A SEARCH FOR COHESION IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION, WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO CHAPTER ONE

Iwan Whiteley

The lack of consensus on any specific issue in the book of Revelation demonstrates that it is a difficult work to understand. This thesis is founded upon the Greg Beale’s study. He has made significant gains in the understanding of Revelation. His analysis of the use of Daniel in Revelation shows not only that Revelation referred to specific passages, but also that one could narrow down the reference to a specific version of the Old Testament. Further reading of Beale’s work demonstrates that he does not extrapolate this precision into other areas of the study of Revelation. His precise analysis of the use of Daniel does not lead to the same consistency in his analysis of other OT references. There is a tendency to identify OT themes rather than specific references. Also, although Beale makes a serious attempt to explain the very challenging linguistic features in this book, yet cohesion is not found to an extent that would be expected from the presence of discrete references. Beale is the victim of his own thesis because his work establishes that when an interpreter is unable to gain clarity in Revelation, then this is the failure of the interpreter, not the original author.

This thesis consists of six chapters: chapter one provides a hermeneutical framework to interpret the text so as to obtain cohesion within it. ‘Cohesion does not concern what the text means; it concerns how the text is constructed as a semantic edifice.’ A discourse is written in such a way that it interacts with itself. This cohesion can only be obtained if interpreters adjust their world-view to that of the author’s. One common problem in interpreting Revelation is that the word ‘allusion’ is used to describe the relationship between Revelation and its antecedent texts. The choice of ‘allusion’ is problematic because the

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1 Ph.D. thesis, University of Wales, Lampeter, 2005; supervisor: Dr Martin O’Kane.
relationship established between the works is vague. Many commentators show little sensitivity to the OT texts that Revelation uses. A better word to define the relationship is ‘reference’ because such language recognises that the interpreter has the responsibility to import information from the antecedent works, leading to cohesion.

Discourse contains an internal chronology: both the underlying interpretational framework and the text itself develop: they are ‘in a constant state of flux-, of augmentation, of modification, of radical transformation.’ This is why this thesis begins at Revelation 1, so as to capture the hermeneutical development from the beginning of the letter.

The search for cohesion has always been a difficult subject in the field of Revelation. Luther objected that the book did not ‘speak clearly of Christ and His deeds’. It is common for commentators to start by explaining why they should not have to find cohesion in Revelation. Beckwith concludes that the reason for the ‘departure from logical order’ within the book was due to ‘a fervid religious imagination, especially in one proceeding from a mind like that of a Hebrew prophet’. The syntax in the text is particularly problematic because Revelation does not conform to what would commonly be referred to as the rules of Greek syntax, leading to the conclusion that it was written in bad Greek. Black counters such assumptions when approaching a text by saying that ‘the notion of “correct” Greek has no basis in the language itself ... There is no intrinsically “best” Greek, although one can with full justification speak of the more appropriate or effective variety of language for some particular type of communication.’

Chapter two searches for a suitable starting point in establishing a hermeneutical framework for interpreting the text. There is an exploration of seven approaches: 1. Understanding the Text to be ‘Literal’; 2. Revelation as Astral Prophecy; 3. Revelation as Christian Drama; 4. Revelation as Liturgy; 5. Revelation as Apocalyptic; 6. Revelation as a Letter; and 7. Revelation as Midrash. The conclusion of this exploration is that none of these strategies provide the necessary framework to decode the Revelation text. Revelation as apocalyptic is examined in detail. It is noted that this genre is presuppositionally

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6 Black, ‘Discourse Analysis, Sympotic Criticism’: 97.
problematic: ‘How can one define apocalypse before one knows on which works to base the definition, yet how can one know on which works to base the definition before one has defined the apocalypse?’ 

The apocalyptic genre is also difficult because no individual text contains all the qualities of the genre. However, it is common for commentators to import the apocalyptic presuppositions into Revelation wholesale without demonstrating sensitivity to authorial signals.

One consistent feature in Revelation is that it refers to the OT. Linton argues that Revelation resists generic definition, particularly because of the presence of a large amount of intertextuality. It is more probable that Linton is resisting Revelation’s hermeneutical framework by defying the intertextual nature of the text. The conclusion of this chapter is that a suitable starting point for interpreting Revelation is assuming that the text is referring to the OT. It is argued that the apocalyptic nature of Revelation is subordinate to the fact that John refers to OT books like Daniel. Consequently, one should question to what extent Revelation is apocalyptic; it would be more accurate to say that the text is ‘Daniellic.’

Chapters three to five exegete Revelation 1. An attempt is made to explain every feature of the text. Each word of the discourse is assessed. A particular sensitivity is employed in ascertaining its significance with regard to the OT (analysing the MT, LXX and Theodotion’s version of Daniel); its relevance in the context; and its importance in its syntagmatic and paradigmatic domain. The evaluation of the data has been made possible using the analytical tools of BibleWorks4 software.

Chapter six gathers up all the data accumulated during exegesis. It is argued that commentators tend to start their exegesis of Revelation with the assumption that they do not have to explain every feature of the text because it is a badly written discourse. Consequently, scholars fail to adjust their hermeneutical assumptions to align them with the author’s. While Revelation contains many of the qualities found in apocalyptic literature, yet this designation is not useful for interpreting the text and it is unwise to place interpretational assumptions on the text based upon this genre. The most important idea that contributes to understanding the text is the assumption that it refers to the OT. It becomes evident that the author had a set theological world-view based

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8 Linton, ‘Reading the Apocalypse’: 161.
on the OT, and it is necessary to grasp this world-view before one understands the meaning of the text. Because Revelation is narrative, the work should be treated as a diachronic event, meaning that one should not interpret the text from later events in the discourse. Revelation 1 contains structural cohesion; it is formulated as a parallelism surrounded by an inclusio. These structural features help the reader understand what is being said. The difficult syntax of the text can be explained due to two factors: first, John refers to OT texts which conflict syntactically with the Revelation discourse; second, John himself extrapolates from these syntactic conflicts. The asyndeton and *kai* are very important for John. John’s strategy for making the reader conform to his beliefs is ambiguity. This ambiguity prevails until John chooses to remove it. John’s choice of the asyndeton exemplifies his ‘ambiguity invasion’, while *kai* is used to restrain his ambiguous inclinations. The semantic significance of *kai* is generally based upon the Greek language (rather than upon the Hebrew *vav*). Titrud’s work on *kai* is very useful for understanding the use of this conjunction in Revelation 1.

One of the most important features of the conclusion is the theological cohesion that is obtained from Revelation 1. Jesus is seen as the eschatological Passover Lamb who is bringing his people in a spiritual exodus to the eschatological Sinai. He has ‘come with the clouds’ before the Ancient of Days; he is the Ancient of Days. He sent his Spirit to the saints of the Most High. However while walking through his heavenly temple, he notices that the saints are lacking that fire of the Spirit. Consequently, he approaches his servant, the prophet John, with the eschatological book of the covenant and tells him to write down what he saw; namely, what is and what is to take place ‘after these things’. The text is also loaded with a blend of warning of judgement for the rebellious and encouragement for the weak. The warnings are founded in the exilic-inducing acts of Yahweh; and the encouragements are based upon what Jesus did at Calvary.

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