

The Time Periods in the Central Part of the Book of Revelation

Introduction

Looking broadly at the central part of the Book of Revelation, one notices a very special concern with chronology. This central part of the text (Rev 11–13) describes events occurring during various periods of time, all of which appear to be of more or less the same duration and equivalent to three-and-a-half years. Three different expressions of time are mentioned: ‘1,260 days’ is found twice (at 11,3 and 12,6), ‘42 months’ is also found twice (at 11,2 and 13,5), and the expression ‘time, times and half-a-time’ is used once (at 12,14). The use of these temporal expressions not only binds the central chapters together into a single literary unit, but also indicates how the narrated events are related to each other. As the author of one recent monograph wrote “this chronological marker is the interpretive key to this middle section of Revelation... understanding how this 42 months/1260 days/ ‘a time, times and half a time’ period is used by John to bind together the events found in Rev.11–13 will be vital to understanding John’s central message”.¹

As with so many aspects of the Book of Revelation, the Old Testament provides the key to the significance of these temporal expressions. In the Book of Daniel, similar expressions are used to prophesy a final, shortened period of time, during which temple sacrifices will be suspended and the saints will be oppressed and persecuted by a tyrant (Dan 7,23-25; 8,9-14.23-26; 9,27; 12,1.7.11). This prophecy is reiterated in the eschatological discourse of the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, where it refers to a final, shortened period of tribulation and deception immediately preceding Christ’s Parousia at the end of history (cf. Mt 24,15-28; Mk 13,14-23). The same prophecy appears to have been interpreted by Luke to refer to the ‘time of the gentiles’, understood as the entire, unshortened interval starting with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE and lasting until ‘the times of the gentiles are fulfilled’ at the Parousia (Lk 21,20-24).

Current Interpretations

Returning to the central chapters of the Book of Revelation, it is therefore widely assumed that the analogous expressions of time all represent the same final period of trial and tribulation for the people of God. Almost all modern commentators consider the temporal expressions to be ‘synchronous’ (i.e. they are equal and refer to the same period of time), although some interpret this period as symbolic of the entire inter-advent interval (following Luke),² and others take it to represent a final, shortened period immediately preceding the Parousia (following Matthew and Mark).³ This ‘synchronic’ approach implies that all the following events take place during the same time-period: the trampling of the Holy City for 42 months (Rev 11,2), the prophetic mission of the two witnesses for 1,260 days (11,3-13), the protection of the celestial woman in the desert for 1,260 days (12,6) and for ‘time, times and half-a-time’ (12,14), and the reign of the ‘beast from the sea’ for 42 months (13,1-8).

As long as the interpretation of these events remains on the non-literal level, the inconsistencies of the synchronic approach do not become apparent. Indeed, it is only possible to view all the events described in these chapters as concurrent and contemporaneous, if the literal details of the text are disregarded. However, as soon as the literal aspects of the described events are considered, serious objections arise to the approach that interprets them as synchronous:

¹ Antoninus King Wai Siew, *The War Between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses: A Chiastic Reading of Revelation 11.1-14.5*, LNTS 283; London: T & T Clark 2005, 3.

² E.g., Prigent, Swete, Murphy, Schüssler Fiorenza, Ford, and Harrington.

³ E.g., Bauckham, Aune, Ladd, Vanni, Yarbro Collins, Beckwith, Redditch, Boring, Roloff, Witherington, Stuckenbruck, Caird, Charles, Beasley-Murray, Morris, and Mounce.

1. According to the text, the mission of the two prophets during the 1,260 days (11,3-13) cannot take place during the 42-month reign of the beast from the sea (13,1-8), as they are enemies of each other and the two prophets and the sea-beast both have the power to destroy their enemies (11,5 and 13,7). If the reign of the beast were to be concurrent with the mission of the two prophets, it would quickly degenerate into mortal combat, but a fateful contest of this kind is not what is described.⁴ Instead, the text notes: “whenever they finish their witnessing, the beast that is coming up out of the abyss will make war against them and overcome them and kill them” (11,7), which is to say, the beast does not make war against the two witnesses and kill them until they have completed their 1260-day mission (11,7); the 42-month reign of the beast is terminated by the Lord and his armies at the Parousia (19,19-20), and not by the two witnesses.

2. If the time periods are considered equal, it follows that the mission of the two witnesses and the reign of the beast finish simultaneously with the Parousia at the end of history. This is problematic since, at the same time the beast is supposed to be killing the two witnesses and celebrating their deaths, he is meeting his own fate at Armageddon, at the Parousia of the Lord, when he is captured and then condemned eternally to the lake of fire (19,20).

3. If the end of the mission of the two witnesses coincides with the end of the reign of the beast at the Parousia, at the end of history, then the resurrection and ascension of the two witnesses takes place three-and-a-half days later (11,13). This would be after the end of history, in an unscriptural ‘overtime’. However, by this time the eternal destiny of every soul will already have been decided on the basis of whether or not he or she ‘worshipped the beast’ (13,8; 20,15). So, for the conversion of souls at the ascension of the two witnesses to be real and effective (11,13), it must happen before the destiny of each soul has been determined during the reign of the beast.

4. It has been shown that 11,2 and 11,3 contain a parallel couplet that links the opening verses in chapter 11 (11,1-2) with the rest of the chapter (11,3-13): “it [the outer court] was given to the nations and they will trample the Holy City for 42 months” (11,2) has a structure which is parallel in form to that of the following verse: “And I will give to my two witnesses and they will prophesy for 1260 days...”(11,3).⁵ However, the parallelism in these two verses does not extend to the meaning of the terms found there, since the ‘giving the outer court of the temple to the nations’ cannot be equated with ‘giving divine authority to the two witnesses’, neither can the act of ‘trampling the Holy City’ be equated with ‘prophesying’. Clearly the terms in the parallel couplet are being contrasted, and not compared or equated in any way. One cannot argue, therefore, on the basis of this parallelism, that the temporal expressions (42 months and 1260 days) are the same. On the contrary, the contrasting nature of the parallelism indicates that they should be considered as different.

5. If the two time-periods, 1,260 days (11,3; 12,6) and 42 months (11,2; 13,5), refer to the same period of time, as most scholars assert, then it is legitimate to ask why the author has chosen two different temporal expressions when one would suffice. Furthermore, the author would have known that, whichever calendar was used, 1,260 days is not exactly the same as 42 months: according to the Hebrew luni-solar calendar, 42 months is 21 days less than 1,260 days and

⁴ In other words, one would have to explain why the two witnesses are not killed by the beast, or vice versa, before the end of their ordained assignments. In particular, one would have to explain why the beast might permit the two witnesses to continue prophesying against him, while at the same time authorizing the massacre of countless, less threatening, fellow witnesses (Rev 13,5.7). No plausible explanation exists. It is inconceivable, and totally implausible, that there may be a private pact between the beast and the two witnesses, preventing them from harming each other. Similarly, the argument that the two witnesses continuously manage to elude or frustrate the beast’s efforts to put them to death cannot be supported, because the text specifically states that the beast “will make war against them and overcome them and kill them” only after they have finished their 1260-day mission (11,7).

⁵ Siew, *The War*, 103-107.

according to the Essene 364-day solar calendar 42 months lasted 14 days more than 1,260. His use of these two different expressions therefore implies that he is referring to two different periods of time.

Final Week of Years

In the light of these textual details, it is unreasonable to assume, as do the great majority of commentators, that all the temporal expressions are the same and synchronous.⁶ The last two objections stated above argue against the equivalence of the two periods (1260 days and 42 months), while the first three objections would be resolved if the mission of the two witnesses preceded the reign of the beast, that is to say, if the two time periods were consecutive, with the period of 1260 days preceding that of the 42 months.

In fact, such an alternative interpretation already exists, and was originally proposed by both Hippolytus and Victorinus in their comments on the Book of Revelation.⁷ St. Augustine also seems to have adopted this view, although he speaks of only one witness instead of two.⁸ The Babylonian Talmud also speaks of a final period of seven years, or *septennium*, after which the world as we know it will come to an end.⁹ In the modern period, this interpretation has been revived by a very small number of scholars,¹⁰ on the basis that the prophecy in the Book of Daniel mentions a final seven-year period, in which only the last half is dominated by the tyrannical oppression of the people of God. In the first half of this final ‘week of years’, the tyrant makes a covenant with many rulers (Dan 9,27). In an analogous way, the Book of Revelation describes a final seven-year period, the first half of which is described as the period of 1260 days, and the second as the period of 42 months. The 1260-day mission of the two witnesses is brought to an end by the beast at the start of his 42-month reign (Rev 11,7). At the end of this final 42-month period, the beast is removed from power by Christ returning at his Parousia, at the end of history.

Needless to say, this finding has significant implications for the interpretation of the central part of the Book of Revelation. The two consecutive time periods give a temporal structure to all the events described in chaps. 11-13, in such a way that they can be understood as a narrative prophecy: during the first period of 1260 days the two witnesses conduct their prophetic mission (Rev 11,3) at the

⁶ The popularity of the synchronous interpretation of these time periods may be due to the persistence of the so-called Enoch and Elijah tradition carefully elucidated by Richard Bauckham in *The Martyrdom of Enoch and Elijah: Jewish or Christian?* JBL 95/3 (1976) 447-58. This tradition appears to have been elaborated from the fourth century AD, from a combination of Rev 11 with various pre-Christian elements, but it differs from Rev 11 in having the two witnesses active at the same time as the Antichrist figure (the beast): “The point of most consistent divergence is the purpose of the mission of Enoch and Elijah. The two witnesses in Rev 11:3-13 are preachers of repentance; they are not represented as preaching against Antichrist specifically; they encounter Antichrist only when their witness is completed. In the Enoch and Elijah tradition, almost without exception, the two prophets are sent against Antichrist, after his reign has begun. This may mean that they are the instruments of his destruction (...) but it most commonly means that they expose him as an imposter” (ibid. 453). It is quite possible that this tradition constitutes a pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*) of Rev 11,3-13 that influences its interpretation up to this day, in ways that are not strictly faithful to the text.

⁷ Hippolytus, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, paragraphs 43-47, and Victorinus, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of the Blessed John*, on 11,3.

⁸ St. Augustine, *City of God*, 20:30: “And at or in connection with that judgment the following events shall come to pass, as we have learned: Elias the Tishbite shall come; the Jews shall believe; Antichrist shall persecute; Christ shall judge; the dead shall rise; the good and the wicked shall be separated; the world shall be burned and renewed. All these things, we believe, shall come to pass; but how, or in what order, human understanding cannot perfectly teach us, but only the experience of the events themselves. My opinion, however, is, that they will happen in the order in which I have related them” (quoted from <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120120.htm>).

⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 97a.

¹⁰ T.F. Glasson, *The Revelation of John*, Cambridge: CUP 1965, 67-70, and Alan Johnson, ‘Revelation’ in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Gæbelein, Vol. 12, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1981, 502-504.

same time as those, represented by the heavenly woman, flee to their place in the desert (12,6).¹¹ This first stage is followed immediately by the second period, which lasts 42 months and is characterized by the reign of the beast (13,5) and the trampling of the Holy City (11,2). This second period is brought to an end by the Parousia and the final battle described in the text (19,11-21). The central message of Revelation, then, concerns the events prophesied for the final ‘week of years’ before the end of history.

We should note how this consecutive approach to the temporal structure of Rev 11-13 frustrates the allegorizing interpretation¹² of one or other of the time periods, whose aim is to explain the two time periods as concurrent. This applies especially to the interpretation that allegorizes the protection of the woman in the desert for 1260 days (12,6), in order to combine it with the 42-month reign of the beast understood literally. The former period is said to represent the spiritual protection granted to the Church, while the latter period encompasses the literal persecution and annihilation of her members.¹³ Interpreting the two time-periods consecutively removes the need for this hybrid amalgam of allegorical and literal interpretations.

Time, Times and Half-a-Time

The discussion so far has only dealt with two of the temporal expressions mentioned in chapters 11-13. The third expression, ‘time, times and half-a-time’, occurs at 12,14 and is identical to the expression used in the Book of Daniel to represent the period when the saints will be sorely persecuted and oppressed by a tyrant described as the little horn of the fourth beast (Dan 7,23-25; 12,7). In the Book of Revelation, as we have seen, this period of tribulation is represented by the period of 42 months. The information on the flight and protection of the woman in 12,14 is not therefore a repetition of that given at 12,6. In 12,6, this information is reported with reference to the period of 1260 days, while in 12,14 it is reaffirmed, but this time with reference to the succeeding period of 42 months (‘a time, times, and half-a-time’). The conclusion is that the woman remains at her place in the desert for the entire final ‘week of years’ (the 1260 days followed by the 42 months).

The expression “time, two times and half-a-time”, cited at Rev 12,14 and meaning ‘three-and-a-half years’, informs us exactly which calendar the author had in mind: the Hebrew luni-solar calendar in which 42 months lasted 1,239 days (21 days less than 1,260) or the sectarian (Essene) 364-day solar calendar in which 42 months lasted 1,274 days (14 days more than 1,260). By referring to the 42-month period by the expression “time, two times and half-a-time”, the author is telling us that its duration is three-and-a-half years. Under the Hebrew luni-solar calendar, three-and-a-half years was composed of at least 43 months, due to the ‘intercalated’ month added every 2-3 years. It seems, therefore, that the author was guided by the sectarian 364-day solar calendar in which 42 months were equal to 3½ years and 1,274 days.

Summary

Apart from the exegetical implications outlined above, the discussion has touched on an important difference between the majority of academic interpretations on one hand, with their predilection for symbolical and allegorical expositions, and the interpretations of faith on the other hand, which adhere more to the literal significance of the text. As long as the mission of the two witnesses is

¹¹ For our identification of the woman and interpretation of her flight to the desert, see https://www.academia.edu/66117811/Towards_the_mystical_interpretation_of_Revelation_12.

¹² Allegorization (allegorical embellishment or interpretation) should be distinguished from allegory: “To allegorize is to impose on a story hidden meanings which the original author neither intended nor envisaged; it is to treat as allegory that which was not intended as allegory” C.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, Pennsylvania 1980, 165-171.

¹³ So, for example, Beale can say: “Therefore the three and a half years reveals two perspectives about the saints’ destiny: they undergo tribulation (11,2; 12,14; 13,5-6) but are nonetheless protected from ultimate spiritual harm.” G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation – A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999, 566.

interpreted in a non-literal way, as wholly symbolizing the mission of the faithful Church, the powers attributed to them are taken metaphorically, and do not therefore seem to clash with those of the beast. Understood like this, there appears to be no contradiction in considering all the time periods as equal and concurrent. This interpretation has been adopted by the majority of modern scholars, and is characteristic of the contemporary academic approach.¹⁴

However, this approach breaks down when the mission and powers of the two witnesses are understood on a more literal level. Since their powers are described as divine and supernatural, a biblical belief in the reality of supernatural power is a precondition for understanding them literally, and this is uniquely characteristic of the interpretation of faith.¹⁵ Understanding the powers of the two witnesses in a literal way, it becomes clear that they cannot be exercised at the same time as those of the beast, unless one invokes highly implausible reasons to explain why the two witnesses are not killed by the beast, or vice versa, before the end of their ordained assignments.¹⁶ All the literal details of the text are explained much more satisfactorily if the two periods are considered as consecutive, with the 1260-day mission of the two witnesses succeeded immediately by the 42-month reign of the beast. This approach is supported not only by its analogy with the final ‘week of years’ described in the Book of Daniel, but also by some of the earliest commentaries on these passages in the history of the text’s interpretation.

John Ben-Daniel
Jerusalem.

¹⁴ In a survey of 29 of the most commonly consulted commentaries on the Book of Revelation, 21 propose this non-literal interpretation of the mission of the two witnesses.

¹⁵ The legitimacy of the non-literal interpretation really depends on whether the passage can be interpreted literally or not, as ‘impossible literality’ is the main criterion for non-literal interpretation (see Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 188). In this case, the question of whether ‘literalness’ is possible or impossible is really a matter of faith.

¹⁶ See footnote 4.