

Thoughts on Rev 10

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Introduction

This passage would be hard enough to interpret with just things like the seven thunders saying things that are not written down, and the sweetness followed by sourness of John's stomach on eating a little scroll. People do not eat scrolls. John did not eat a scroll. This is not literal language. John was writing as a prophet. The passage is symbolic. Or is it?

It would be possible to claim that "John" is a literal reference to John and that, as such, the timeframe for the passage is the first century – John's own lifetime. This does not convince me at all. I submit that John is personifying God's people and that the timeframe in which he does this needs to be established by exegetical arguments. We cannot start and end with an assumption about it being in the first century.

What Is the Timeframe for the Chapter?

Rev 10 is part of the sixth trumpet (see Rev 9:13; 11:15). To know the timeframe for chap. 10 we must first ask what the timeframe is for the fifth trumpet and the seventh, i.e., the ones on either side of this one. The fifth trumpet is the first woe. It follows four other trumpets that are not woes. This requires time. So on what basis are we back at our chronological starting point when we come to the sixth in the series? We might be able to say with exact certainty when the sixth trumpet takes place, but I think we can be very sure when it does not take place. It does not take place in the first century – unless all the trumpets do, and in that event we have a preterist interpretation in which nothing at all goes beyond the prophet's lifetime.

Historicism expositors have generally located the fifth trumpet in the middle ages. The seventh trumpet brings us to the very final events of Earth's history (see Rev 11:17-19). So it would be reasonable to suggest that chronologically the sixth trumpet falls between these two points, i.e., somewhere between the middle ages and the end of Earth's history. This sounds a lot like the time when we are living now.

But the angel addresses John in chap. 10, just as Daniel addresses Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 2. Surely this must be a literal reference to John himself during the prophet's own lifetime. There are three arguments against saying so. The first has already been introduced above, i.e., that the sixth trumpet should be located in time somewhere between the fifth and the seventh. The second argument is that what happened between Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar does not provide a binding precedent for Rev 10. In Dan 2 there is much that is literal, and also a symbolic dream and its interpretation, but in the trumpets *nothing* is literal. This brings us to the third argument. Making Rev 10 into a literal conversation between John and an angel in John's lifetime would take any such conversation beyond the context of everything surrounding it. Rev 10 occurs in a sea of symbolism provided by the entire series of seven trumpets generally and by the rest of number six in particular. I feel uncomfortable making this one section literal when nothing around it is.

The Text of the Passage

Verses 1-7

Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars.² He was holding a little scroll, which lay open in his hand. He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land,³ and he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. When he shouted, the voices of **the seven thunders** spoke.⁴ And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down."⁵ Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven.⁶ And he swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, "There will be no more delay!"⁷ But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets." (Rev 10:1-7)¹

The mystery of what the "seven thunders" say becomes clearer when we feed in two pieces of information. First, what they say is something that God withholds from the church. That's why John could not write it down (vs. 4). The information is withheld. Second, it is withheld in the timeframe of a disappointment of some sort (see vss. 8-11). If this is just John and there is no further significance, the whole exchange is rendered vacuous. Once we place the exchange in our own day as involving, not a single individual but a broad cross-section of the church, we can know – within reasonable parameters – what the seven thunders said. They say what the church was not allowed to know in the years leading up to the great disappointment of 1844. That's why there was a disappointment.

There were things the Millerites didn't know or understand. If they had, their message would not have been what it was, nor could it have had the power it did. It is true that we don't know how the seven thunders laid all this out, but can be very sure that this was their subject matter. Armed with this much information, we can look back over the events with hindsight and see how God led His remnant people in the years before and after 1844. The Millerites didn't have any idea how God would lead them. He withheld that knowledge from them. That's what vss. 2-4 are trying to tell us.

Verses 8-11

Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: "Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land."⁹ So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, "Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey."¹⁰ I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour.¹¹ Then I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings." (Rev 10:8-11)

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What made the scroll sweet in John's mouth? We learn this by asking what made it sour in his stomach later. Verse 11 says, "Then I was told, 'You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings.'" This statement summarizes for us why John's stomach became sour. If the knowledge that there would be more work to do made the scroll sour, what made it sweet was the opposite, i.e., the belief that – because Jesus' second coming was imminent – the advent believers would not have more work to do. It was all done. The days of their prophesying (or speaking for God) were over, because they were going to come to heaven on October 22, 1844. When they found out otherwise, the intensity of their joy at the thought of seeing Jesus and being with Him was changed to a corresponding level of disappointment at having to stay here. The great disappointment was the opposite counterpart of the anticipation these people felt at the thought of Jesus coming to take them home.

Discussion

Same message

Rev 10:1-7 and 8-11 say essentially the same things. Both describe events in and around the time of the great disappointment of 1844. The seven thunders – if written down – could have spared the Millerites and early adventists their great disappointment, but doing so would have robbed the message of its power. So God concealed certain things, allowed the Millerite message to go to the world in all its potential force, and allowed the disappointment to occur with all its devastating bitterness. He allowed events to show who really loved Him. Would not such information be valuable to have in the context of what the Millerites thought would be the second coming? The scroll John ate was sweet in the mouth precisely *because* what the seven thunders said was not written down.

This is another reason why a literal exchange doesn't provide a good set of starting assumptions. The whole story line revolves around the fact that something was disappointing. Something changed John's experience with the booklet from sweet to sour. This works if John is personifying Millerites, but not if he's writing on his own account, because they didn't hear what the thunders said. But he did. He was not forbidden to hear them. He heard them. He knew what they said. He merely couldn't write it down. So how could not knowing what they said be a factor in turning the booklet sour in his stomach? Whoever is being described did not have the information John had. From this I draw that it wasn't John.

The message of the scroll became sour for the Millerites when they found out by hard experience what the thunders had been talking about all along. They learned on October 23 what they had been kept from learning earlier. This is what brought their disappointment.

Different message?

There is one significant difference between the messages of the two sections, and this difference is very significant indeed. In vs. 6 the angel "swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, 'There will be no more delay [*chronos ouketi estai*]!" The Greek says, "There will be no more time" (lit., "time no more there is [i.e., there will be]"). So vs. 6 appears to say there will not be more time and vs. 11 appears to say there will be. Do the sections disagree?

No conflict

At issue is what we mean by time. What sort of time does vs. 6 have in view? Answer: Not chronological time. If in vs. 6 the angel were speaking of chronological time, the Millerites would have been right and what the angel says a bit later in vs. 11 ("you must prophesy again") would be wrong. Under such circumstances the scroll would never have become sour in John's stomach.

Verse 6 is not referring to chronological time. If not chronological time, what then? Prophetic time. The events described in Rev 10 were occurring in and around 1844. That's when the 2300 days ended – in the timeframe of the second or great disappointment. The 1290 and 1335 days prophetic periods had ended just one year previously (1843) – in the timeframe of the first disappointment. The 1260 days ended only 45 years before that in 1798. The seventy weeks were over long since – in the timeframe of the first coming. After 1844 there would be more chronological time. We still don't know how much, but the point is that history did not end then. What ended in 1844 was prophetic time. The great prophetic time periods had all come to an end by October 22, 1844. After that, it was no longer a matter of time. God would test His people in other ways.

Conclusion

In Rev 10 John is named, but the intent is symbolic, just as all the material around chap. 10 is symbolic. John is here personifying the people of God who would be alive in the timeframe required by the context of the passage. The time required is our own day, by which I mean the time after 1844. If the angel were speaking to John as a single literal individual, why would he speak of prophesying again? At this point John had not finished prophesying once. He knew he wasn't finished writing down what the angel had to tell him, so why should he be disappointed to learn that there was more? He had twelve more chapters to go before he could be said to have prophesied once. Prophesying twice was not an issue he would consider meaningful. But it was vitally important to the people he was being used here to represent.

What do the seven thunders say? Something God chose to withhold from His people in and around 1844. It is true that we don't know exactly what the thunders said, but in hindsight we can at least know what they were talking about, because we have a detailed knowledge of what the Millerites missed – what was withheld from them, i.e., that Christ would come "to His temple" (Mal 3:1) in 1844, not to the earth; that the sanctuary was not on earth, or the earth, but a literal structure in heaven; that chronological time would not end in 1844, although prophetic time would, thus creating a distinction between the two that is still important today; that the door of mercy did not close when Christ entered the most holy place; and that because of this important fact there was still a work they needed to do – on a scale no one living then could have imagined in their wildest dreams.

The basis for the disappointment of vss. 8-11 is explained in vss. 1-7. The two sections go together in such a way that neither one can be understood correctly without the other. Nor can either section be understood well without a knowledge of what the timeframe the angel has in mind. He was talking about the experience of the Millerites in the years leading up to, and then beyond, 1844.