the wealth of international merchants (Rev. 18:3, 11, 14:9). This is a major blunder.

Similarly, David interprets the “second beast” or “false prophet” who enforces worship of the Emperor (Rev. 13:11-18) as the leaders of Israel, despite the historical inaccuracies involved and with no compelling exegetical argumentation. This too comes from preconceived interpretive notions. The second beast is the pagan Emperor-cult itself (pagan *ecclesia* which stood behind the pagan “polis” or political structure), involving a crass idolatry (13:15) and delegated political power (13:12, 16-17) which were never characteristic of the Jews in Roman era.

So then, I cannot recommend my friend David's commentary on Revelation. (1) It embodies an unsound, imaginative hermeneutic. (2) It is confused about the book's structure and meaning. (3) It is guilty of considerable errors in history and interpretation.

But then, to be fair, I should alert the reader that the publisher, Dr. North, has already dispensed in advance with criticisms of the commentary. His preface warns that the commentary will take some heat, *not* because of its shortcomings, but because critics are "infected" with disdain over not discovering the "Tyler theology" themselves (pp. xviii-xix). I will let the reader decide "on the merits" of my critique whether Gary here commits the logical fallacy of "poisoning the well" or not. Printed words are easier to read than human hearts.