Revelation: Exegetical Concerns

The Need for Exegesis

- Because of the <u>Prophetic</u> & <u>Epistolary</u> natures of Revelation
  - It is imperative that we undergo rigorous exegesis of the text to properly understand it
- This includes applying 5 basic exegetical principles

5 Principles

1. The first task of exegesis in Revelation is to seek the author's/Holy Spirit's <u>original</u> <u>intent</u>
   - As with the Epistles, the primary meaning of Revelation is what <u>John</u> intended to mean
     - Which in turn must also have been something his <u>readers</u> could have understood it to mean
     - In fact, they would have the advantage over us of:
       - Knowing their own <u>historical</u> context
       - Familiarity with <u>apocalyptic</u> forms & images
       - Steeped deeply in the <u>OT</u>
   - Since Revelation is meant to be <u>prophetic</u>, one must be open to the possibility of a <u>secondary</u> meaning, inspired by the Holy Spirit but not fully seen by the author or his readers
     - However, such a second meaning lies beyond exegesis in the broader area of hermeneutics
     - Thus, the task of exegesis is to understand what John was intending his original audience to hear and understand
2. One cannot assume the knowledge of other <u>NT</u> <u>texts</u> by the original audience, and therefore one *must* not make those texts the hermeneutical key to unlock Revelation
   - For instance, it is fair to assume that the original audience was aware of John's use of imagery from Daniel & Ezekiel
   - But not that he assumed his audience's knowledge of Matthew 24 or 1 & 2 Thessalonians
   - There should be a level of consistency between all texts of the NT
     - But that does not mean that the original audience of any NT book would *need* to be familiar with the content of another NT book to make sense of what they were receiving
3. Because of the <u>apocalyptic</u>/<u>prophetic</u> nature of the book, there are some added difficulties at the exegetical level, especially having to do with <u>imagery</u>
   - Here are 4 suggestions to help:
     a) One must have a sensitivity to the rich background of ideas that have gone into Revelation's composition
       - The chief of which is the <u>OT</u>
       - But also from <u>apocalyptic</u> and ancient <u>mythology</u>
       - Though the images may not always mean what they did in their original source
     b) Apocalyptic imagery is of several kinds
       - Some are <u>constant</u>
         - Ex.) the beast out of the sea = a world empire, not an individual ruler
       - Some are <u>fluid</u>
         - Ex.) The 'lion' of the tribe of Judah turns out to be a 'lamb' (Rev. 5:5-6)

- o Ex.) The woman in ch. 12 is clearly a positive image, while the woman in ch. 17 is evil
  - Some have <u>specific</u> counterparts
    - o Ex.) the 7 lampstands = 7 churches; the dragon =Satan
  - Some are more <u>general</u> in nature
    - o The 4 horsemen (ch. 6) probably do not represent specific expressions of conquest, war, famine, and death, but rather represent this expression of human fallenness as the source of the church's suffering (6:9-11) that in turn will be a cause of God's judgment (6:12-17)
  c) When John himself interprets his images, these interpreted images must be held firmly and must serve as a starting point for understanding other images
  - There are 6 such images:
    - o The one like a son of man is Christ (1:13)
    - o The golden lampstands are the 7 churches (1:20)
    - o The 7 stars are 7 angels/messengers (1:20)
    - o The great dragon is Satan (12:9)
    - o The 7 heads are the 7 hills on which the woman sits (17:9; as well as the 7 kings)
    - o The prostitute is the great city of Rome (17:18)
  d) One must see the visions as wholes and not allegorically press all the details
  - In this way, visions are like parables
  - The whole vision is trying to say something
  - The details are either:
    - o For <u>dramatic</u> effect
      - ▪ Ex.) The details of the sun going black like sackcloth and the stars falling like ripe figs emphasizes the severity of the earthquake described, and does not *necessarily* have a correspondence in reality (6:12-14)
    - o Or to add to the picture of the whole so that the readers will mot mistake the points of reference
      - ▪ Ex.) The locusts with gold crowns, human faces, and women's long hair (9:7-11) helps fill out the picture that the original audience could not mistake: the barbican hordes on the edges of the Roman Empire
4. John expects his readers to hear his echoes of the OT as the <u>continuation</u> and <u>consummation</u> of that story
  - Ex.) Fee, p. 265.3-266.1
  - Thus, good exegesis of Revelation requires one to be constantly aware of these OT echoes
  - Since in the vast majority of instances the OT context of these echoes gives you clues as to how John intends his own images and pictures to be understood
5. Apocalypses in general, and Revelation in particular, seldom intend to give a detailed <u>chronological</u> account of the future
  - John's larger concern is that, despite present (for him) appearances, God is in control of history and the church, and even though the church will experience suffering and death, it will be triumphant in Christ, who will judge His enemies and save His people
  - All the visions must be seen in light of this greater concern