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978-1-107-50539-1 - Book of Revelation: Theory of the Text: Rearranged : Text and Translation : Commentary

John Oman

Excerpt

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## PART I

### THE TEXT & ITS REARRANGEMENT

#### I

#### THE THEORY OF THE TEXT

THAT there is some disorder in the text of the Apocalypse is as near a certainty as a literary question can well be.

The evidence is plainest towards the end of the book. Nations need healing (xxii. 2) after pain and sorrow have passed for ever (xxi. 4); the unclean and idolaters and hypocrites must be kept out of the Holy City (xxi. 27) after they have all perished in the lake of fire (xxi. 8); this holy city comes (xxi. 9), but the saints already sit in it on thrones (xx. 4), and its 1000 years end with the loosing of Satan (xx. 7); the Last Judgment and the Eternal State must close the book.

Were the disorder confined to the end of the book, we might be persuaded by Dr Charles's view that John died or suffered martyrdom before finishing his work, leaving part of it on scraps of writing which the editor pieced together very badly.

How we are to conceive John composing in such disconnected clauses yet making his work so complete that Dr Charles can arrange it into a whole<sup>1</sup>, we are not informed. Moreover, the result is stiff and formal and inferior to John's own writing, which is at least free and eloquent, and nowhere more than in this part. In fact nothing in the book seems to have been finished more carefully. But, throughout the whole book, from Ch. iv. onwards, evidences of disorder are easily discernible. The prophetic call is not immediately after the Messages to the Churches, as it ought to be, but in Ch. x. The earth suffers such disaster early in the book that nothing could well happen in it afterwards.

<sup>1</sup> Dr Charles's rearrangement is sufficient disproof of his contention. It is: xx. 1-3, xxi. 9-xxii. 2, 14-15, 17, xx. 4<sup>ch</sup>, 4<sup>ab1</sup>, 5<sup>b</sup>, 6-14, 15, xxi. 5<sup>a</sup>, 4<sup>d</sup>, 5<sup>b</sup>, 1-4<sup>c</sup>, xxii. 3-5, xxi. 5<sup>c</sup>, 6<sup>b</sup>-8, xxii. 6-7, 18<sup>a</sup>, 16, 13, 12, 10, 8-9, 20-21.

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Satan is found working mischief on the earth in Ch. ix., while his fall to earth is not related till Ch. xii. Babylon has fallen in Ch. xiv., while the process which ends with her destruction does not begin till Ch. xvi.

In Dr Charles's view no transposition of leaves or any error which could have happened in transcription can possibly afford the explanation. And, in the sense of ordinary accidental errors, this is true, because the mere transcription seems to have been done with very special care. Yet the reconstruction here offered is based on transposition of pages which are found to be of exactly equal length, with the removal of certain glosses of which this equality affords a reliable, because a rigid, test. This theory can only approve itself by explaining the book, but it may be said beforehand in justification of its claim to a hearing, that what began as a vague impression wrought out with absolute precision and left no line over, that the same result seemed to be reached along quite different lines of inquiry, and that the reasons for the confusion became clearer as the right order was discovered.

The germ of the discovery—if it can be dignified by that name—upon which this reconstruction of the Apocalypse is based, was the view that the women of xii. 6 and xvii. 1 must be parallel conceptions. One sits in state in the wilderness, as her native dominion; the other flees into the wilderness, where she lives in exile from her heavenly home. One is a city, Babylon the Great; the other is at least related to the Holy Jerusalem. The seer is carried in spirit into the wilderness to see the former. This seems to be suggested by the temptation for which Jesus was carried by the Spirit into the wilderness, and to be interpreted by what He there saw—‘the kingdoms of this world and the glory thereof.’ In that case, Babylon the Great is the Rule of the World. Thereupon, the other woman is the Rule of God and His Christ. This would define the whole purpose of the book, in accord with xi. 15, as an account of how the Rule of the World is to become the Rule of our God and of His Christ.

On this interpretation we must distinguish between the Rule of the World and the World-empire. The former is the woman; the latter is the beast which carries her. If this

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distinction be correct, we seem to have some guide for the order of at least part of the book. The fall of the World-empire, of which Rome is the last great embodiment, and the fall of the whole worldly civilisation must be different events: and as the fall of the latter is a consequence of the fall of the former, the passages which describe the fall of Rome must go before the description of the end of the worldly civilisation which embodies the Rule of the World. This involves the transposition of xix. 11–21 and xvi. 17—xix. 9.

Further, if the trumpets (Chs. viii–ix) are reduced to three, as Dr Charles argues, they are merely a form of the last trump and must be towards the end of the book, and Ch. x, being the call to write the book, must be near the beginning.

While these sections were being transposed for the purpose of studying the result, it appeared that the length of the Greek text of each, in the Gebhardt edition which was being used, was always a little over a page or multiples of it. As the Gebhardt text is very carefully spaced and in a type imitating in width the ancient uncial writing, this singular fact seemed worth investigating.

The following passages were selected for the test because (a) they can be certainly distinguished from what precedes and what follows, and (b) the glosses are fairly evident.

I. Ch. i. 9—iii. 22. This is marked off (a) by its contents and (b) by the probability that it should be followed by Ch. x., which contains the prophetic call to write the rest of the book.

II. Ch. xvi. 17—xix. 9<sup>a</sup>. Before it comes the abrupt ending of Har-magedon, when, after the most elaborate setting of the stage, nothing happens; and after it the doublet xix. 9<sup>b</sup>, 10 which has no obvious connexion.

III. Chs. viii. and ix., the first six trumpets.

IV. Ch. xi. 1–13.

V. Ch. xii. 1–xiv. 5. Ch. xi. 14–19, which separates it from xi. 13, looks like an interpolation, and it is followed by the fall of Babylon, the causes of which are not related till xvi. 17 ff.

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The result is:

I. Four sections of 33 lines each, minus about three words, when i. 20<sup>b</sup> and all the clauses, 'he that hath an ear, etc.' are omitted except the first and the last<sup>1</sup>.

II. Four sections of 33 lines each, with two lines more. But 'earthquake' throughout the book means political upheaval, so 'then were there lightnings and thunders' in xvi. 18 must certainly be a gloss. 'Because he is king of kings and lord of lords' in xvii. 14 is a doublet of xix. 16, and interrupts the connexion, and 'it shall no more be' in xviii. 21<sup>b</sup> makes the description which follows superfluous. Omit and the result is exact.

III. Two sections of 33 lines each with two words over, when, as Dr Charles and others have maintained already, the first four trumpets are omitted as a gloss. As what follow are now the only voices, 'the rest' in viii. 13 is certainly one of the superfluous words.

IV. 'And gave glory to the God of heaven' in xi. 13 is a pious gloss, because they do not repent. This leaves exactly 33 lines.

V. Three sections as it stands, with only two or three words over. This is sufficiently near in itself, yet 'for they are virgins' (xiv. 4) is almost certainly a gloss, because the subject is idolatry, not celibacy. This makes them exact.

<sup>1</sup> If i. 20<sup>b</sup> is retained and all the repetitions of ii. 7<sup>a</sup> are omitted, the result is exactly four sections of 33 lines. But i. 20<sup>b</sup> (a) has the appearance of a typical explanatory gloss, (b) seems to explain τὸ μυστήριον as 'the secret,' a sense in which it is not used elsewhere by the author, (c) has four repetitions of ἐπτα, not even one being necessary, which is unlike the author and characteristic of the editor, (d) the stars in iii. 1 are parallel with and possibly identical with the seven spirits of God, and are, therefore, not probably the angels of the Churches. For retaining iii. 22 the reasons are: (a) While no section is longer than 33 lines, some are a word or two less. (b) The repetition is effective as a closing appeal. (c) Its position at the end of the message would explain why the repetitions on the same sheet as ii. 7 are, like it, before 'he that overcometh' and, on the other sheets, at the end of each message, which must be imitated from a genuine example in that position. (d) If the editor only filled in between the first and the last, it would be parallel with his action elsewhere.

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So precise a result in so many instances seemed to justify an attempt to apply this measure to the whole text. Suppose it held good throughout, it might show some new divisions, but its certain value would be as a rigid standard of glosses. Therefore, the process was now reversed. Instead of determining the divisions and marking off glosses, and then counting the lines, the lines were counted and the glosses determined by the enumeration, while a watch was kept for possible new divisions.

In respect of divisions the important points were (1) That the two sections beginning with Ch. iv. 1 ended at vi. 1. This would not have been of any consequence by itself, but the omission of everything connecting the next section with these two left it exactly 33 lines. This singular fact is of the first importance for the interpretation of the book. (2) That of five shorter sections, three combined to make a section of the proper length, and two to make another. (3) That two passages, which made the section in which they stand too long, and which were irrelevant in their present connexion, fitted into two other sections and made them precisely the right length. Moreover, this process, though conducted without any regard to what would happen at the end, finished without leaving a line too many or too few.

In respect of glosses, practically all doublets went out, and the rest had a curious family likeness of dull comment, which, on being removed, left a length of a precision which, at first sight, seemed almost too exact to be credible.

The work was so full of surprises and unexpected confirmations, that, if the course of it could be reproduced, important evidence for the theory would appear. But this proved to be an impossible task without over-burdening the reader with detail. Therefore, we proceed at once to tabulate the result.

## SECTIONS AND GLOSSES

## Sections

I-IV. Ch. i. 9—iii. 22. Glosses i. 20<sup>b</sup>, ii. 11<sup>a</sup>, 17<sup>a</sup>, 29, iii. 6, 13.

V-VI. Ch. iv. 1—vi. 1: 32 and 33 lines.

VII. Ch. vi. 2-17. Glosses *vv.* 3, 5<sup>a</sup>, 7, 9<sup>a</sup>, 12<sup>a</sup>.

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This will require more consideration, because it deeply affects the interpretation of the whole book. Meantime it is enough to note the singular fact that the omission of the opening of the second to the sixth seals leaves a section of exactly 33 lines.

VIII. Ch. vii. Glosses *vv.* 5-8 and *v.* 2 after 'angels.'

The enumeration of the tribes of Israel is irrelevant and contrary to the author's view of Israel as the true Elect of God—Christian as well as Jewish. The other is less certain, but the task of the angels is not to hurt the land and the sea but to prevent them from being hurt. 'Hurt not' which follows could mean, 'Let them not be hurt.'

IX-X. Chs. viii.—ix. Gloss viii. 7-12.

*vv.* 7-12 are a senseless destruction of thirds, out of harmony with the rest, and feeble in form. The other glosses are only three words, both 'sevens' in viii. 6 and 'rest' in *v.* 13.

XI. Ch. x. 1-10. Ch. xxii. 6-8<sup>a</sup>, Ch. x. 11.

xxii. 6-8<sup>a</sup> has no connexion where it stands, and 'he said' has no subject, but here we have a fitting connexion, because the scroll represents the faithful words, and the angel is a fitting speaker<sup>1</sup>.

XII. Ch. xi. 1-13. Gloss *v.* 13, 'and gave glory to the God of heaven'—a repentance the author does not expect.

XIII-XV. Ch. xii. 1-xiv. 5. Gloss xiv. 4, 'for they are virgins,' the subject being freedom from idolatry not celibacy.

XVI-XVII. Ch. xi. 14-19 and Ch. xiv. 6-xv. 4. Ch. xiv. 19<sup>b</sup>-20 is out of place, being in conflict with the meaning of the passage.

XVIII. Ch. xv. 5-xvi. 16. Glosses xv. 8<sup>b</sup>, xvi. 2<sup>b</sup> after 'men,' 6, 9. Omit xvi. 15 as out of place, interrupting the connexion. The glosses are marked by repetition of phrases, crudeness of idea and feebleness of style.

<sup>1</sup> In the old context no plural subject for λέγουσιν (*v.* 11), the almost certain reading, can be found; in the new it might be οἱ λόγοι, but is more probably ταῦτα, considered as two sets—things seen and things heard. This is an important confirmation of the arrangement proposed.

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XIX–XXII. Ch. xvi. 17–xix. 9<sup>a</sup>. Glosses: xvi. 18<sup>a</sup>, ‘lightnings and voices and thunders,’ because ‘earthquake’ here means ‘political upheaval’ and must stand alone; xvi. 21<sup>b</sup>, the usual commentary with the anti-climax ‘very great’; xvii. 14<sup>b</sup>, a doublet of xix. 16; xviii. 21, last clause, because it deprives what follows of meaning, as it would include all the other things which are no more.

XXIII. Ch. xix. 11–16, xiv. 19<sup>b</sup>, 20, xix. 17–21.

This is the only place in the book where xiv. 19<sup>b</sup>–20 is appropriate. xix. 12<sup>b</sup>, ‘having a name written which no one knew except himself’ has been regarded as a gloss, but, on the test of length, it is genuine.

XXIV. Ch. xvi. 15, xix. 9<sup>b</sup>–10, xx. 1–10: 34 lines.

XXV. Ch. xx. 11–xxi. 8: 31 lines. The end of the book.

XXVI–XXVII. Ch. xxi. 9–xxii. 5, xxii. 10–17. Glosses ‘the last’ in xxi. 9 ‘and the height of it’ in v. 16. Ch. xxii. 6–8<sup>a</sup> has already been accounted for.

This includes every word in the text except xxii. 8<sup>b</sup>, 9, which is a doublet of xix. 9–10, and i. 1–8, which is the editor’s preface, and xxii. 18–21, which is the editor’s epilogue.

The chief question regarding this result must concern the glosses. The best test is to put them all together and compare them with each other and with the editor’s undoubted work in the prologue and epilogue. When this is done the marked family likeness becomes too obvious to be missed. This must be discussed more fully, but meantime we have to ask, how any series of glosses, however carefully selected, could be omitted and leave the rest, not approximately but so exactly 33 lines. Moreover, the astonishing precision of this result was not discovered till after the sections were made up with the glosses already marked off. The reckoning had been made with a Gebhardt Greek Testament, but the broken lines were difficult to estimate in that way, and it seemed as though the standard might vary by as much as half a line. Only when the sections had been made up separately from Gebhardt and the enumeration done with precision, was it discovered that 33 lines was so exact a standard that the

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sections were never more, and never above a word or two less. But three exceptions were discovered. §§ V–VI were found to be a line short; and the section which had been arranged before it, and which, being in three parts, was difficult to reckon accurately when they were apart, was found to be too long by precisely the amount that the section following it was short. This seemed too remarkable to be mere coincidence. The second was § XXIII. It was about a third of a line too short. The explanation is probably that ‘and he gathered’ in xiv. 19 belongs to both texts. Such a phrase seems necessary before ‘and he cast,’ and the existence of the same phrase in both passages would explain why the editor inserted the passage where he did. The third was § XXV, which is only 31 lines, but it is certainly the close of the book, and raises no question.

## II

## THE WORK OF THE EDITOR

WERE the book mere mysterious vaticination, it would be conceivable that the writer, especially if he had to find occupation for weary years of captivity, composed a work divided so exactly in equal sections. If we could believe that it is written in a kind of Hebrew metre, as Dr Charles supposes, this task might seem easier and more rational, though it is difficult to conceive what kind of metre would make sections so equal when written as prose. But the many changes Dr Charles has to introduce into the text to support his theory alter the length of the sections. This lands us in the still more perplexing theory, that the sections originally were not equal, but have been made so by the editor. To accomplish such a feat he ought surely to have been very clever, but Dr Charles has no such opinion of him: and in that he is not mistaken.

A simpler explanation is that we have to do with equal sheets of a MS. which have suffered disarrangement. This hypothesis we now proceed to consider. Only an arrangement in which the sections are made to fit naturally into

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each other would afford convincing proof, but, as the text stands and without any rearrangement, we have seen in it evidence of disorder, while the glosses show mistaken ideas about the meaning of the book likely to cause mistakes in its arrangement, and, when we proceed to consider the editor's own work in the preface and the epilogue, we shall discover some more misunderstandings of the same kind.

Our next task, therefore, must be to learn what we can of the editor, both of his ideas and of his capacity, by putting together and studying what he has added to his author.

In the editorial epilogue (xxii. 18, 19) the text may either be 'I testify' or 'we testify.' It is, therefore, impossible to be certain whether we ought to speak of editor or of editors. Possibly the careful transcribing and the incompetent editing may argue for a joint-stock responsibility, which is apt to be more efficient in small matters than in great. Yet, for the sake of convenience, we shall speak of the editor.

The strict numeration of lines of the original text, working out exactly at the end, shows that nothing has been omitted except one short doublet. It would, therefore, appear that the transcriber laid his own testimony about not taking from the words of the prophecy of this book very much to heart. But why he did not lay to heart equally his own warning about adding to the words of the prophecy is impossible to say, except that he undoubtedly thought his additions mere explanations and completions.

By his own work we can test the measure of his capacity for this task of interpretation and expansion.

The epilogue (xxii. 18, 19) is the nearest to original composition which he has achieved, because, even if he took the idea of such a testimony from the Gospel of John, he does manage to say what is in a measure new. Yet, even in this short paragraph, he repeats 'this book' four times, and twice with 'prophecy.' He also manages to show that he misunderstood his author's view of prophecy, of the plagues, of the tree of life, and of the Holy City. To him they are prediction, God's general judgments, eternal life, and heaven, while for our author they are declaring the mind of God, particular judgments on the world-empires, medicine for the healing of the nations, and the Millennial Kingdom.

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Further, the threat shows an attitude towards the book impossible for the author, who wrote solely to the end that men should be warned and remain steadfast, or, if they had fallen, repent.

The only other section which the editor wrote as his own, and not as commentary on the work of his author, is the introduction (i. 1–8). Probably it was composed at the same time as the epilogue, because the epilogue is merely an expansion of Ch. xxii. 7, ‘Blessed is he that keepeth the words of the prophecy of this book,’ and in the introduction this is quoted in full.

In the first paragraph of the introduction (*vv.* 1–3) the book is called ‘The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ.’ In a sense this may be true of our author’s work, but not in the sense of mere information about the future, as is here meant. John, instead of describing his message as ‘the things which must shortly come to pass,’ describes it as concerned with ‘the things which are, and the things which shall come to pass hereafter.’ From the contents of the book, this means the principles by which God governs the present and by which He will determine the future. Moreover, some of this future is not to be realised for at least a thousand years. Yet, with all this misunderstanding, the paragraph is made up almost entirely of phrases from the author.

The second paragraph (*vv.* 4–6) begins with ‘John to the seven churches which are in Asia.’ This may have been the destination of the book, but the phrase is a repetition from Ch. i. 11, with the characteristic tag of information, that the churches are in Asia. To John the essential point is their personal relation to him, and not probably their geographical position. This form of address is, moreover, an imitation of Paul’s method of beginning his epistles. ‘From Him which was and which is and which is to come,’ twice repeated, with ‘the Almighty’ or ‘All-Sovereign’ in the last, is from Ch. iv. 8, where it is in place, as it is not here<sup>1</sup>. To the phrase ‘From the seven spirits which are before the throne,’ it is difficult to attach any meaning, and it certainly can have no

<sup>1</sup> ‘Which is to come’ is singular as a description of God even there, but was, is and is to come is probably merely a way of saying He is ruler of all in the past, the present and the future.