REVELATION 20: PRELUDE TO THE OMEGA POINT - THE NEW HEAVEN AND EARTH

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show that Revelation (Rv) 20 does not contain chiliastic/millenialistic thoughts. It was written as a word of comfort and encouragement to the Christians in Asia Minor (circa A.D.95-96). Their time, represented as a symbolical period of a thousand years, was characterized by inner and outer temptations and conflict. The end of time, the omega point, was apparently expected to take place in their time and then Satan and the power of evil would finally be destroyed. The new heaven and earth was to be their inheritance. The 'thousand years' is an immanent and a transcendent formula. As an immanent formula it defines their earthly struggle against the brutality of Satan, which resulted in the death of some of them. As a transcendent formula it gave them a look at the spiritual world where those who persevered in the faith were rewarded. They experience the greatest amount of joy with Christ in heaven. Rv is therefore not a foretelling of history.

1. Introduction

Chiliastic thoughts about a reign of peace on earth have a profound influence in our churches and schools (De Smidt 1993: 79). With due consideration of the theme of this congress, (old and new methods in teaching the Bible), concentration in this paper is focused on the exegesis of Revelation (Rv) 20. Rv 20 forms the locus classicus of the millennium controversy (Gourques 1985:677; Hazelip 1975:229). In this research perspectives offered by an integration of methods are advocated in the interpretation of Rv 20. The methods effectively applied here are discourse analysis and the historical-critical and literary-critical methods. A few findings derived from literary science and sociological approaches are also mentioned. Rv 20 does not contain chiliastic thoughts.

In this article an effort is made to analyse Rv 20, to establish and name the mutual relationships without attempting to provide a complete exegesis by any

means. It is hoped that this will be of assistance to the teacher/catechist in interpreting Rv 20.

2. A relationship between Rv 20 and the macro context of the book of Revelation

The hermeneutical point of departure is that Rv 20 is regarded as a definite part of the whole Apocalypse and of a specific group of chapters, namely 19:11-22:5. Rv 20 is thus analysed as part of the whole.

3. The genre of Revelation

Exegetes agree that Rv must be read in the same manner as all the other writings in the Bible. In the first place the book is directed to readers of that time. Secondly, the specific genre (type of text) that it represents must be articulated (Cloete & Smit 1992:56).

Rv belongs to the apocalyptic literature that flourished between 200 BC and 100 AD. The informed reader of Rv was acquainted with the forms and conventions (such as symbols and characters) of apocalyptic literature (Carson 1992:478; Wall:1991:12). In Rv an apocalyptic narrative with a prophetical-eschatological focus in the form of a pastoral letter is sent to the congregations (Carson 1992:479; Wall 1991:13; Du Rand 1991:287; Puskas 1989:51).

For Morris (1989:24) an apocalypse functions as a revelation made by some celestial personage (like an angel) to a great figure of the past. The message is usually expressed in vivid symbolism. It appears in difficult times and conveys the author's profound conviction that the troubles in which his readers find themselves are not the last word. God in his own good time will intervene catastrophically and destroy evil (cf. Du Rand 1991:199; De Villiers 1987:68).

4. Rhetoric in a rhetorical historical situation

Rhetorical principles, namely ethos, pathos and logos were, in New Testament times and at the time of Rv, already well known (Du Toit 1992:465,469; Du Rand 1990:385). In the ethos the author endeavoured to give readers a positive image of himself; logos included the requirements for logical argumentation and pathos appealed to the readers' emotions (Du Toit 1992:470). The writer of Rv made particular use of the logos aspect in a rhetorical-historical situation, to lead his readers to understand and accept their crisis - or transitional situation (Du Rand 1991:582; Botha 1988:13).

By using apocalyptic symbols and images the author has, amongst others, created a symbolic universe (cf. Fiorenza 1989:6; Vorster 1986:159). Du Rand (1991:262) states in this regard that the author created a conceptual

world for the socially despised and wronged Christians in Asia Minor, in which the readers could find encouragement and resignation.

Through symbolic transformation or conversion the reader is able to step out of his desperate situation intellectually and to move into the world where the Lamb has conquered and where the oppressed are victors. In this way the empirically suppressed community is transferred to the symbolic universe where their rights are maintained on the grounds of what God has accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a transformation from a life situation in Asia Minor to the world of meaningful symbols and imagery. (cf. Fiorenza 1989:6).

For Thompson (1990:74) it is not merely a 'literary world' or a 'symbolic universe', a vision separate from the everyday life. The seer is constructing an encompassing vision that includes everyday, social realities in Asia Minor.

5. A possible reconstruction of the historical situation leading to Rv 20

At a specific point both the chiliasts and the antichiliasts interpret Rv 20 (and with this Rv in general) as though it was written for the 20th century (De Smidt 1993:1). To determine the purpose of Rv 20, it is necessary to establish the situation in which John/the author lived at the end of the first century AD (cf. De Smidt 1983:88).

Since the earliest traditions, such as Irenaeus (AD 180) the point of view has been that Rv was written during the rule of emperor Domitian (AD 95-96) (Carson 1992:473; Du Rand 1991:198; Thompson 1990:15).

There is much debate around the question of whether there was a full-scale persecution under Domitian. According to Thompson (1990:107); Meeks (1986:145) and Moberly (1992:377) there would have been calmness as long as one did not disturb the public order or willfully affront one of the symbols or agents of Caesar's sovereignty.

The majority of exegetes however are of the opinion that Rv was written when Christians were being severely persecuted (Fiorenza 1989:8; Botha 1988:2). The author is in exile (1:90), a Christian, Antipas had been killed in Pergamum (2:12) imprisonment was expected in Smyrna (2:10), and blood was flowing (6:9,10; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4 - Cloete & Smit 1992:57; Botha 1988:2).

Although there are differences in point of view regarding the socio-historical circumstances of the persecution, one aspect is sure, namely that there was definitely a cult of emperor worship. Domitian stressed his divinity, and as a test of loyalty he required that he be addressed as *dominus et deus*, lord and god (Carson 1992:475; Keresztes, 1979:257). Christians experienced this as an intense conflict situation and as an attack on their faith (Cloete & Smit

1992: 57). In addition the 'rhetorical situation' in Rv reflects that the greatest threat was not only from outside the congregations but also from inside, in the form of compromise with regard to Rome, the Jews and the heathens as well as internal lack of harmony (Cloete & Smit 1992:57; Meeks 1986:147).

6. A discourse analysis of a structure of Rv 20 and a structural exploration: Synchronical analysis

In order to understand the coherence of the fifteen verses under discussion, a discourse analysis of the structure of Rv 20: 1-15 as a possible working basis has been done. Conspicuous unifying syntactic markers are indicated in the analysis (Louw & Nida 1988:vi). The various signs by which they are indicated point to their interrelationship. The most important markers are: kai eidon (and I saw, cola 1, 8, 30, 32); êdêsen (bound, colon 3; chilia êtê (thousand years, cola 3, 6, 15, 16, 20, 21); luthênai (release cola 7,21); anastasei tê protê (the first resurrection, cola 17, 18) and hô deuteros thanatos (the second death, cola 19,41).

The following cursory exegetical sketches can be made according to the discourse analysis (section 6). Rv 20:1-15 consists of 42 cola which can again be divided as follows: verses 1-3 are divided into cola 1-7, making block A. Verses 4-6 are divided into cola 8-20 and form block B. Verses 7-10 are divided into cola 21-29 and form block C. Verses 11-15 contain cola 30-42, block D.

According to an analysis of a structure of Rv 20 arising out of a colon-and-block division, the fifteen verses form an entity.

The exposition and naming of the various subdivisions of the 42 cola of Rv 20 are as follows:

Main Theme (Leitmotiv): Christ's absolute victory over Satan.

In this pericope *kai eidon* (and I saw) is used four times (cola 1, 8, 30, 32) and reduction is assumed in colon 11. The expression is not used in Rv to indicate a chronological sequence, a time requirement or a time order (Swete 1960: 259; Fensham 1952: 244). It is merely a proclamation of the vision which John saw. While the expression is used four times, Rv 20 contains only one vision with four subdivisions, as is seen from an analysis of the structure. It forms part, again, of John's total visionary experience.

The concept *chilia êtê* 'a thousand years', is an accusative of a length of time (a crux interpretum). It is a symbolic number indicating absolute time and an absolute act. It is an important structural device and is used six times (Engelbrecht 1980: 532).

The term 'thousand years' is an immanent and transcendent formula and indicates:

Absolute Time:

The accusative of length of time requires that the concept is not removed from its temporal meaning.

The words 'a thousand years' occur in a construction used to express duration or extent. We are dealing with an ordinary expression for the duration of time (Schick 1977:70). According to the structural analysis this thousand years encompasses a beginning (immanent formula), a heavenly aspect (transcendent formula) an earthly aspect (immanent formula) and an end - the omega point (transcendent formula, cf. p. 13). This degree of time is a specific God-given time, of short (colon 7) or long duration, and absolute. It indicates a period that is lapsing. It is therefore limited time belonging to the temporary sphere. It is enacted in the created time in which Christ's dominion is present. It begins with the binding of Satan. Therefore the one thousand years is an immanent and a transcended formula with a special character. It is also a symbol for the time in which John and his fellow believers lived.

■ Absolute Act:

The bound, for a thousand years, (colon 3) also refers to an absolute/completed act and therefore to a power symbol (Berkouwer 1963:89 etc.). It is a symbol of absolute bondage and of Christ's absolute victory over Satan (Hazelip 1975:234). God's plan of action is carried out in full (Hoeksema 1986: 643).

It is thus made impossible for Satan, for the duration of an absolute period of time, to carry out all his evil plans (cf. Du Rand 1991:284). It is an absolute act, namely the bondage of Satan in an absolute period of time.

7. A discourse analysis of Rv 20 See addendum, p. 11.

8. Exegetical notes with relation to Rv 20: synchronical and diachronical analysis

A complete exegesis of Rv 20 is impossible because of a lack of space and time. Only a number of important findings are indicated.

8.1 Rv 20 as a sub-section of Chapters 19:11-22:5

The content of Rv can be divided into seven subdivisions, according to Du Rand (1991:300). Rv 20 fits into the seventh division, between the victory of Christ over the beast and the false prophet and the new creation, the omega point. Rv is therefore the prelude to the omega point, the new heaven and earth (cf. Du Rand 1991:302).

8.2 Exegetical notes with reference to block A (cola 1-7): The beginning of the thousand years. (immanent formula)

Rv 20:1-3, cola 1-7 describes the beginning of the thousand years. John sees a vision of an angel coming down out of heaven. An angel is a messenger from God. As a functionary of God he is invested with authority. He is provided with aids to help him, namely the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. This is an indication that he is on a special mission. The angel's God-given commission is to seize the dragon, the ancient serpent, namely the Devil, because he is deceiving the people of the earth. The angel has six functions to perform:

- (i) to seize the dragon,
- (ii) to bind him for a thousand years,
- (iii) to throw him into the subterranean depths (the abyss),
- (iv) to lock him up,
- (v) and, after the thousand years are ended, to set him free for a short time (De Smidt 1983:98, 120; Walvoord 1967:290).

The abyss (colon 1) is not the same as the lake of fire (colon 41). It is thus not a temporary place of punishment, but a place where the entire realm of darkness practises his limited power before the final judgement (Hailey 1979:390; Douglas 1977;8; Hoeksema 1986:641; Swete 1960:260).

The 'key' and the 'great chain' (colon 1) are symbolical names for the power by which the angel controls the evil spirits in their domain. Evil possesses thus, what power God has given it. This image is well-known in Jewish apocalyptic writings cf. Enoch 54:1-6; Fensham 1952:247). The accumulation of names for Satan (colon 2) is indicative of his power, his cleverness and his atrocities.

The words 'seize' and 'bound' (cola 2, 3) are indicative in the aorist mode and thus indicate an action in the past without an indication of the passage of time. It is metaphorical since Satan is a spirit that cannot be bound in this way. It suggests a great spiritual power which restrain him, hampers his actions and limits his wholesale deception. The specific purpose (Rv 20, colon 6) is: so that he does not lead the people of the world along the wrong path. There is thus no talk of a comprehensive prevention and a kingdom of peace on earth. It occurs for an absolute time as laid down by God.

The 'short time' (colon 7) is an indication that this judgement over the devil is not final. It is only a temporary binding of Satan.

The probable context within which John was writing here was the situation of the congregations at the end of the first century. There were traces of persecution and martyrdom. The Christians may have been in a state of confusion because of this. According to the teaching of the apostles, Satan had been overcome - or had he?

While the Christians suffer from the attacks of Satan, John gives his vision to the congregations. Metaphorical language is used. The aim is to bring a certain message to people persecuted under the Roman emperor - not to predict future events in detail (Botha 1988:138).

The message is that the rule of God continues. Affliction and martyrdom are a reality. But against the triumph of God and the persecuted congregations Satan stands powerless. Why God permits the persecutions is not indicated here. It was a comfort for the first readers (Berkouwer 1963; König 1970:354). They need not fear that they would be overwhelmed at this time. Satan can go no further than God has decreed. In addition to this readers are warned not to underestimate the fight against evil. It is therefore a radical encouragement in difficult times and a reference to the salvation of God (Berkouwer 1963:99).

There are various theologians who connect Rv 20 with various Old and New Testament sections, amongst others the Easter events and the Second Coming of Christ (eg Mt 12:29; 2 Pt 2:5, etc). Agreement cannot be claimed in terms of literary dependence, but rather in terms of valid ideas of the early-Christian kerygma (cf Ridderbos 1965:239; De Smidt 1983: 121-123). Augustine was the first to explain Rv 20:1-3 in this manner (De Smidt 1983:126).

8.3 Exegetical notes with relation to block B (cola 8-20): The heavenly aspect of the thousand years (transcendent formula).

In cola 8-20 John sees thrones in heaven and seated upon these thrones people who have authority to judge. These people were without bodies having been beheaded because they had testified about Jesus and had spread the Gospel. They had also not worshipped the beast and his image and had not received the mark on their foreheads or hands. Although they are without bodies they came to life and had reigned, with Christ for a thousand years. They experienced the first resurrection and were therefore blessed and holy. They are priests of God and of Christ and the second death, the lake of fire, has no power over them. The other dead have not come to life. This was for a thousand years (cf. De Smidt 1983:93, 128).

John sees a vision of the spiritual world. He sees thrones (colon 8). It is a symbolic collection of all who reign with Christ for a 'thousand years' (colon 15) and who, as the oppressed, are now in a position of strength (Engelbrecht 1980:536; Hailey 1979:393; Visser 1975:240). Therefore the term 'thousand years' is a transcendent formula. They are souls without bodies (colon 11) and point to the in-between condition of the dead (Jones 1975:70; Hendriksen 1952:192).

There are two groups, the martyrs who were beheaded and the faithful who, during the time of the caesar-worship, maintained their understanding (forehead, colon 13) and will (hand) against the influence of Rome (Hailey 1979:393; Swete 1960:262).

The souls lived without bodies and were an indication that they were physically dead (colon 14). The quality of this life was a life with Christ (colon 15). They live in the sense that they, since their bodily death, live with Christ. For them, Satan is absolutely bound. According to colon 16 they still belong to the dead, because their bodily resurrection must still take place.

The rest of the dead (hoi lôpoi, colon 16) indicates those who capitulated before the influence of Rome (Van Schaik 1971:230; Fenshan 1952:289). Their bodily death was not a passage to eternal life, but to eternal death.

In colon 17 the first resurrection is mentioned. The first resurrection (hê anastasis hê protê) is an asyndenton pointing back to the 'they lived' (êzesan, colon 14) and 'reigned' (colon 15). According to a synchronic investigation the first resurrection points to the conditions of the souls (psugas, colon 11) directly after death. All that John sees here took place in the spiritual world, since he saw a vision of souls without bodies, on thrones. If all those in cola 8-15 are in heaven, then the first resurrection points to the transition of the soul at the moment of death to eternal life, or otherwise the transition to life after death. It occurs with the bodily death of the martyrs and the faithful (Botha 1965:310; Groenewald 1959;810). The second resurrection is the bodily resurrection at the fullness of times (De Smidt 1983: 142). Death leads to a new existence, eternal life (colon 15) or eternal death (colon 16) (Hendriksen 1952:193).

The 'first' points not only to the sequence, but also to the order of precedence (Botha 1965;311). It is the most conclusive resurrection to eternal life (Hughes 1973:302). According to the five beatitudes in Rv (colon 18) those who were part of the first resurrection find the greatest blessing. It is an eternal condition (colon 19).

In colon 19 John says that the second death has no power over them. The meaning of the second death is given in colon 41, the throwing into the lake of fire. The first death is not specified here, but is assumed. The first death is the natural death of man. It is followed by the first resurrection, the transition of the soul from the world of sin to heaven where they are clothed in priestly and kinglike status (Charles 1976:186; Hendriksen 1952:193).

This heavenly prospect offered the readers a rich consolation. In those days they had great need of this. Rome was giving them difficult times. Nevertheless they kept the faith and did not deny Christ. This heavenly vision encouraged them in the knowledge that against the suffering of a few years here below, in heaven the reign of 'a thousand years' with Christ was awaiting them. They also came to a better understanding regarding the souls of their deceased nearest and dearest.

8.4 Exegetical notes with relation to block C (Cola 21-29): The earthly aspect of a thousand years (immanent formula).

According to the cola division there are two thoughts that are grouped together as one unit, namely the action of Satan after his release (cola 21-25) and the judgement against Satan (colon 26-29). He oppressed the camp of the faithful. He surrounded the beloved city and finally is judged.

After the duration of the symbolical thousand years Satan is released by God for a short time (colon 21). The One who bound him also releases him, with the purpose of bringing about judgement over evil and the unbelieving world. God's plan includes controlling and destroying evil (Visser 1975:242). This includes the thoughts that before the end of time 'all hell will break loose' and there will be very difficult times.

Satan has deceived the unfaithful nations throughout the world, symbolized by Gog and Magog, and has mobilized them for battle (colon 22-24). Gog and Magog, who, according to Josephus, lived originally in the region of the Black Sea, had become, in Old Testament and Jewish apocalyptic writings, a type of a opponent of God (De Smidt 1983:158; Du Preez 1979:61; Russell 1976:191-193; Swete 1960:268). The one article before the two names (colon 23) demonstrates that the two symbols are one great power (Mounce 1990:362). John could have been thinking here of Domitian, Rome and the people in the areas around Rome. Satan does now what he has always been prevented from doing, to deceive the people.

The 'camp of God's people' and the 'city he loves' (colon 25) are the same images for the believers. It indicates an organized entity whom God loves. This is not a city of stone, but of the faithful. Before the end of time the faithful will be like a beleaguered city. There will be no space for them and their numbers will have diminished (Visser 1975:243).

At this anxious, fearful moment God himself will suddenly and unexpectedly become involved (colon 26; Hendriksen 1952:195). The power of the antigodly trinity (Satan, the beast and the false prophet) is, once and for all, entirely destroyed (colon 29; Hoeksema 1986:656). He is thrown into the lake of fire and where his eternal bondage (both day and night) also comes to him. Fire is the symbol of the judgement of God.

These events after the duration of the symbolical thousand years (colon 21) bring the reader to the end of the earthly dispensation. The word for expired is from telêo, meaning 'brought to the goal or end', hence finished. (Walvoord 1967:302). The maximum completenessy, symbolized by 'thousand' has been attained. Therefore Rv 20 is a prelude to the omega point which follows, namely the judgement and the new heaven and the new earth.

8.5 Exegetical notes with relation to block D (cola 30-42):
The end of the thousand years and the end of time (transcendent formula).

In these cola John saw a great white throne and someone who was seated on it. The heaven and the earth gave way before the throne. John saw all the dead, great and small, standing before the throne. The books were opened in which all that the dead had done was recorded. Another book was also opened. It was the book of life. The dead were judged according to what was written in the book. People were dead in the sea. The sea gave them back. Each one was judged according to what he had done. The dead and Hades are thrown into the fire, which is the second death. If anyone's name was not written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

9. Conclusion

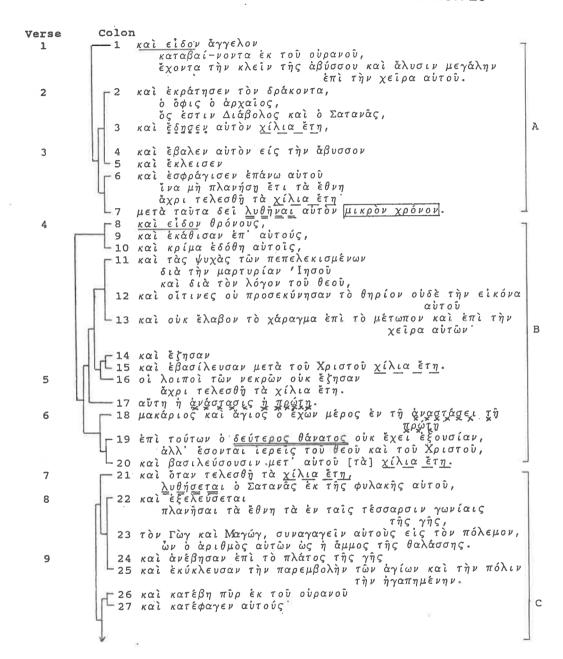
Sustained interest and research into the possible meaning of Rv remain the responsibility of theologians. This investigation was conducted with this in mind.

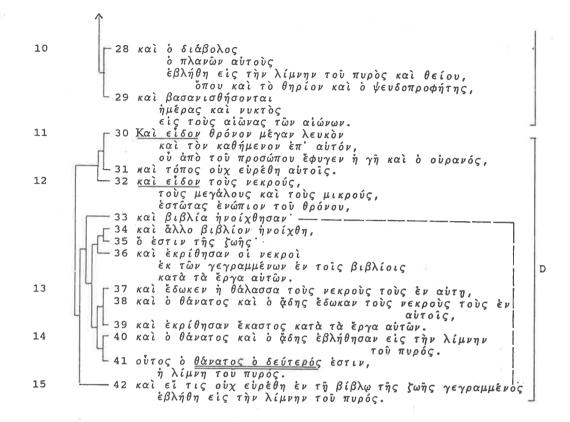
We are not concerned here with a millennium in the past or in the future. Rv 20 is a product of difficult times. The seed-bed of Rv 20 was the persecuted believers of the seven congregations of Asia Minor. According to Rv 1:1 the readers were to expect that all that the vision gave would shortly take place. These believers had experienced conflict from outside (persecution, social pressure) and from within (compromise with the caesar cults). It could cause confusion and disbelief. To encourage the Christians John now wrote a cryptogram in symbolic language which he sent to them.

A SCHEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF REVELATION 20

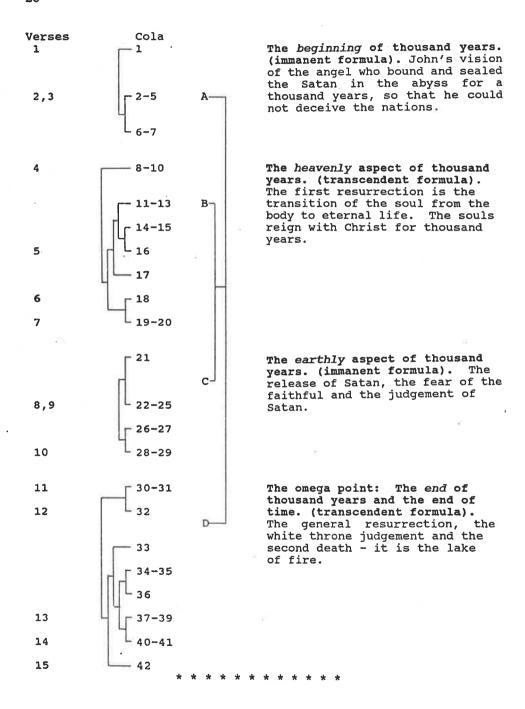
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ADDENDUM. A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF REVELATION 20





A DIAGRAM OF A ANALYSIS OF A STRUCTURE OF REVELATION 20



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