

Objections to John's "Near" Statements in Revelation

by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.

John opens Revelation with two seemingly clear statements:

"The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John." (Rev 1:1)

"Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near." (Rev 1:3)

Then he closes his glorious book with two parallel statements, reiterating his point:

"He said to me, 'These words are faithful and true'; and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to His bond-servants the things which must soon take place." (Rev 22:6)

"He said to me, 'Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.'" (Rev 22:10)

These near-term statements have tripped-up commentators over the years. In this article I would like to point out several of the leading attempts to re-interpret John's introductory and concluding statements. This is an important interpretive endeavor for the postmillennialist because many modern Christians see Revelation's judgment scenes as contradictory to the postmillennial hope.

The following statements are made by those who do not believe Revelation's events were near.

1. John was mistaken

The events were expected soon, but John was wrong. M. E. Boring asserts that John's near-term expectation for "all the events his letter envisions" erred: "Does this mean he was wrong? Yes. Christians who reverence the Bible as Scripture, the vehicle of God's word, ought not to hesitate to acknowledge that its authors made errors. . . . When John adopted apocalyptic as the vehicle of his message, he adopted its errors as well." W. J. Harrington concurs: "When John declares that the time is near, he means that, in his view, the End is soon. Was he, then, mistaken? In one sense, obviously yes. The end did not happen in his

day, nor has it occurred nineteen centuries later. What we might learn from him is a sense of urgency.”

Nigel Turner agrees, noting that “conservative scholars try to see in this word the meaning ‘quickly’ (i.e. catastrophically) as well as soon, for the simple truth is that the events did not have an immediate fulfillment. James Barr notes that Revelation “failed rather spectacularly to deliver on its promise that Jesus would come ‘soon.’” B. Robinson is more gracious to John but agrees that: “John’s expectation of a speedy winding up of history . . . was premature.” But the meaning really is ‘soon.’”

W. Buchanan puts the matter boldly: “John thought Christians were then near the end of the tribulation, and it would be only a short time before the predestined period would be over and the nation would be free from foreign rule. . . . John was not expecting to wait a thousand years. Based on Daniel, he expected an end to take place within three and one-half years. That did not happen, and John made a mistake. That is all there is to it, and no one should try to claim some infallibly correct interpretation that will absolve John of error.”

This approach is unacceptable to those who believe Revelation is divinely revealed (as John claims in 1:1, hopefully truthfully). And it is based on a radical misunderstanding of what Revelation is really teaching, as we shall see. Furthermore, it certainly would not create a sense of “urgency” but rather a profound sense of disappointment and disgust akin to those who followed William Miller to the mountain top in 1843. Revelation should be nothing more than a Qumran-like specimen of failed expectations.

2. John was ambiguous

The events were prophesied to be soon, but as was customary with Israel’s prophets, the special prophetic language is intentionally “ambiguous.” Prophetic ambiguity is intentional and designed to heighten the hearers’ expectations for moral purposes of readiness. Though not applying his discussion to Rev, we may easily see how Scot McKnight’s understanding of Hebrew prophecy would explain John’s nearness imagery. In discussing Jesus’ Gospel statements regarding the nearness of the kingdom and the apocalyptic judgments associated with it, McKnight writes: “I will argue that Jesus had an imminent expectation and that this view is consistent with the prophetic movement in Israel. His perception was not erroneous. In its limitation, ignorance, and ambiguity, prophetic knowledge is not erroneous knowledge, but it is different from everyday, empirical knowledge.”

Though McKnight (129) argues against employing “exegetical gymnastics” to evade the import of prophetic near-term pronouncements, his approach seems to encourage just that. John’s statements are quite clear, repeated, and balanced with one another. He opens (1;1, 3) and closes (22:6, 10) with these nearness statements. He never declares that he does not

know the time; he does not use ambiguous language in making his statements. Any prophetic-ambiguity argument will not suffice to discount the approaching judgments.

3. Revelation is motivational

The events are declared to be soon, but only for dramatic, motivational purposes. Michaels argues that “Christians tend to get nervous about any implication that the Bible might be mistaken. Yet a great deal is lost when the striking words *soon* and the time is *near* are not given their proper force. The conviction that the end of the world is near is what makes the book of Revelation larger than life. . . . The intense awareness of the end of all things infuses the book’s imagery with sharpness and rich color. The announcement that ‘the time is near’ provokes not resignation or a feeling that nothing matters, but on the contrary a kind of jubilation at the preciousness of life and at the world God created and will create anew in the events that must soon take place.” J. L. Resseguie holds a similar view when he states that John is building a sense of “tension” in his dramatic work. J. L. Maier comments that “Jesus, like Godot, is just around a corner that is never turned.”

Perhaps we may suppose that this approach would have infused the book with sharpness and color for its original recipients. But now nineteen hundred years of delay would surely dull that cutting edge and wash out the color considerably. And surely Jesus is not like Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot that depicts the meaninglessness of life.

4. The events will occur rapidly

The events will unfold rapidly whenever they begin to occur. Dispensationalist scholar John Walvoord understands Revelation’s opening comment thus: “That which Daniel declared would occur ‘in the latter days’ is here described as ‘soon’ (Gr. *en tachei*), that is, ‘quickly or suddenly coming to pass,’ indicating a rapidity of execution after the beginning takes place. The idea is not that the event may occur soon, but that when it does, it will be sudden (cf. Luke 18:8; Acts 12:7; 22:18; 25:4; Rom. 16:20). A similar word, *tachys*, is translated ‘quickly’ seven times in Rev.” Charles Ryrie and LEGNT also hold this view.

*This interpretation does not offer any encouragement whatsoever. If the Church must wait hundreds and hundreds of years before the events occur, what is the significance of their finally arriving rapidly? Besides the soon-ness embodied in this phrase occurs again in other expressions in 1:3, 19, and elsewhere. F. D. Mazzaferri well argues: “Though *tachos* may connote speed rather than imminence, the former makes little sense in terms of 22:10, or in context with *engus*. Likewise, Jesus’ promise *erchomai tachy*, is scarcely intelligible, let alone a motivation for perseverance, except in the sense of imminence.” He even notes that in 1:7 “the pres. tense eloquently speaks of imminence in its own right” (Mazzaferri).*

5. John is speaking of God's time

The events will occur soon according to the eternal God's measure of time. Dispensationalist R. L. Thomas recognizes the weakness of Walvoord's position noting that "to say that relief will come 'suddenly' offers no encouragement but to say that it will come 'soon' does." He argues that "when measuring time, Scripture has a different standard from ours. . . . It must be kept in mind that God is not limited by considerations of time in the same way man is (cf. 2 Pet. 3:8)."

L. Morris (46–47) holds a similar view: "We must bear in mind that in the prophetic perspective the future is sometimes foreshortened. In other words the term may refer to the certainty of the events in question. The Lord God has determined them and he will speedily bring them to pass. But this refers to his time, not ours, to the quality of the time rather than the quantity. With him one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day (2 Pet. 3:8)." Indeed, Alford warns that this statement "must not be urged to signify the events of apocalyptic prophecy were to be close at hand." According to C. Keener "Revelation functions, therefore, as a "summons to readiness." G. Osborne agrees: "to God the period between John's time and ours still connotes 'soon.'" See also Ocemenius, H. B. Swete, H. Alford, M. Vincent, A. T. Robertson, M. R. Mulholland, D. W. Hall, and R. Stefanovic.

How this offers any more encouragement to a severely persecuted Church than Walvoord's view is not clear. After all, on this view John would be stating: "The events within are imminent, but may in fact take 2000 years before they occur." In addition I would make a three-fold rebuttal to the possibility that John is speaking of time as does Peter in 2 Peter 3:8:

In the first place, Peter expressly states the fact that God views time differently from man. John does not. We cannot go about interpreting all temporal indicators by God's estimation of time. Secondly, Peter is talking about God, whereas John is giving directives to men. Peter makes a theological statement regarding God and his perception of time; John provides an historical directive to men regarding their unfolding hardships. We must not confuse theological truth about God with historical directives to men. Thirdly, Peter is expressly dealing with the objection that certain prophecies have failed because they have yet to occur: "Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation'" (2 Peter 3:3–4). Peter is facing the slowness of God's judgment. John, however, is warning suffering Christians (among which he numbers himself, Revelation 1:9) about what they must expect. He dogmatically declares repeatedly and in various ways that his prophecies "must soon take place" because "the time is near."

6. The events are always imminent

The events are imminent in that they could theoretically occur at any minute.

Premillennialist R. H. Mounce takes this approach: “John writes that the events that constitute the revelation must ‘soon take place.’ That almost 2,000 year of church history have passed and the end has not yet come poses a problem for some. . . . The most satisfying solution is to take the expression ‘must soon take place’ in a straightforward sense, remembering that in the prophetic outlook the end is always imminent. Time as a chronological sequence is of secondary concern in prophecy. This perspective is common to the entire NT.” Later he writes: “One answer to the problem of this as-yet-unfulfilled expectation is to hold that God is more concerned with the fulfillment of his redemptive purposes than he is with satisfying our ideas of appropriate timing.”

B. M. Metzger adds: “In the Christian doctrine of the last things, the imminence of the end is moral rather than chronological: each successive generation, so far as can be known to the contrary, may be the last generation. In that sense the time is always near (22:10).” This view is held by G. E. Ladd and A. F. Johnson.

But against this view we must wonder why John would use time-laden words to express his view of prophecy rather than simply saying these events “must” come about. Indeed, in 22:10 John’s revelatory angel seems intentionally to be reversing Daniel’s heavenly directive which stated: “But as for you, Daniel, conceal these words and seal up the book until the end of time” (Dan 12:4). John’s directive is “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near” (Rev 22:10). Thus, we have the odd situation that around 600 years before John’s day, Daniel was commanded to seal up his prophecy until the end, but John is commanded not to seal up his prophecy for the end is near — though we have now gone over 1900 years into the future.

Besides this understanding of imminency in the futurist scheme is an abuse of the term: Webster’s New Twentieth Century Unabridged Dictionary defines “imminent”: “appearing as if about to happen; likely to happen without delay; impending.” The Oxford English Dictionary defines “imminent”: “Impending threateningly, hanging over one’s head; ready to befall or overtake one; close at hand in its incidence; coming on shortly.” Imminency has no meaning if that which is “imminent” stretches out for 2000 years — or more.

7. The events are certain

The events are certain irrespective of when they occur. S. S. Smalley states that “this phrase indicates the sure accomplishment of God’s purposes, rather than a ‘hasty consummation’ of history.” L. Brighton concurs: “The events described will certainly take place: human evil and the resulting sufferings under God’s judgment, and the church of Christ completing her mission. It is necessary that these events take place.”

But again, John could have better expressed this view by simply stating that he was referring to “the things which must take place.” The word “soon” simply confuses the matter. Or he could have used the simple future: “the things which will take place.” Or he could have used amen to affirm its certainty, especially since John is fond of amen both in Rev (1:6, 7; 3:14; 5:14; 7:12; 19:4; 22:20, 21), as well as in his Gospel where he always doubles it (25 x): “the things which must take place. Amen.”

8. John speaks from the future

G. R. Beasley-Murray emphasizes “imminence” and “no more delay” but not for the original audience. Actually “in his vision John stands near the close of the period of messianic judgments.” Thus, he sees John as speaking from within the future context when the events are about to explode on the scene.

This is highly unlikely for John opens his book with these words of temporal nearness before anyone knows what he will be saying. And even before he gets caught up “in the Spirit” (1:10; 4:1–2) or transported into the scenes (17:1; 21:9–10). This approach might be more plausible if he said something to the effect: “I was carried in the Spirit into the future to see things that were soon to come to pass.” Or: “the Spirit entered me and set me in the Day of the Lord where I saw things that were soon to take place.” Besides, in 1:3 he blessed the original reader of Rev and the original hearers who would “heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near” (1:3). Surely the time was near for the reader and hearers.

9. The events are inaugurated

The events have already been inaugurated and are gradually unfolding through history. G. K. Beale presents this view, which is quite widely held in the current scholarly discussion: “the focus of ‘quickness’ and ‘nearness’ in vv 1–3 is primarily on inauguration of prophetic fulfillment and its ongoing aspect, not on nearness of consummated fulfillment, though the latter is secondarily in mind as leading from the former.” Thus, “the beginning of fulfillment and not final fulfillment is the focus.”

G. Osborne (55) agrees: “In salvation history the events indicated in the book have already begun to ‘come to pass’ and await the final consummation.” This is basically the view held by G. R. Beasley-Murray, J. P. M. Sweet, S. Kistemaker, and V. Poythress.

*This approach is semi-preteristic and acceptable as a partial answer to the question of John’s meaning. But its application by scholars is generally rather nebulous in allowing recurring events throughout history continually to unfold. John’s terminology, however, seems more concrete and constraining. Indeed, he uses the aorist infinitive *genesthai* (“take place,” i.e.,*

come to be) which should be translated “must have come to pass” (H. Alford 545). This dei . . . genesthai wording occurs seven times in Scripture (including 1:1; 22:6) and signifies fulfillment, not the beginning of fulfillment. It speaks of the fulfillment of Scripture prophecies of Jesus’ death (Mt 26:64) and the wars and rumors of wars that must occur before the “end” (Mk 13:7; Lk 21:9). (Revelation 4:1 cannot serve as evidence one way or the other because it is a part of the question as to whether the things in Revelation must occur soon.)

As I will show below in defending the preteristic understanding of the phrase here, John expects the actual fulfillment of the overwhelming majority of his prophecies. In fact, in only one place does he glance into the distant future to reveal the long-term consequences of its first-century fulfillment: in 20:1–15. But there he expressly states that the events will not occur soon, for he states that some of them will transpire after 1000 years are “completed” (20:3, 5, 7).

10. The events will occur soon

The events will occur soon — within the lifetime of John’s audience. P. Carrington (vii) expresses this approach clearly: “When the Revelation was written it was naturally accepted as an account of current events and of events ‘shortly to come to pass’; that is how it describes itself, and that is how it was naturally taken.” He later states: “we cannot, however, do justice to his very plain opening statement (cf. 1.3; iv:1; xxii. 10) by saying that he foresaw a long series of events covering centuries, which could be described as imminent because they were to begin shortly. Whatever earthly realities correspond to John’s symbols, he expected them to be accomplished quickly in their entirety” (Carrington 12). M. Stuart (1:5) calls this the “plain and obvious sense” of the phrase. Kurt Aland observes:

In the original text, the Greek work used is tachy, and this does not mean “Soon,” in the sense of “sometime,” but rather “now,” “immediately.” Therefore, we must understand Rev. 22:12 in this way: “I am coming now, bringing my recompense.” The concluding word of Rev. 22:20 is: “He who testifies to these things says, ‘surely I am coming soon.’” Here we again find the word tachy, so this means: I am coming quickly, immediately. This is followed by the prayer: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” . . . The Apocalypse expresses the fervent waiting for the end within the circles in which the writer lived — not an expectation that will happen at some unknown point X in time (just to repeat this), but one in the immediate present.

F. W. Farrar captures the frustration preterists feel when interacting with the alternative positions: “it is curious to see with what extraordinary ease commentators explain the perfectly simple [un]ambiguous expression ‘speedily’ (*en tachei*), to mean any length of time which they may choose to demand.” Indeed, the “language is simply meaningless if it is to be so manipulated by every successive commentator as to make the words ‘speedily’ and

‘near’ imply any number of centuries of delay.” For the preterist “the primary focus is on John’s own generation.”

In addition to Carrington, Stuart, Farrar, and Boxall, this view is held by F. J. A. Hort (6), W. Milligan (2), M. S. Terry (276), J. E. Adams (50), J. M. Ford (373), D. Chilton (52), E. Corsini (72), and B. Malina (31).

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Sources:

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