

(Part 1 of 6 from)

THE MEDIATORIAL KINGDOM IN THE APOCALYPSE

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CHAPTER XXVI

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It is only through this doctrine of the Kingdom that the Apocalypse can or will be understood and consistently interpreted. The reason for this lies in the simple fact that it announces the Coming and the events connected with the Advent of the Theocratic King. Now to enter fully into its spirit and appreciate its force, to form an adequate conception of the testimony of Jesus either as a whole or in its several aspects, there must of necessity be a *previous* acquaintance with the covenants and a correct *apprehension* of the burden of prophecy based on those covenants, resolving itself into the promised Kingdom. ---George N. H. Peters¹

1. The last book of the Bible is pre-eminently *the Book of the Kingdom of God* in conflict with, and victory over, the kingdoms of this world. With this general viewpoint most commentators would agree, regardless of differences over principles and details of interpretation. It is closely supported by the terminology of the book: The word "throne" (*thronos*) occurs 41 times; of which 38 refer to the divine kingdom (1:4), 3 to the satanic kingdom (16:10, tr. "seat"). "Kingdom" (*basileia*) is found 7 times; referring 3 times to God's kingdom (1:9), and 4 times to the kingdom of evil (16:10). The term "crown" occurs 11 times: in 3 references representing *diadēma*; applied to Christ (19:12), to Satan (12:3), and to the beast (13:1); in 8 references representing *stephanos*; applied to Christian believers (2:10), to the rider on the white horse (6:2), to the demonic hosts (9:7), to Israel (12:1), and to the Son of man (14:14). "Reign" (*basileuō*) is used 7 times, always of the divine kingdom (6:10). "Power" (*exousia*), i.e., authority to rule, occurs 20 times, about evenly divided between the two opposing kingdoms (2:26; 13:4). "Rule" (*poimainō*) in the sense of shepherdly government is used 4 times, always of Christ's activity (19:15). As terms indicating a supreme function of government, the verb "judge" (*krinō*) occurs 8 times and the noun "judgment" (representing *krisis* and *krima*) 6 times; significantly in every instance applied to the divine government (6:10; 14:7). The word "wrath" (representing *thumos*, 15:1; and *orgē*, 6:16) is used 15 times as indicating the expression or execution of the divine judgment, and once in the lower sense of Satanic anger (12:12).

1 Geo. N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884), Vol. III, p. 366.

2. The Apocalypse is also *the Book of the Second Coming of Christ*. After six verses of introductory material, the main body of the book opens with the glad announcement: "Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him" (1:7). And the final word from Christ Himself, uttered from His present throne of grace in heaven, is the promise, "Surely I come quickly"; to which John responds with the last prayer recorded in Scripture, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (22:20).² That the second advent and the Kingdom are brought together as the main subjects of the last book of Scripture, will occasion no surprise to those acquainted with divine revelation. For these two great eschatological events are inseparable as the goal of history, as we have already noted especially in the teaching of Christ Himself. The personal and glorious coming of Messiah will bring in the Kingdom, and without such a coming there can be no Messianic Kingdom. Between the two prayers, "Thy kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10) and "come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20), therefore, there is little difference as to their great objective, except perhaps that the latter represents the more mature thought in the progress of divine revelation.

3. The revelation of the Kingdom and its glorious King in the Apocalypse can only be apprehended in close connection with the Old Testament, especially its prophetic literature, and particularly the Book of Daniel. Although the Apocalypse contains no direct citation from the Old Testament, it is saturated with Old Testament phraseology. In the total of 404 verses, Westcott and Hort list about 265 which contain Old Testament language; and also about 550 references to Old Testament passages. "Nothing is more important for the understanding of our author's mental and literary processes than a close study of his use of Old Testament language."³ An exposition which leans heavily upon the Old Testament, and especially its prophetic writing, according to Hengstenberg, "is absolutely indispensable to a proper understanding of the Revelation."⁴ And James Orr says, "Its precursor in the Old Testament is the Book of Daniel, with the symbolic visions and mystical numbers of which it stands in close affinity."⁵ It may be laid down as a first principle, therefore, that no interpretation of the Revelation can be accepted which breaks with the thought of the Old Testament prophets.

2 See the discerning appraisal of Archbishop Trench: "What is the keynote to the whole Book? Surely it is 'Maranatha,' 'our Lord cometh' With this announcement the Book begins . . . with this it ends . . . and this is a constantly recurring note through it all We may say, indeed, that in some sort *ho erchomenos* is a proper name of our Lord" (*Epistles to the Churches*, p. 7). Also see Dusterdieck in *Meyer's Commentary on the Revelation*, p. 27: "The entire prophecy of the Apocalypse rests upon the fundamental thought of the *personal return of the Lord*."

3 Frank C. Porter, "Book of Revelation," *Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1902), Vol. IV, p. 254.

4 E. W. Hengstenberg, *Revelation of St. John*, (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1851), Vol. I, preface, p. VII.

5 James Orr, "Book of Revelation," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1915), Vol. IV, p. 2582.

4. Let us now approach the Book of Revelation from the standpoint of the general eschatological concepts of the Old Testament. If the prophets teach anything clearly, they teach that in the last times there will come, first, a period when God will pour out His judgments upon the world; also that following these judgments a Messianic Kingdom of God will be established on earth; and that this Kingdom will become universal in scope and be prolonged without end. Now these are precisely the general ideas of the Apocalypse, and they are stated in the same sequence. Passing over for a moment the introductory material dealing with the Giver of the revelation and the Churches which receive it (chs. 1-3), the book presents three general subjects: first, a period of divine judgments on the world (chs. 4-18); second, the coming of Christ to establish His Kingdom on earth (chs. 19-20); and third, an extension of this reign of Christ into the eternal Kingdom of God in the new heavens and earth (chs. 21-22. Cf. especially 22:3-5).

5. The clear and exact correspondence between the general ideas of the Old Testament prophets and the Book of Revelation is also supported by our Lord's final eschatological discourse as recorded in the Gospels. As to the events of the end-time: first, there is to be a period of unparalleled "tribulation" in the world (Matt. 24:21-26); second, this will be followed "immediately" by the glorious second advent of Messiah (Matt. 24:29-30), when He will establish His Kingdom over the nations (Matt. 25:31-34); and third, the judgments of this Kingdom will extend into the eternal state (Matt. 25:41, 46).

6. It also should be noted here that the Apocalypse preserves and further clarifies the same distinction between the Mediatorial Kingdom of Messiah and the Universal Kingdom of God, which we have already observed throughout the earlier Scriptures. In this final book John sees two kingdoms, each preceded by a throne of judgment. From the first of these thrones (4:2) issue the divine judgments which finally usher in the Mediatorial Kingdom of Christ on earth for a thousand years (20:6). From the second throne of judgment (20:11-15) issue those final judgments which prepare for the Universal Kingdom in its final form, where the *one* eternal throne is that "of God and of the Lamb" (22:3-5).

These general correspondences running through the Scriptures are too evident to be ignored, as too often they have been. On the contrary, they should provide the surest guidance to the understanding of the Apocalypse in its revelation of "things to come." From this standpoint, the book may be examined under the following outlines:

Introduction: The Revelation of Future Things and Its Present Blessing (1:1-3)

I. The Churches to Which the Revelation Was Addressed (1:4-3:22)

II. The Revelation of the Period of Pre-Kingdom Judgments (4:1-18:24)

III. The Revelation of the Period of the Messianic Kingdom (19:1-20:15)

IV. The Revelation of the Final Universal Kingdom of God (21:1-22:5)

Conclusion: Exhortations to the Churches in View of the Lord's Coming (22:6-21)

I. THE CHURCHES TO WHICH THE REVELATION WAS ADDRESSED (Rev. 1:4-3:22)

All, then, are agreed that these seven Epistles, however primarily addressed to these seven Church of Asia, were also written for the edification of the Universal Church; in the same way, that is, as St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, or to Timothy, or St. James to the Dispersion, were written with this intention. The warnings, the incentives, the promises, the consolations, and, generally, the whole instruction in righteousness in these contained, are for everyone in all times, so far as they may meet the several cases and conditions of men; what Christ says to those here addressed He says to all in similar conditions. Thus far there can be no question.
--Archbishop Trench⁶

1. The entire Book of Revelation (as well as the individual letters of chapters 2-3) is addressed to seven churches: "John to the seven churches which are in Asia" (1:4). Later in the same chapter the geographical locations of these churches are named as Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (1:11), thus indicating their literality. Still later the same churches appear under the symbolism of seven golden candlesticks, which are identified by the divine Person in the vision thus: "the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches" (1:20).
2. The Greek term used in Revelation to designate the seven bodies of believers is *ekklēsiai*. In the entire book the term occurs twenty times, always of the seven churches to which the book was addressed. Outside of the first three chapters, which are introductory in character, the word is found only once, in the closing epilogue which refers back to the original recipients of the Revelation (22:16). It is a striking fact that *ekklēsia* is never used in the main body of the book where the great eschatological events of the end are described (4:1-22:5). Furthermore, the Book of Revelation always employs *ekklēsia* in connection with the churches *on earth*; never with any body of the saved in heaven.
3. It should be noted also that all references to an *ekklēsia* in the Apocalypse apply only to *local churches*. The symbol is not *one candelabrum* with seven branches, but rather a group of seven separate lamp-stands⁷ in the midst of which the Son of man walks (2:1). There is in this Book of Revelation no one true world-church on earth. The idea of any historical ecumenicity is totally absent. It is true that in chapter 19 the truly saved of the present age are presented as a "wife" at the marriage of the Lamb (vs. 7); but this scene is set "in heaven" (vs. 1), and the wife here is presented as having been perfected in character (vss. 7-8). Furthermore, she is not called an *ekklēsia*, a term which by the writer of Revelation is always reserved for local churches on earth composed of good and bad (cf. the description in chs. 2-3). The only genuine example of an ecumenical organization of religion on earth appears in the great harlot of chapter 17.

6 R. C. Trench, *Epistles to the Seven Churches* (6th ed.: London, 1897), pp. 234-235.

7 Plumptre says, "The Seer beholds not a lamp with seven branches, but seven distinct lamps" (*Epistles to the Seven Churches* [3rd ed., London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1884], p. 35).

4. There is doubtless some symbolic meaning in the *number* of churches selected by the Spirit of God for description; and about this good men have differed widely. But the one thing upon which there seems to be general agreement is that "seven" here speaks of a *totality of characteristics*. In the seven churches we have both every kind of church and also every kind of member, which not only existed on earth in John's generation but also will exist throughout all ecclesiastical history. In other words, we have in the seven selected local churches a composite picture of *all* local churches on earth at any particular time. The number *seven* can hardly be pressed here to signify some over-all visible organization of the churches. If there was some co-operative organization of this kind existing at this early stage of history, it is wholly ignored by the writer of Revelation. Each local church is treated as a unit, complete in itself and related directly thus to Christ for good or for bad. The term *ekklēsia* in Revelation is never used in the sense of the one true body of Christ, as used elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22-23). Whether there may be found, in this number *seven*, some typical foreshadowing of seven successive eras of church history is a matter which I have come to regard with some reserve and caution for reasons which will be stated below. We are certain, however, that each separate epistle is what the Spirit saith to *all* the "churches" (cf. 1:4; 3:22).

5. It should be observed that all the churches of Revelation 2-3 are pictured as living under the sign, *Till He come*. There are five references to the coming of Christ. Three of these warn of judgment: to Ephesus He says, "Repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick" (2:5); to Pergamos, "Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth" (2:16); to Sardis, "If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief" (3:3). Twice our Lord speaks of His coming as an encouragement: to Thyatira, "But that which ye have already hold fast till I come" (2:25); and to Philadelphia, "Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown" (3:11).

In addition to these direct references, our Lord speaks encouragingly to the churches about things associated with His second coming. In 2:23 He refers to the day when He "will give unto every one of you according to your works." In 2:10 the faithful are promised "a crown of life." In 2:26-27 the overcomer is promised "authority over the nations" to rule them "with a rod of iron" (ASV). In 3:10 those who are steadfast have the promise of Christ that "I also will keep thee from the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon the earth" (ASV). And in His final word to the faithful individuals of the rejected Laodicean church, our Lord offers the assurance of a place with Him on His throne (3:21).

This picture of the churches on earth points unmistakably to the *interim* between the ascension of Christ and His return to establish His Kingdom on earth. Always the regal rewards for the faithful and the Messianic throne of Christ are future, never present during the era of the churches on earth.

6. Furthermore, the picture of the career of the churches on earth is utterly incongruous with the theory of a Messianic Kingdom presently established on earth. Let any student read the record in chapters 2 and 3, so sorry in many respects; then compare the conditions there described with the idyllic conditions set forth by the prophets and our Lord in connection with the Mediatorial Kingdom; and by no device of fair interpretation can the two eras be equated as one. The conditions obtaining during the life of the churches on earth have been ably summed up by Seiss:

Never, indeed, has there been a sowing of God on earth, but it has been oversown by Satan; or a growth for Christ, which the plantings of the wicked one did not mingle with and hinder The Church is not an exception, and never will be, as long as the present dispensation lasts. Even in its first and purest periods, as the Scriptural accounts attest, it was intermixed with what pertained not to it. There was a Judas among its apostles; an Ananias and a Simon Magus among its first converts; a Demas and a Diotrephes among its first public servants. And as long as it continues in this world, Christ will have His Antichrist, and the temple of God its men of sin. He who sets out to find a perfect Church, in which there are no unworthy elements and no disfigurations, proposes to himself a hopeless search. Go where he will, worship where he may, in any country, in any age, he will soon find tares among the wheat, sin mixing in with all earthly holiness; self-deceivers, hypocrites and unchristians in every assembly of saints; Satan insinuating himself into every gathering of the sons of God to present themselves before the Lord. No preaching, however pure; no discipline, however strict or prudent; no watchfulness, however searching and faithful, can ever make it different.⁸

So universal and persistent is this mixture of good and bad in the churches that in each case the final exhortation to hear and the promise of reward are addressed to individual members. In every one of the seven epistles the call is, "*He that hath an ear, let him hear*"; and the promise in every case is, "*To him that overcometh*" (italics supplied). Among the churches on earth to which the Revelation was addressed, there is not even one which the Lord could present as an *ekklēsia* "that overcometh."

7. If, as generally agreed, the seven churches of Revelation present symbolically a composite view of the professing church on earth in human history, it becomes significant that absolutely *no chronology of the period appears in the picture*. Although found in different geographical locations, the seven churches are presented as existing *together in time*; they *are* in Asia, according to the writer. While of necessity there is a literary order, there is no hint of any temporal sequence. And this is as it should be, to conform with the historical interlude to which the *ekklēsiai* on earth belong. Since to the Church, from the day of its

8 J. A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse*, 1865, Vol. I, pp. 178-179.

birth on Pentecost, the coming of the Lord is always imminent, obviously there could be no chronological chart of ecclesiastical history given in advance. This one fact stands opposed to any interpretation which finds in the seven churches of the Apocalypse any rigid prophetic system of successive church eras sufficiently well defined to read in advance of the history.⁹ All such schemes applied to the present age raise an eschatological dilemma from which there is no escape except by erasing the sign, "Till He come," under which the churches must live in every moment of their existence upon earth. The logic of the matter is quite simple: If in the seven churches there was prophetically revealed the entire history of the Church in seven successive eras, and if these eras could be identified with certainty in advance of this history, then it is obvious that the coming of the Lord could not occur at any point short of the seventh era. On the other hand, if the eras could *not* thus be identified, then there was no such revelation.

This chronological blank is peculiar to the revelation of the career of the churches on earth. When we move from this section of the book (chs. 2-3) to the period of divine judgments (chs. 4-18) and the establishment of the Kingdom which follows (chs. 19-20), the case is entirely different. The chronology of the Judgment period is clearly based on a single measurement stated variously as 1260 days (12:6), 42 months (13:5), and three and a half years (12:14). Similarly, in the case of the Messianic Kingdom, the measurement is stated specifically as a "thousand years" (20:6). Whether or not these numbers are to be taken as stated, or only as symbolic, will be discussed later. The point here is that there is nothing of this character applied to the total career of the churches in Revelation.

9 For a brief but able account of such interpretations, and weighty arguments against them, the reader should consult the "Excursus" by Archbishop Trench in his *Epistles to the Seven Churches*, pp. 233-250. His conclusion is that "The multitude of dissertations, essays, books, which have been, and are still being written, in support of this scheme of interpretation, must remain a singular monument of wasted ingenuity and misapplied toil; and, in their entire failure to prove their point, of the disappointment which must result from a futile looking into Scripture for that which is not to be found there." However, Trench's conclusion seems too sweepingly dogmatic. For the true explanation may be that in the seven churches of the Apocalypse the Holy Spirit did give a *latent* revelation of the Church's career on earth, but so obscure that it could not be clearly discerned until the last or Laodicean era had been reached. If so, it would be significant that only in modern times have many devout Bible students come to agree that there was such a revelation and that we are now living in the final ear of the Church on earth. Such a method of revelation is not novel in Scripture; for the Second Advent of our Lord could not be certainly identified in Old Testament prophecy until the First Advent had been realized in history.