

The Synopsis

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1 THE REVELATION

1.1 Introduction

As regards Peter and Paul, we have scriptural authority for regarding them as the apostles respectively of the circumcision and of the uncircumcision. Peter and the twelve remained at Jerusalem when the disciples were scattered, and, continuing (though God was careful to maintain unity) the work of Christ in the remnant of Israel, gathered into an assembly on earth, the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Paul, having received the ministry of the assembly, as of the gospel to every creature under heaven (Col. I), as a wise master-builder, lays the foundation. Peter sets us off as pilgrims on our journey to follow Christ risen towards the inheritance above. Paul, in the full development of his doctrine (though owning this, as in Philippians 3), shews us the saints sitting in heavenly places in Christ, heirs of all which He is heir of. All this was dispensational, and it is full of instruction. But John holds a different place. He does not enter on dispensation; nor, though once or twice stating the fact (as John 13: I; 14: I; 17: 24; 20: 17), does he take the saint, nor even the Lord Himself, up to heaven. Jesus, for him, is a divine Person, the Word made flesh manifesting God and His Father, eternal life come down to earth. The epistle of John treats the question of our partaking of this life, and its character.

But at the close of the Gospel, after stating the sending of the Comforter on His going away, Christ opens to the disciples (though in a mysterious way) the continuation of God's dealings with the earth, of which John ministerially is the representative, linking the manifestation of Christ on earth at His first coming with His manifestation at His second; Christ's Person, and eternal life in Him, being the abiding security and living seed of God, when dispensationally all was corrupted, and in confusion and decay. If all were in disorder outwardly, eternal life was still the same.

The destruction of Jerusalem formed a momentous epoch as to these things, because the Jewish assembly, formed as such at Pentecost, had ceased (nay, it had even before); only the judicial act was then accomplished. Christians had been warned to leave the camp. The breach of Christianity with Judaism was consummated. Christ could no longer take up the assembly, established in the

remnant of the Jews, as His own seat of earthly authority.¹ But alas! the assembly, as Paul had established it too, had already fallen from its first estate—could in no sense take up the fallen inheritance of Israel. All seek their own, says Paul, not the things of Jesus Christ. All they of Asia-Ephesus, the beloved scene where all Asia had heard the word of God—had forsaken him. They who had been specially brought with full intelligence into the assembly’s place could not hold it in the power of faith. Indeed, the mystery of iniquity was at work before this, and was to go on and grow until the hindrance to the final apostasy was removed.

Here, in this state of universal declension and ruin, John’s ministry comes in. Stability was in the Person of Christ, for eternal life first, but for the ways of God upon earth too. If the assembly was spued out of His mouth, He was the faithful witness, the beginning of the creation of God. Let us trace the links of this in his Gospel. In John 20, as elsewhere noticed in detail, we have a picture of God’s ways from the resurrection of Christ till we come to the remnant of Israel in the latter days, represented by Thomas’s look on the pierced One and believing by seeing. In chapter 21 we have, besides the remnant, the full millennial gathering. Then at the close of the chapter, the special ministry of Peter and John is pointed out, though mysteriously. The sheep of Jesus of the circumcision are confided to Peter; but this ministry was to close like Christ’s. The assembly would not be established on this ground, any more than Israel. There was no tarrying here till Christ came.² Peter’s ministry in fact was closed, and the circumcision assembly left shepherdless, before the destruction of Jerusalem put an end to all such connection for ever. Peter then asks as to John. The Lord answers, confessedly mysteriously, but putting off, as that which did not concern Peter who was to follow Him, the closing of John’s ministry, prolonging it in possibility till Christ came. Now, in fact, the Bridegroom tarried; but the service and ministry of John by the word (which was all that was to remain, and no apostle in personal care) did go on to the return of Christ.

John was no master-builder like Paul—had no dispensation committed to him. He was connected with the assembly in its earthly structure like Peter, not in the Ephesus or heavenly one; he was not the minister of the circumcision, but carried on the earthly system among the Gentiles, only holding fast the Person of Christ. His special place was testimony to the Person of Christ come to earth with divine title over it—power over all flesh. This did not break the links with Israel, as Paul’s ministry did, but raised the power which held all together in the Person of Christ to a height which carried it through any hidden time, or hidden power, on to its establishment over the world at the end; it did not exclude Israel as such, but enlarged the scene of the exercise of Christ’s power so as to set it over the world, and did not establish it in Israel as its source,

¹This was morally true from Acts 3, where the Jewish leaders refuse the testimony to a glorified Christ who would return, as they had rejected a humbled One. Acts 7, by the mouth of Stephen, closes God’s dealings with them in testimony, and the heavenly gathering begins, his spirit being received on high. The destruction of Jerusalem closed Jewish history judicially.

²Paul, of course, is in no way noticed. For him the assembly belonged to heaven—was the body of Christ, the house of God. He was a builder.

though it might establish Israel itself in its own place from a heavenly source of power.

What place does the assembly then hold in this ministry of John, found as it is in the book of Revelation? None in its Pauline character, save in one phrase, coming in after the Revelation is closed, where its true place in Christ's absence is indicated (chap. 22: 17). We have the saints at the time, in their own conscious relationship to Christ, in reference, too, to the royal and priestly place to His God and Father, in which they are associated with Himself. But John's ministerial testimony, as to the assembly, views it as the outward assembly on earth³ in its state of decay—Christ judging this—and the true assembly, the capital city and seat of God's government over the world, at the end, but in glory and grace. It is an abode, and where God dwells and the Lamb. All this facilitates our intelligence of the objects and bearing of the book. The assembly has failed; the Gentiles, grafted in by faith, have not continued in God's goodness. The Ephesian assembly, the intelligent vessel, and expression of what the assembly of God was, had left its first estate, and unless it repented, the candlestick was to be removed. The Ephesus of Paul becomes the witness on earth of decay and of removal out of God's sight, even as Israel had been removed. God's patience would be shewn towards the assembly as it had been towards Israel; but the assembly would not maintain God's testimony in the world any more than Israel had. John does maintain this testimony, ministerially judging the assemblies by Christ's word,⁴ and then the world from the throne, till Christ comes and takes to Himself His great power and reigns. During this transition—dealing of the throne the heavenly saints are seen on high. When Christ comes, they come with Him.

The first part, then, of the epistles of John is the continuation, so to speak, of the Gospel before the last two dispensational chapters; the Revelation, that of these last two chapters (20, 21), where, Christ being risen and no ascension given, the dispensational dealings of God are largely intimated in the circumstances which occur; while it is shewn at the same time that He could not personally set up the kingdom then. He must ascend first. The two short epistles shew us that truth (truth as to His Person) was the test of true love, and to be held fast when what was anti-Christian came in; and the free liberty of the ministration of the truth to be held fast against assumed ecclesiastical or clerical authority, as contrasted with the assembly. The apostle had written to

³And hence in particular assemblies, which of course could be judged and removed. There is another point of divine wisdom here. Though we have, I doubt not, the whole history of the assembly to its end in this world, it is given in facts then present, so that there should be no putting off the coming of the Lord. So, in the parables, the virgins who go to sleep are the same that wake up; the servants that receive the talents are the same found on the Lord's return, though we know ages have passed and death come in.

⁴Note this immensely important principle: the church judged by the word, not the church a judge; and the individual Christian called to give heed to this judgment. The church (I use the word designedly here as used to claim this authority) cannot be an authority when the Lord calls me, if I have ears to hear, to hear and receive the judgment pronounced by Him on it. I judge its state by the words of the Spirit, am bound to do so: it cannot be an authority therefore on the Lord's behalf over me in that state. Discipline is not in question here, but the church as wielding authority.

the assembly. Diotrephes rejected free ministry.
I now turn to the book itself.