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October, 1999

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REVELATION
of JESUS CHRIST

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THE WORD AND WORK

"Declare the whole counsel of God"

Alex V. Wilson, Editor

Dennis L. Allen, Missions

Bennie Hill, News & Notes

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The BOOK of the
REVELATION
of JESUS CHRIST

“The Most Revealing Book in the Bible”

Alex V. Wilson

Occasionally in former issues of this magazine we have sought to introduce and illuminate a particular book of the Bible. Especially some of the harder ones: Ecclesiastes, Job, Psalms, the O.T. prophets as a group, Proverbs, Genesis 1-11. This month and next we've become more daring than ever. We hope to make all the mysteries of *Revelation* clear and plain!

Well, not really. Not by a long, l-o-n-g shot. But we will attempt at least to clear away some of the underbrush, and look at a number of the marvelous insights which have been made obscure due to the common neglect of Scripture's concluding book. We hope you'll join us in this venture. After all, Revelation is part of God's inspired word which He gave to build us up and equip us to follow Him faithfully (2 Tim.3:16-17).

Contrasting Attitudes

One view: “I feel the only safe thing for any of us to do is to let the book of Revelation entirely alone. I sometimes wish that some Bible house would get up a Bible or New Testament and leave the book of Revelation off. We don't need it at all. Why should we waste time on such uncertain and unnecessary matters? Read Revelation if you want to, just for diversion, but don't try to read it with the thought you can ever understand it.” Thus wrote the editor of a Church of Christ magazine in 1933. He must not have believed those verses from 2 Timothy.

Another view: “It is a matter for great regret that the book of Revelation is so little expounded among Christians. Nowhere else in Scripture is the position of the Lord's people in China so vividly and accurately depicted as here. If you want to sense the atmosphere, read the thirteenth chapter of Revelation and set down Chinese Christians in the midst of it.” Thus wrote David Bentley-Taylor in *Communism and Christianity*. Similarly, another writer entitled his commentary on Revelation, *The Most Revealing Book in the Bible*.

It's true, of course, that the last book of the Bible is difficult to interpret when you try to grasp every detail. Yet it is **challenging** and

encouraging if you first of all read it for its overall effect -- if you sense the atmosphere and seek to grasp the main themes and lessons it portrays. Frank Stagg rightly wrote, "The overall message of the book is clearer than certain of its parts." There are various schools of interpretation (and we'll survey them later), yet you really need not bother about them at first. **In no other book is it so important to study telescopically first, surveying the big picture to get the overall impression and impact, before starting your microscopic, detailed study.** If possible, read the entire 22 chapters at one sitting. If you can't do that, at least read 1-11 at one time, and 12-22 soon after, also at one sitting. But first fasten your seatbelt and put on your helmet. This is explosive stuff.

(To save space, from now on we'll usually abbreviate, using "Rev.")

The Most Up-to-Date Book in Scripture

The book of Revelation describes some practices which used to seem fantastic and unbelievable but now sound strangely current. Chapter 9:13-19 portrays the killing of 1/3 of all mankind, probably as a result of war. Such a prediction seemed laughably impossible in former generations. But nobody is laughing now, since the era of nuclear weapons began in 1945. The same chapter mentions sorcery and witchcraft as being common in the last times. And people are described as worshipping demons and even Satan (9:20; 13:4). These practices seemed incredible, at least in the West, until the 1960s brought on a boom of occultism. Now some universities offer courses in magic and witchcraft, and "churches of Satan" are found in a number of cities.

The late Merrill Tenney, a careful scholar not given to quackery, wrote:

To the modern man...the Apocalypse now seems less apocalyptic than it did to his father The mysterious references to images that talk (13:15), to economic control of large populations (13:16,17), to compulsory obedience to a synthetic religion (13:14), to the wholesale devastation of the earth by the elemental changes in the sea and by physical changes in the heat of the sun (16:3,8), the summoning of all the kings of the earth to do battle (16:14), the leadership of the nations vested in one or two persons (19:19,20), and the complete collapse of the center of civilization in 'one hour' (18:18-20) are not outside the reach of possibility at the present time. In many respects, the Apocalypse is the most modern book in existence." (*The New Testament: A Survey*)

Basic Lessons from the Opening Verses

Read Rev. 1:1-8

Note the following terms in these verses. (1)The word *revelation* comes from the Greek word *apocalypsis*, meaning **an unveiling**, such as of a statue which is about to be newly presented to the public, or **the drawing back of a curtain** so one may see through a doorway or window which it was covering. From the same Greek word come our terms “apocalypse” and “apocalyptic,” which refer to a specific type of literature (or genre, to use a word you might hear in a literature class). We’ll explain more about that soon. But think about that idea of **unveiling**. Rev. unveils realities which are unseen because they are spiritual, heavenly, behind-the-scenes, or which are unseen because they are future, yet-to-come. The obvious point is that this book makes things clearer, not dimmer!

(2)Note and remember that this is a revelation of Jesus Christ. That may mean He is the **revealer**, or that He is the **one revealed**. If the former, then He is the one revealing the contents made known here (as verse 1 continues: “God gave him [this revelation] to show his servants”). That’s true. If the latter idea is correct, then He is the object focused on -- this book mainly reveals Christ himself, in His various offices and activities. That’s true also, so **make sure you don’t miss seeing Him** as you study Rev.

See Him as He appears to John with breathtaking splendor, and as He walks among the churches observing them, and as He takes the scroll of destiny and opens its seals. (Chap. 1, 2-3, 5-6.) Be sure to notice His fullness of deity: He is worshipped equally with the Father. (5:13 & 7:10, etc.) Observe the repeated times His “blood” or redemptive death is mentioned. (1:5, 5:9 & 12, 7:14, 12:11, etc.) See Him as both our Lamb and Shepherd. (7:17) Behold Him as the child born to rule all the nations with an iron scepter, and as the one worth dying for. (12, 13.) So far we’ve covered only 13 of Rev.’s 22 chapters. Search on for our Savior in the rest of its chapters. Some older versions of the Bible entitled this book “The Revelation of St. John,” but its real title is found in its first five words -- “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.”

(3)The Lord “made it known...” The Greek word for this expression literally is “**signified it**,” that is, revealed it by means of signs, symbols, and pictures. Of course there are plain, literal parts too, but from the very beginning we are alerted to the fact that much of Rev. is highly figurative. We should not expect it to read like Exodus, 2 Kings, Acts, or James.

(4) "Blessed..." The Lord promises a blessing to His people merely by hearing this book read aloud when the church gathered together. This contradicts those who say that Rev. is so obscure that nobody will benefit from it. And how doubly blessed we are in our time to have many Bibles and many versions to aid our study. We can not only hear it read in the assembly, but hold it in our hands and study it for ourselves. With such added privileges come added responsibilities.

(5) Interpreters differ over **what period of time Rev. mainly refers to**. Some say that almost the whole book is about events which occurred in the first century. Others say it foretold events throughout all the centuries of church history. A third view believes the great majority of it has not happened yet but is still future.

John's words, "soon," and "the time is near" (or "at hand" -- that is, within reach) clearly show the book's relevance to the churches to whom he originally sent it. There's no denying that fact, and our interpretation must embrace it. But at the same time John uses the expressions "this prophecy" and "He is coming with the clouds." Of course Biblical prophecy does not necessarily relate to the future; much of it concerned the days of the prophet. Yet it may refer to the future. And this reference (in Rev.'s opening verses) to Christ's second coming definitely looks forward to the end of the age. So far as John and his readers knew, the end of the age could have been quite soon anyway. Putting these four expressions together, and considering the rest of the book too, it seems to me that Rev. has many **pre-fulfillments** which applied to the church at its beginning -- in the days of John -- , and many **fulfillments** which await the last days of this age. [Regarding "pre-fulfillments" in prophecy, see July '98 W&W, pages 202-4, "Already happened, or not yet, or both?" and Mar.'99, pages 76ff, "Dress Rehearsals of the End."]

Notice in passing that the mention in 1:7 of Christ's "coming with the clouds" surely refers to His final coming with power and glory. Dan.7:13 plus Matt.24:30 and 26:64 make that clear. We should realize, however, that at least occasionally His statement "I will come" refers to "comings before the Coming." That is, at various times *in history* He has "visited" His people either with extraordinary chastening or with exceptional deliverance and blessing. For instance, in the letters to the 7 churches, the Lord Jesus mentions His "coming" or says "I will come" 5-6 times. (Can you find them?) But at least 2 times, and maybe more, He does *not* mean His ultimate second advent. Instead, He means...well, study it for yourself. You'll remember it better that way.

Questions & Answers about the Book of Revelation

WHO wrote it? “John, your brother” (v.9). Almost certainly John the apostle, who by this time would be around 90 years old.

WHERE was it written? On Patmos, a mountainous island about 30 miles from the coast of Asia province (today the country of Turkey). The government used it as a penal colony for criminals. Most of them worked in its mines. John was exiled there “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (v.9). Are we willing to suffer for the Lord?

TO WHOM was it written? To “the seven churches in the province of Asia.” Today this area is western Turkey. (1:4, compare v.11).

John Stott writes, “The seven cities mentioned form an irregular circle, and are listed in the order in which a messenger might visit them if commissioned to deliver the letters. Sailing from the island of Patmos, to which John had been banished, he would arrive at Ephesus. He would then travel north to Smyrna and Pergamum, south-east to Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia, and finish his journey at Laodicea....

“This historical context for the Book of Revelation, however, cannot possibly be thought to exhaust its significance. Just as the letters of Paul to the Corinthians...convey the word of God to us as well as to them, to London and New York and Cairo as well as to Corinth...so Christ’s letters through John to the first century Christian communities of Asia have a permanent value and a universal message...The seven churches of Asia, though historical, represent the local churches of all ages and of all lands” (*What Christ Thinks of the Church*).

Actually, there were other churches in that area. For example, Colosse was located just a few miles from Laodicea and there may have been more. Why then did the Lord limit His messages to only seven? We cannot answer dogmatically, but we do know that the number seven is used symbolically to represent fullness or completion. The one Holy Spirit is called “the seven spirits” (or perhaps better, “the sevenfold Spirit,” as in the New Living Translation and a footnote in NIV). We also read of seven eyes, seals, trumpets, thunders, bowls, etc. So seven churches were picked as representative of the whole Church as found in its many local churches throughout the world and the centuries.

Of course the book is not only to churches, but to individuals. Seven times in chapters 2-3, our Lord says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Even if your church will not listen, *you* may listen.

WHEN was it written? Though some scholars believe it was written during the reign of Nero in the 60s A.D., much stronger evidence exists for dating it in the mid-90s, *during the reign of Domitian Caesar*. What relevant facts do we know about him?

To start with, he was *cruel*. Pliny, governor of a Roman province, called him a beast from hell, sitting in its den and licking blood. The early church historian Eusebius says that Domitian sent a number of Christians into exile. For instance, his own niece Flavia Domitilla and many other believers were banished to the island of Pontia. Why would he do that? Because, *believing himself to be a deity*, he was intolerant of those who disagreed with that view! Some copies of his official letters have been found which begin, "I, Domitian, your Lord and your God [order you to do the following]"

Crowds would acclaim Domitian with shouts such as "Lord of the earth" and "You are worthy."

Scholars have also discovered that *poets in his court vied with one another in their exaggerated expressions of adulation*. "May I gaze upon thee, Hope of mankind and Favourite of the gods," said one." Perhaps you have seen old movie-clips of the huge Nazi rallies in the 1930s: a coliseum filled to the brim with ecstatic followers; scores of swastika-banners; dress uniforms; goose-stepping troops marching by; and jubilant cries of "Heil Hitler" sounding over and over again. In similar fashion, in Domitian's time public gatherings were held in his honor. When he appeared, the crowds (sometimes led by what we would call cheer-leaders) would acclaim him with shouts such as "Lord of the earth," "You are worthy," "Invincible," and "Worthy is he to inherit the kingdom." (Quoted from George Beasley-Murray in *Revelation: Three Viewpoints*.) Where have we heard terms like that before?

Background: During the period recorded in the book of Acts, persecution came mostly from Jewish religious leaders (like Saul) or heathen mobs stirred up by rabble-rousers. Fairly often in those earlier days the Roman government *protected* the disciples, in order to maintain order. But in 64 A.D., when Nero ruled, he stirred up a dreadful slaughter of Christians in Rome and its environs. However it was not widespread in area. Some persecutions continued during the reigns of

the following five emperors, but they were minor -- merely localized and sporadic.

However, a growing menace appeared in the form of Caesar-worship. "By the time of Domitian (81-96), an imperial cult, celebrating the majesty of the Roman Empire as represented in the emperors -- and especially Domitian -- was vigorously spreading in Asia Minor. Temples had been built in honor of Augustus at Pergamum, of Tiberius at Smyrna, and of Claudius at Ephesus. An official league, with its president known as the Asiarch, presided over the emperor worship throughout the province and particularly at games held in honor of the emperor-god; such games had been held at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Sardis, and Philadelphia" (William Woodson). This Asiarch who headed the league or cult of Caesar-worship was no doubt the contemporary **prefilment** of the second beast or "false prophet" John mentions in Rev. 13 and elsewhere. You'll remember that he was the one who enforced worship of the first, major beast -- of whom Domitian was doubtless a **prefilment**.

WHY was Rev. written? To bolster the faith, hope and courage of believers who were beginning to undergo terrifying trials and pressures. It is likely some were being ostracized socially and boycotted economically. It is certain they were already being insulted, slandered, and threatened with imprisonment. And worse was to come. At least one and possibly more had been killed for their faith. (2:9-10, 13; 3:9.) And their aged leader John had been banished to a penal colony. Even the Emperor's niece and other believers had also been banished. It was obvious that their primary confession of faith, "Jesus is Lord," was going to be challenged by the government's demand that all citizens profess "Caesar is lord." (Remember how Domitian began his letters?) No doubt more of them would be martyred before long.

Rome's Empire seemed so strong, dazzling and invincible while Christ's Church seemed so small, insignificant and weak. More and more, the Empire was persecuting the Church. Caesar seemed stronger than Christ.

Let's modernize this situation. illustrating it with quotes from a newsletter written by Richard Wurmbrand, a Christian preacher and leader in Romania who was imprisoned for 14 years during the Marxist era. Later he reached the U.S. He wrote this in 1976, but similar situations still exist in Communist lands like China and North Korea and some Muslim lands like Sudan and Saudi Arabia. Wurmbrand said.

Christ teaches (John 10:29) that God is almighty, but reality seems to contradict this teaching. God's Son was executed like a common criminal; then He suffered again in every Christian martyr

throughout the centuries. There is so much suffering in the world. If God were good and almighty, He would end it.

In Communist Romania, the Orthodox priest Ion Boboc of Buzau has been kept for two years in a psychiatric asylum for the crime of "having given Holy Communion to a sick child." When he was taken there, he was perfectly sane; now, two years later, he has lost his sanity. Why did God Almighty not prevent this?

I received a letter from a French girl: "I am 15.... A few years ago, I believed firmly in God, but now I have doubts. If God really exists, why does He not stop wars, and the famines, the cold, the many sicknesses? Why would an almighty God put us through such physical and moral sufferings?"

I quote from a letter of an East German pastor: "I am ninety. I opposed Hitler and was imprisoned. I suffered also at the hands of the Communists. I am tempted daily to commit suicide. Thinking about the tens of millions of innocents killed by the Nazis and the Reds, I cannot believe any more that an almighty God leads all things well. The Iron Curtain and the Berlin wall have brought me to despair."

God seems to be powerless. Atheist rulers can chase him from their countries. [end of quote from Wurmbrand]

Put Those Feelings in first-century dress, and you'll know (at least partly) why the book of Revelation was written! Alan Cole observed, "In Europe, some of the best commentaries on Rev. have been produced in concentration camps."

***Only Christians celebrate our King's
resurrection - day!***

WHEN was Rev. written? You may reply that this question was asked earlier. And you are right. But there's another answer. We should know not only the approximate year that John wrote, but also the exact day. He beheld and recorded his first vision "on **the Lord's Day**" (1:10; in Greek, as in our Bibles, this expression differs from "the day of the Lord"). Early Christians used this term, the Lord's Day, for Sunday, first day of the week, their main day of gathering to worship. And why did they meet on that day, instead of on Saturday, God's chosen day of rest and remembrance in the Old Covenant era? They met on the first day because it was then that **Jesus conquered death, arose to live forever, and appeared and re-appeared to His followers.**

Many of Rome's citizens celebrated their Emperor's birthday, and in some cases his inauguration day -- when he was crowned. Rome's citizens might also celebrate the death day of some past hero. But we Christians, and we alone, celebrate our Emperor's **resurrection day**. No Caesar can match Him! All Hail, King Jesus!

Why is Revelation so DIFFERENT?

Every day, probably without realizing it, we encounter **differing types of "literature"** or written materials. In our major newspapers, for example, there are *news reports* (supposedly written in a very objective way, just giving the "facts"). Then there are *editorials and columns* where it is taken for granted that the writers are expressing their personal opinions. There are also *political cartoons, letters to the editor, advertisements, crossword puzzles, the comics, TV and radio program-guides, weather forecasts* and perhaps *recipes, horoscopes and reviews of movies, concerts and books*. Without thinking much about it, you react in different ways to these thirteen or so different styles of writing (*genre* is a technical word for such styles). Hopefully you don't look at the horoscopes at all, for they are foolishness at best. You probably don't put as much confidence in the ads as you do in your favorite columnist. You may trust or distrust the editorials, and you may have learned that even the news reports are slanted. But our main point now is, you don't cook your casserole by the crossword puzzle, nor decide what channel to watch by reading the weather report. Nor do you form opinions about our armed forces by reading Beetle Bailey. You seek to use (or ignore) each different feature according to its purpose.

Again, consider **letters**. You don't write a *love letter* to your husband in the style of a *business letter*. ("Dear Mr. Smith: This is to reply to yours of May 18. I would like to inform you that you are missed very much, sir. Our children send their kindest respects to you Sincerely yours, Mary Ann Smith.") And vice versa.

Or think about forms of **drama**. Imagine that somehow a primitive tribesman from the jungle visited New York City with an interpreter. One night they attend an **opera** by Puccini. Since the tribesman had never heard of Italy before, he might conclude that Italians don't converse by means of ordinary talking like other folks, but always and only by singing. The next night they attend the **musical**, "Oklahoma," and he concludes that southern Americans communicate by talking about 4/5 of the time, and by stopping to sing the rest of the time. The point is obvious: **To gain understanding, we must interpret according to the form of communication being used.**

Here's another example. "Exaggeration in a story that claims to be **factual history** is a form of untruth. On the other hand, the same type of exaggeration in **lyric poetry** is called *hyperbole* and is a standard way of expressing emotional truth. Each literary type has its own rules for understanding and interpretation" (John Newport). For an example of such exaggeration in Biblical poetry, consider Psa 91:5-10.

After mentioning arrows flying in battle, and pestilence and plague, the psalmist writes, "A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you If you make the Most High your dwelling ... then no harm will befall you." But the godly prophet Elisha, who performed many miracles, at an advanced age "suffered from the illness from which he died." Timothy served the Lord with deep devotion, yet had "frequent illnesses." King Josiah followed God "with all his heart"; but he was killed in a battle against Pharaoh Neco. Does that mean Psa.91 is false? Not at all, for the Lord has often protected His people during epidemics and wars. But it is poetic hyperbole -- general statements to which there are exceptions.

Apocalyptic Literature

Now to our point. **The Bible contains various kinds of literature, with their differing rules of interpretation:** history, poetry, proverbs, prophecy, types, metaphors, epistles, etc.

Michael Wilcock explains a particular type of literature which was quite popular in the time of Jesus and the early church. It's the form in which most of Rev. is written. "A whole class of Jewish religious writings copied from the style of the book of Daniel appeared chiefly between 200 B.C. and 100 A.D., which is known as 'apocalyptic literature.' Truths which could not be discovered by normal investigation (that is, matters of the future or of the spiritual realm) are unveiled, usually through the agency of angels, in lurid colors and with a wealth of bizarre symbolism -- stars and mountains, monsters and demons, complex number schemes The apocalyptists were at once extreme pessimists, for whom things were so bad that only God could ever put them right, and extreme optimists, looking forward to the time when He was going to do just that.

"Revelation really is meant to *reveal* truth, and not to obscure it. This however does not mean that its meaning will be spelled out for us verbally, with logic and precision. What God has in store for His last unveiling is an acted word, a word dramatized, painted, set to music -- a word you can see and feel.

"It is no use reading Rev. as though it were a Paul-type theological treatise in a slightly different idiom, or Luke-style history projected into the future. You might as well analyze the rainbow -- or the wine of communion or the water of baptism. Logical analysis is not what they are for. They are meant to be used and enjoyed.

"We now live in a post-literate age, which, tiring of words, is beginning to talk again in pictures. In the same way, when God's children have had enough of reciting systematic theology, He gives them a gorgeous picture book to look at, which is in a different way just as

educational. Jesus has given us this book as a sacrament of the imagination, to quicken the pulse and set the soul aflame over the gospel which all too often we take for granted" (*The Message of Revelation*).

Truth has many aspects and can be presented in many different ways. For instance, think of a battle fought during the Israel-Egypt "Six-day War" as it might be described by a news-reporter, or by an army officer, a novelist, a poet, a student of the Bible. Each would differ from the others, and yet all might be true. (Please don't misinterpret us here. We are *not at all* saying there is no absolute truth, and that each person's "truth" is true no matter what he believes!)

Consider other examples: "We have one style for **telegrams** ("Change of plan return delayed letter follows") which we would never think of using in our ordinary letters.

"Some of the symbols and pictures used in Rev. seem strange to us today -- horses of various colors, trumpets blowing and basins being poured out over the earth, etc. But to **any reader of the Old Testament these will be old familiar symbols** (see Zech.6; Isa.58; Jer. 1:13ff). If we try to study Rev.'s visions in detail, we may get confused, or lost in small points. Rev. is really like a **great masterpiece of painting**: first we need to stand back and appreciate the whole. If we think of the visions as **scenes in a great play**, or as **movements in a musical composition**, we shall not go far wrong. As in a play, there are often tranquil intervals between the scenes." (Alan Cole)

George Beasley-Murray suggests that in our day the nearest parallel to apocalyptic is the **political cartoon** found on the editorial pages of most newspapers. These use hyperbole, caricature and symbolism. They are easily understood by today's readers but would perplex many people in future centuries. (For example, a bear sulking because an eagle and a dragon are in a friendly huddle = Russia upset because of closer relations between the U.S. and China, several years ago.)

Apocalyptic writings flourished before and during the days of Jesus and the apostles. The book of Enoch was the most popular apocalypse, and probably many of the early Christians, especially Jewish ones, had read it or at least were familiar with it in general. Jude 14 even quotes from this book, but in so doing Jude endorsed only that quotation, not the entire book. (In the same way, a preacher might use a true saying from Huxley's *Brave New World* to illustrate a point in his sermon. His listeners would know he did not believe the whole book.)

Our Attitude in Studying Revelation: *God can Teach even Me!*

"When the reader first encounters what seems to be the obscurity of Rev., he may say, 'If I only had more specialized knowledge of

Jewish literature or Roman history or Greek philosophy, these mysteries would become clear to me.' This, I believe, is misleading. For the number of God's servants who are equipped with that kind of learning will always be comparatively small -- not many wise are called -- whereas the message of Rev. is addressed to all His servants without distinction. Its chief value must therefore be of such a kind that Christians with no special academic resources can nevertheless appreciate it.

"This is not to belittle the value of biblical research, still less to exalt anti-intellectualism; the study of Scripture demands the fullest possible use of the Christian's mind. But it is to assert that the prime requirement for understanding these great mysteries is a knowledge, such as John himself had, of the Word of God. Of the sixty-six books of Scripture, perhaps Rev. above all is dependent on the rest for its proper interpretation" (Wilcock).

Out of the 404 verses in the book of Rev., 278 refer to the Old Testament -- some of them more than once. Rev. "contains over 400 quotations from or allusions to other Scriptures, of which 50 are from the book of Daniel. Anything that causes us to familiarize ourselves with the whole Word of God, as a study of this book must help to do, is a blessing" (Crow).

[Next month we will point out that Rev. is not only an apocalypse, but also a prophecy and a pastoral letter. But at this time we stress its apocalyptic form because in that way it differs the most from what we are used to.]

A Sample of Non-Biblical Apocalyptic:

Some Excerpts from "The Second Book of Esdras"

Introduction by the editor: The preceding article explains the meaning of "apocalyptic literature," written after the style of the book of Daniel. The popularity of such writings in the first century (especially among the Jews) might be compared to the popularity of science fiction today -- Star Wars, Star Trek, etc.

Don't confuse the apocalyptic style with what are called Apocryphal books. The Apocrypha are those books which the Roman Catholic Church includes in their versions of the Old Testament, at various places. Examples include "Additions to Esther," "The Prayer of Manasseh," and the two books of Maccabees. For good reasons which we cannot go into at this time, Protestant churches do not accept them as inspired or God-breathed Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16f.). Neither did the Jewish rabbis of the first century, nor Jesus nor the apostles. It is true that some parts of the Apocrypha -- such as "The Wisdom of Jesus the

Son of Sirach" -- contain wise insights. They are thus "inspiring" in their effects but not "inspired" in their origin in the same way that the writings of the prophets and apostles were. We might compare them to writings by C.S. Lewis, A.W. Tozer or Max Lucado, which we admire and profit from but do not want to include in our Bibles!

Let's see if we can further clarify what we have said thus far. **Many apocalyptic writings were *not* in the Apocrypha.** An example is the book of Enoch mentioned in the preceding article. On the other hand, **many books in the Apocrypha are *not* apocalyptic in style.** Examples include the books of Maccabees which are historical records of rulers, persecutions and battles (some parts more accurate than others). **But it is possible to be *both* apocalyptic and apocryphal! And we want to look at such a book, 2 Esdras, in order to see a literary style which many of the first readers of Revelation were already familiar with.** "Esdras," by the way, is another form of the name Ezra.

Here are some introductory notes to this book (in the edition I have) by an unknown commentator: "The book commonly known as 2 Esdras differs from the other fourteen books of the Apocrypha in being an apocalypse... The main part is a series of seven revelations, in which the seer is instructed by the angel Uriel concerning some of the great mysteries of the moral world... The purpose of the original author of 2 Esdras was not only to denounce the wickedness of Rome (under the image of 'Babylon') and to lament the sorrows that had befallen Jerusalem [in 70 A.D.], but to wrestle with one of the most perplexing of all religious questions... the reconciliation of God's justice, wisdom, power, and goodness with the many evils that beset mankind."

Now we look at a few excerpts from that apocalypse. The entire book contains 16 chapters, and is 35 pages long in my copy.

Excerpts from 2nd Esdras 11:1-13:11

On the second night I [Esdras, or Ezra] had a dream, and behold, there came up from the sea an eagle that had twelve feathered wings and three heads. And...he spread his wings over all the earth... His heads were at rest; the middle head was larger than the other heads... And behold, the eagle flew with his wings, to reign over the earth...

And I looked and behold, a creature like a lion was aroused out of the forest, roaring; and I heard how he uttered a man's voice to the eagle... "The Most High says to you, 'You have held sway over the world with much terror, and...with grievous oppression... Therefore you will surely disappear...'"

[The Lord] said to me, "This is the interpretation of this vision which you have seen: The eagle which you saw coming up from the sea is the fourth kingdom which appeared in a vision to your brother Daniel. But it was not explained to him as I now explain it to you. Behold, the days are coming when a kingdom shall arise on earth, and it shall be more terrifying than all the kingdoms that have been before it....

"And as for the lion whom you saw rousing up out of the forest...and speaking to the eagle and reproving him for his unrighteousness.... this is the Messiah whom the Most High has kept until the end of days, who will arise from the posterity of David.... First he will set them living before his judgment seat, and when he has reproved them, then he will destroy them. But he will deliver in mercy the remnant of my people, those who have been saved throughout my borders.... This is the dream that you saw, and this is its interpretation...."

After seven days I dreamed a dream in the night; and behold, a wind arose from the sea and stirred up all its waves. And... behold, this wind made something like the figure of a man come up out of the heart of the sea. And... behold, that man flew with the clouds of heaven; and wherever he turned his face to look, everything under his gaze trembled.... After this... behold, an innumerable multitude of men were gathered together from the four winds of heaven to make war against the man who came up out of the sea. And... behold, he carved out for himself a great mountain, and flew up upon it....

After this... behold, all who had gathered together against him, to wage war with him, were much afraid, yet dared to fight. And... he sent forth from his mouth as it were a stream of fire, and from his lips a flaming breath, and from his tongue he shot forth a storm of sparks... [which] fell on the onrushing multitude which was prepared to fight, and burned them all up.... [End of quote. Taken from the *Revised Standard Version Apocrypha*.]

* * * *

[aww now writing] If you lived in the first century and were familiar with 2 Esdras or other apocalypses, what would you think when you later read the book of Revelation? Would it affect your approach? At least you would not find the dramatic, symbolic style of Rev. so astonishing and mystifying, would you?

We could call the biblical book of Daniel the "fountain" of apocalyptic style, due to the symbolic dreams and visions God gave in that book. Thus familiarity with Daniel gives a good foundation for understanding Rev. But it also helps to realize there were other, non-inspired books of similar style in the days when Rev. was written.

This fact can especially help Christians who are just beginning to study Rev., and find it perplexing. It is not just a bunch of fantastic nonsense, but has clear lessons for us -- but we should **avoid being overly-literal** in our approach. Of course some interpreters have tried to explain away most of Rev. by "**spiritualizing**" it. Their interpretations show very little relation to what John wrote. This wipes out the book's *value*, and *does great harm*. For example, Rev. 19:11-21 pictures Christ riding a white horse, like a victorious Roman general. He "makes war Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword [People] were killed with the sword that came out of [his] mouth." One writer says this portrays not a battle at the end of this age, but the centuries-long conflict between truth and error during which the gospel will gradually conquer the nations. The sword from Christ's mouth is the word of God (as in Eph 6:17, Heb. 4:12), and He "kills" His enemies by converting them into followers!

Now that might be a possible meaning of the passage, if it didn't contain **repeated clues** that it means something totally different: Christ **judges** and makes war. He strikes down the nations and will **rule them with an iron scepter** (not simply by His word and Spirit). He treads the winepress of **the fury of the wrath of God!** (What could that mean, according to that theory?) Vultures are summoned to eat the **corpses** of His defecated enemies. (Why mention such a fact?) The leader of His opponents in this **war** is the **beast!** (To be consistent, this theory must teach that even he will be converted, but v.20 contradicts that.)

No, no -- this passage does not foretell the agelong conversion of the nations. Instead it describes, with symbolism to be sure, "the battle on the great day of God Almighty," when demons induce earth's God-defying leaders to gather their armies to fight His purposes and people. This is made clear by Rev.16:12-16, which sets the stage for chapter 19:11-21. Chapter 19 vividly pictures the final Day of the Lord when "the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire ... [to] punish those who ... do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction" (2 Thes. 1:7-9). With those words Paul tells of the same event which John pictures so dramatically. Let's not empty Rev. of its meaning just because it uses symbolism.

Yet, at the other extreme, sometimes an ultra-literal approach has been used. Here's a really weird example: In the mid-1900s a prophecy-novel was written which depicted "the beast" of Rev.13 not as a human being but as a supernatural **animal!** The world-ruler actually appeared in the form of a wonder-dog! I wonder if the novelist also thought of Christ in Rev. 6 as really being a lamb -- covered with wool?

Here's another example to consider. **Rev. 14:6** says "I saw another angel flying in mid-air, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth -- to every nation, tribe, language and people." Will a heavenly angel actually become a world-evangelist, circling the earth and shouting his message from the sky? Some so interpret it.

To the contrary, I believe that **the angel is simply part of the apocalyptic style in which God showed John an important fact -- the Gospel will indeed be proclaimed worldwide.** The preceding chapter told horrifying news: The beast "was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation" (13:7). But often in Rev., after the Lord gives a vision of doom and gloom (to make us awake and alert). He then gives a vision of victory or glory (to keep us trusting and hoping). So 14:6 assures us that despite the beast's furious and seemingly successful persecution of the saints, and despite his having political power over all nations and peoples -- God's Good News will be made known throughout the whole world. No matter how bad the circumstances, no matter how dreadful the opposition, His people **will** evangelize all nations. (So let's get on with it, the sooner the better.)

Jesus himself gave this great worldwide commission to His disciples (not to angels): "Go into all the world and **preach the good news to all creation**." Jesus also stated that fulfilling this command was a requirement: "The gospel **must first be preached to all nations**." Not only that, but He gave firm assurance that it would be fulfilled: "This gospel of the kingdom **will be preached in the whole world** as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." (Mt.28:18-20, Mk.16:15, etc.; Mk.13:10; Mt.24:14.) Rev. 14:6 reiterates that fact, but -- using apocalyptic style -- shows an angel doing it. How should we interpret it? By focusing on **what** John shows will be done, **not on who will do it and how.** (You might want to compare Rev.8:13, a talking eagle makes a proclamation; etc. etc.)

So it seems to me. But I'll love you even if you disagree.

The TIME-FACTOR in Revelation

Now we get to the sticky part. (No, I guess we actually got there in the preceding article or two!) There are scads of interpretations of Revelation, and they can't all be right. Seven Christians look at the same passage and come up with four or five (or seven) different views of what it means! That implies that we can't really understand this book -- so why even try?

Well, cheer up. Obviously there are difficulties. To claim otherwise would be only pretense. But we hope to show that the problem is not so extreme as it sounds. Study the four views explained in this next section, and also the diagram.

A. Four Different Methods of Interpreting Revelation

Several answers have been given to the question, "The visions and events of this book belong to what period of time? Which of John's visions have already occurred, and what is yet to occur?" Some interpreters say the book is about *the past only*: they are "preterists" (from the Latin word for "past"). Others say Rev. unfolds *all of church history, from start to finish*: they are "historicists." A third group says that chapters 4-22 (or 6:12-chap 22) are still *all future*: they are "futurists." And finally, there are those who say that Rev. does not refer to any specific time period but consists of *ideals or principles which are always in effect*: they are "idealists." Let's review these approaches in a little more detail.

1. The Preterist View: This approach starts with the condition of the church in the first century, and also ends there. John merely described events in his time or very soon to come. "This view has the merit of making the book exceedingly meaningful for the people to whom it was written. And it has the demerit of making it meaningless (except for the information it gives about that early generation) for all subsequent readers" (Morris). It ignores the predictive aspects of Rev. and leaves much of the book unfulfilled and meaningless. One writer seeks to establish "Rev. as a book of events that have already happened," which portray "the fulfillment of O.T. prophecy as concerns the end of the Jewish nation" when Jerusalem fell in 70 A.D. He believes this book is "devastating to the millennial theory, showing chapter 20 to symbolize the past and not the future." Someone compared the preterist view to a pedestal without a statue on it -- a good start but no completion.

2. The Historicist View: This believes that Rev. is a symbolical presentation of all of church history from the first century till Christ returns. For example, one writer says the 7 trumpets cover the years

395-1453 A.D., starting with the Goths' attacks on the Western Roman Empire and ending with the fall of Constantinople to the Turks. But none of the historicists agree among themselves! "As many as fifty different interpretations have been given, depending on the time and circumstances of the expositor." For example, those taking this view have "variously identified the locusts from the abyss in Rev. 9:1ff with the Vandals, Goths, Persians, Muhammedans, heretics, and others" (Newport). More instances of this: "Where one interpreter sees in the sixth seal a reference to Constantine, another sees allusion to the French Revolution; where one sees in the star fallen from heaven a good angel, another discerns Mohammed; the scorpion locusts that have power for 5 months mean [to one commentator] 150 years of the dominion of the Saracens, but [to another] they mean Goths, and [to a third writer] they mean Jesuits. All this seems to be *arbitrary and hazardous in the extreme*" (Joseph Angus; emphasis added). I say "Amen" to that evaluation.

Three of these viewpoints are not necessarily exclusive, but each partially true.

3. The Futurist View: This says that none of the visions of chapters 4-22 (or perhaps 6:12-chap.22) have come to pass yet. They are still to be fulfilled in the period just before and after Christ's second coming. His return is indeed the climax of Rev. Yet if this view is *over-stressed*, or taken by itself *alone*, it robs the book of almost all significance for the early churches -- to whom it was first written -- and, "indeed, for all subsequent generations up to the last. For all intermediate generations it is merely a forecast of what will happen in the last days. Till then it means little except that God has an ultimate purpose" (Morris). Someone compared this to a statue without a foundation or pedestal to stand upon -- in contrast to the preterist view.

4. The Idealist View: It says that Rev. is concerned with none of the above! It neither describes nor predicts any specific events or details -- whether in the early church, or the church during the centuries, or during the endtimes. Instead it merely reveals eternal principles -- such as the ongoing conflict between good and evil, the church's suffering, God's sovereignty, etc. -- which operate constantly throughout history. "The Idealist View's flaw is not so much in what it affirms as in what it denies" (Tenney). I.e., those principles indeed recur through the ages, for history often repeats itself. But to deny that Rev. has any specific fulfillments is to make it merely a nebulous tale containing a vast multitude of unnecessary details.

A Helpful Observation

Notice that **these viewpoints are not necessarily exclusive**. The **first, third and fourth each contain helpful insights** and can overlap. The visions of Rev. "reveal certain abiding, eternal principles governing Christ and His Church which are constantly illustrated in history. They certainly had an immediate fulfillment intelligible to the Asian churches (as preterists say); but they have been successively embodied in many other historical situations of later centuries, and are apparent today (as idealists teach); and they will receive a final and conclusive fulfillment at the end of the world (as futurists affirm)" (Stott).

For example, notice **Satan's three allies**: the beast, the false prophet, and the harlot Babylon. In one sense, "the *beast* emerges from the sea whenever antichristian *government* persecutes the Church. The *false prophet* reappears in every antichristian *philosophy* which deceives the Church. The *scarlet woman* flaunts her vile charms wherever antichristian *morality* contaminates the Church" (Stott). Thus Satan continuously attacks through **physical persecution, mental error, and moral evil**. But at the end, these forces will reach their climax, their ultimate fulfillment. (Study the diagram)

1st century Prefilment:	Recurring Principle:	Final Fulfillment:
<u>The Beast</u> :The Roman emperors	Govt. <u>persecution</u>	The man of sin 2 Thes.2 Dan.7. etc
<u>The False Prophet</u> : (2nd beast) The Caesar-cult, promoting emperor-worship.	<u>Error</u> : false doctrines, cults, & philosophies	The Beast's public-relations officer & executive secretary.
<u>The Harlot Babylon</u> : The city of Rome. source of temptations, & center of lust, pride & materialism.	The world-system of <u>Evil</u> and ungodliness	Unfaithful christianity, headed by Rome & merged into a world-wide religion, compromising in doctrine & conduct.

But What Does It *MEAN*?

And how do you KNOW?

More Questions and Problems in

<<< INTERPRETING REVELATION >>>

1. Is this passage LITERAL or SYMBOLICAL?

For instance, note various uses of the word "star" in 6:12,13; 8:10,11; 9:1. And compare our use of the word today. Often we use it literally, but we also call meteors "shooting stars" or "falling stars" (compare Rev.6:13). In addition we speak of movie-stars and sports-stars. So we shouldn't get shook up by Rev.'s varied use of this and other words.

"There is no need to be worried by facetious people who try to make the Christian hope of heaven ridiculous by saying they do not want to spend eternity playing harps. The answer to such people is that if they cannot understand books written for grown-ups, they should not talk about them. **All the scriptural imagery (harps, crowns, gold, etc.) is, of course, a merely symbolical attempt to express the inexpressible.** Musical instruments are mentioned because for many people (not all), music is the thing known in the present life which most strongly suggests ecstasy and infinity. Crowns are mentioned to suggest the fact that those who are united with God in eternity share His splendour and power and joy. Gold is mentioned to suggest the timelessness of Heaven (gold does not rust) and the preciousness of it. People who take these symbols literally might as well think that when Christ told us to be like doves He meant that we were to lay eggs" (C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*).

Sometimes Rev.'s imagery becomes more startling and "far-out" than the examples just given. In some scenes "inanimate objects and forces of nature suddenly become actors. For example, in 12:14-16 the woman was given the wings of the great eagle. The earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. The *events* symbolically portrayed are not unreal or untrue. Rather, the *form* in which they are pictured as happening is highly dramatic and symbolic The best introduction to understanding such visionary literature in Rev. is by reading other similar types of literature. C. S. Lewis has written this type of literature in his famous Narnia stories" (Newport).

* * * *

"Much of the imagery is symbolical rather than pictorial, and is meant to be interpreted rather than visualized. We are not meant to

imagine creatures 'full of eyes in front and behind' (4:6), but to *remember* their ceaseless vigilance. We are not to conceive of the white robes of the saints as having been literally laundered in a bath of the Lamb's blood (7:9-14), but to understand that their presence before the throne is due solely to the death of Jesus Christ" (Stott).

On the other hand, some of the imagery, "as in the parables of Jesus, is added simply to give a heightened dramatic effect and does not possess an independent meaning in every detail. For instance, the gems enriching the walls of the Heavenly Jerusalem (21:19) may not each symbolize something different" (Stott). In other words, **in these cases they are to be imagined or visualized, not interpreted.**

Yet other passages are to be partly visualized and partly interpreted. This is not so complicated as it may sound. For example, note how John portrays the glorified Christ in 1:13-16. He gives a ten-fold description of Him. "Here is symbolism. The description is not so much intended to give us a picture of the external appearance of our Lord's Person. These descriptions are, in part at least, symbolic, emblematic of His Divine dignity, power, office, and character. The meaning of some of these items is obvious: some are explained here or further on or elsewhere in the scriptures. But though the Son of Man is here presented to us in symbolic array, note well that not *all* is symbolic, nor is He himself symbolic. It was actually the Lord Himself whom John saw ... the same Person whom Stephen had beheld standing at God's right hand, and Saul saw on the road to Damascus. Beware of the false assumption that says, 'If any part of a scripture is symbolical, then all is; and if any is literal all is literal.' **We shall constantly find symbolism grouped around central literal fact; and literal truth woven into symbolic texture.** (Note, for example, Psa.80:8-16 with its mixture of the figurative and the literal.)" (Boll).

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Regarding the sixth seal, Rev.6:13,14. "We are not to take the expression, 'the stars of the heaven fell to the earth,' or 'the heaven was removed as a scroll,' in an astronomical sense; but, as always in the Bible and in common human speech also, in a **phenomenal** sense - - *describing the appearance as it strikes the eye* -- just as we say, for example, 'the sun rose out of the sea and set behind the hill.' This is surely that convulsion of nature, foretold by the Lord Jesus: 'signs in sun and moon and stars and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity for the roaring of the sea and the billows; men fainting for fear and for expectation of the things which are coming on the world, for the powers of the heavens shall be shaken.' (Luke 21:15,16)" (Boll, also be sure to read the article next month about the 3 series of 7 disasters, and the important quote from him there.)

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2. When SYMBOLS are Obviously Used, then WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

For example, who is *the rider on the white horse* in 6:2? Is it Christ, or antichrist, or imperialism, or revival, or the spread of the gospel? All these interpretations have been suggested, for the text does not tell the answer. R.H. Boll and Stanford Chambers, among others, differed on this point, and the present editor takes a third view! Again, who is *the woman clothed with the sun* (12:1ff.)? Is she Mary, or Israel, or the church, or God's people of both OT and NT times? You may not own a commentary and thus not have a clue. Or you may have 2-3 commentaries, and still not have a clue -- since they contradict each other! (Commentaries can be very valuable, but don't over-depend on them, nor use them till you study for yourself first.)

In such cases you may feel tempted to give up in despair. Don't do it. Pray, and study the text (and its context, and other relevant passages). But if then you still don't understand it -- move on to the next passage. Next time through you'll probably understand it better. Don't be afraid to admit, "I don't know." And realize that **the value of Rev. doesn't depend on understanding every symbol, paragraph or even chapter.**

But let's not over-estimate the problem. **In many cases, the meaning of symbols is clear.** You may not be sure of the identity of the woman clothed with the sun, but the same chapter tells us with absolute certainty that the dragon is none other than Satan the Devil (12:9). So, learn all you can about him from the passage. **If we focus on what is clear, gradually we'll understand some points which at present puzzle us.**

* * * *

3. The TIMING and ORDER of Events:

"In chapters 2 and 3 Christ is on earth walking among the lampstands (2:1), while in chapters 4-7 He is the Lamb who is in heaven close to the throne of God (5:6). We are not to conclude from this that Christ first spent a period of fellowship with the churches on earth, and then spent another period close to the throne of God in heaven. It is **only the visions which succeeded one another in John's experience.** Christ Himself is always present both with His Church on earth and with His Father in heaven" (Stott).

* * * *

"Write the things which thou sawest, and the things which are, and the things which shall come to pass hereafter" (1:19, ASV).

“Verse 19 has been taken by many as indicating a 3-fold division of the book of Rev., in which *the things which thou sawest* refers to chapter 1, *the things which are*, to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3, and *the things which shall come to pass hereafter*, to the remainder of the book. Actually this classification does not help much in interpretation. It should be remembered, moreover, that the words here translated hereafter, *meta tauta*, occur 9 other times in the book of Rev. (4:1; 7:1; 7:9; 9:12; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1; 20:3).” --Wilbur Smith in *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*.

* * * *

Some interpreters believe that all the events depicted from Rev. 4:1 onward are yet future to our time. That is, nothing mentioned in chapters 4-22 have occurred yet, but are still to come (except a few verses which are flashbacks to events long ago, such as Jesus' birth/life/ascension which may be presented in 12:5.)

But notice carefully Sidlow Baxter's observations on this:

What is [Christ's] last word to the Church [in the letters of chaps. 2-3]?

It is this: "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My throne, even as *I also overcame, and am set down with My Father in His throne*" (3:21).

This reference to our Lord's joint-occupancy of the Father's throne opens the door to the vision of that throne which now follows in chaps. 4 and 5.... [and of the Lamb's "standing in the center of the throne," 5:6.]

[We insist that chaps. 4 and 5] describe something which has already happened. Their enthronement of the Lamb in heaven is not something which is yet to happen. He is there now. Recall chap. 3:21 [just quoted above] **This agrees with the uniform teaching of the New Testament** (Mark 16:19; Eph. 1:20,21; Heb. 1:3, 2:9, 10:12, 12:2). That enthronement in heaven has already taken place. (*Explore the Book*)

If this is so -- and the evidence seems irrefutable -- then not only Rev.'s first three chapters but at least chapters 4-5 have already occurred in the past. And some students believe the events of ch 6: 1-11 have been occurring from the first century till now. Read on.

* * * *

Clearly the events pictured in Rev. are **not all presented in chronological order.** For instance, 14:8 is the first mention of "Babylon the great." Before Babylon is defined or described for us, we hear the startling declaration: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great." No further explanation is given. Then in 16:19 it is suddenly mentioned

for the second time: "God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup ... of his wrath." Then a few verses later, chapters 17 and 18 portray Babylon's glittering glory, vileness and violence, and vast influence -- before then spelling out its fall in detail. Before scaring God's people with gruesome pictures of Babylon's power, Rev. first assures us that it is doomed -- it will be smashed to bits. But in doing so, the book does not follow chronological order. That is true regarding other topics too, not only Babylon.

* * * *

Another "timing" question: How much of Rev. has already occurred as far as end-time fulfillments are concerned? **Has Christ broken the seals yet?** Study this for yourself. Then see our article next month on the seven seals, trumpets and bowls. It will provide some evidence that He has indeed -- and therefore that the 4 horsemen have been riding far and wide for about 2000 years now! Could that be possible?

4. To what extent are events in Rev. the DIRECT ACTION OF GOD (that is, Miracles), and to what extent does God use "SECOND CAUSES" (that is, work through Natural Processes and/or by means of free Human Agents)?

To understand this question, recall Jesus' words that *God feeds the birds* (Mt.6: 26). He does, *but He doesn't drop worms, bugs or seeds into their nests!* He feeds them by providing food for them to gather, and giving them the instinctive ability to gather it. He feeds them indirectly rather than directly. He feeds them as they feed themselves.

Now consider another angle of this question. *God gave the prophet Ezekiel (chaps.8-11) a vision of judgment that would soon come on Jerusalem* due to its idolatry, bloodshed and injustice. The prophet heard the Lord tell six "men" (obviously angels) to slaughter all the sinful people (but not the righteous) who were there. So they "began killing throughout the city" (9:7). If we insist on interpreting this passage in a fully literal way, it would mean that:

- (1) *angels* (not men) were the killers;
- (2) they slaughtered *all* (not some or most) of Jerusalem's wicked inhabitants;
- (3) and they did it *right then* at the time of Ezekiel's vision-visit.

Yet we know from Scripture that:

- (1) *Babylonian soldiers*, not heavenly angels, were the killers;
- (2) they killed many Jews -- but *not all the wicked* among them;

(3) this occurred sometime *after* Ezekiel's vision.

So was this prediction by Ezekiel fulfilled or not? Yes, but not in a fully literal way. **The main point of this dramatic vision was clear.** God was saying, "Jerusalem, I warn you that terrible judgment will come to you, soon, and it is due to your sins." That prediction came to pass indeed. But notice how it was fulfilled. **Don't press all the details in such prophetic visions. And realize that some (or many?) times God Himself doesn't fulfill His forecasts directly.** In this case, savage soldiers of Babylon did it. (Of course we recognize that God allowed it, and used it for His purposes.)

In a similar way, consider some of Rev.'s visions. We read, "...A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter" (8:11). Again, "...The four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour ... were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million" (9:15-16a).

If such passages are fulfilled in ways similar to Ezek. 8-11, it could be that the poisoning of the waters will be due to *human* folly or malice, rather than direct divine intervention, at least at that stage. Consider that as a possibility anyway. (Such water pollution is already a dread reality in some places, and could easily get much worse.) And those four killer "angels" could possibly be human (as in the case of Ezek. 9) or demonic leaders responsible for the stirring up and unleashing of vast numbers of human warriors.

So we conclude this point. We should realize there is Biblical precedent for prophetic visions which are fulfilled in a general sense, but not with detailed ultra-literalism. Let's **steer between two extremes:** Avoid an *unfounded spiritualism* which robs prophecies of close resemblance to their original meaning. But also avoid an *excessive literalism* which insists that not only the main points but even every detail in such visions will be carried out exactly as stated. That latter error does not make allowance for the dramatic and figurative ways that long-range prophecy is often (but not always) communicated. As Brother Boll wrote, "We shall constantly find symbolism grouped around central literal fact; and literal truth woven into symbolic texture."

Seven Great Themes of Revelation

1. Warfare and Tribulation for God's People

John was an exile on the island of Patmos "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." He referred to himself as his readers' "companion in the suffering ... and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus." Antipas of Pergamum had been martyred, and some disciples in Smyrna were about to be thrown into prison. John saw in heaven the souls of those who had already been martyred for their testimony, and heard that others would join their number. He also saw a numberless multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing in front of the Lamb in heaven; he was told, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation." Christ's two "witnesses" (also called olive trees and lampstands--do they symbolize God's saints as a group?), after being protected from opposition for a period, would then be attacked, overpowered, killed and degraded.

The dragon, Satan, would try to devour the woman's son, and then pursue the woman herself, and finally make war "against the rest of her offspring -- those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus." The beast would be "allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them." The harlot Babylon would become "drunk with the blood of the saints and the martyrs of Jesus." John says that some believers would become captives and others would be killed. Thus he issues a call for "patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints." (References for this section: 1:9; 2:13; 2:10; 6:9-11; 7:9,14; 11:3-10; 12:4,13,17; 13:7; 17:6; 13:10.)

2. Redemption through Christ's Death

Over and over -- at least 24 times -- Christ is called "the Lamb." He "loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood." The song in heaven is, "You are worthy ... because you were slain and with your blood you purchased men for God." The great multitude in heaven are before God's throne because "they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." And we are told that in this present life the overcomers conquer Satan and his accusations "by the blood of the Lamb." In our spiritual warfare we should constantly look back to **Christ's cross.** (1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11.)

3. Christ Shall Return to Conquer and Reign

In our warfare we should also look forward to **the crown.** John cries out, "Behold, Christ is coming with the clouds, and every eye shall see him." Our Lord also cries out, "Behold, I come like a thief." Four times He announces, "I am coming soon" or "quickly." John sees the time when He will ride forth on a white horse, as victorious

Roman generals led their armies in victory celebrations. Heavenly voices will thank God, "You have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, for rewarding your servants and for destroying the destroyers of the earth." At that time the proclamation will be made, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and he shall reign for ever and ever" (1:7; 16:15; 3:11 & 22:7,12,20 NIV/NASV; 19:11ff; 11:15ff.)

4. God's Sovereign Control of Nature, Nations, and Individuals

Yet even **now** God reigns! At least seven times John calls Him "The Lord God Almighty" (NIV) or "Sovereign Lord of All" (NEB). And at least ten times he refers to God as "**him who sits upon the throne.**" That throne dominates Rev., as it dominates the universe. Of the 62 times "throne" is used in the N.T., 47 of them are in Rev., usually referring to God's throne. Those oldtime believers needed to see God's throne; so do we today.

John writes that Jesus Christ "is...the ruler of the kings of the earth." Notice the tense of that verb: the statement is a declaration about the present, not a prediction about the future. Our Lord also holds the keys of Death, controlling it, and opens the seals on the scroll -- controlling war, famine, persecution, etc. He uses even the wrath of His enemies to carry out His will (1:5; 1:18; 6:1ff; 17:12-17.)

5. God's Righteous Judgments on Sinners--During History and at its End

Rev. portrays three series of calamities which come on the world before the End. Each emphasizes a distinct truth about God's judgments. First, He **controls** them: Christ opens the Seals, and *then* the disasters break out on earth. They do not catch Him napping. Second, **they are necessary** if God's righteousness is to prevail over the evil He presently allows: The seven Seals must be opened before the "will" to the universe can be opened and carried out. *Then* His name shall be exalted, His will be done on earth, and His kingdom come -- fully! Third, He **warns the wicked** by His judgments: They are like Trumpets sounding out the alarm that sin deserves doom, and calling for repentance. (Compare Isa.58:1; Ezek.33:3; Joel 2:1.) Fourth, God **punishes** the impenitent by His judgments: the Bowls of Wrath are His retributive justice poured out on those who reject His warnings and defy His holiness. (1, 3 and 4 based on Stott.)

Then at the end of this age the final judgment will occur (20:11ff). Those whose names are in the Book of Life (through faith-commitment to the Savior) will enjoy God's presence forever. But those not

enrolled there will be cast into the lake of fire -- the second death. So eternal destiny depends on one's relationship to Christ the Life-giver. But the degree of punishment for the lost and of rewards for the redeemed will vary, depending on their works -- on what is recorded in the "books" of their lives (20:12; 22:12).

6. The Glorious Destiny of the Redeemed--At Death and at the End

Christ has the keys of death. That is, He controls its timing. And to Christians, death brings release from life's weariness: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, that they may rest from their labors" (1:18; 14:13). Yet death is not our goal; we yearn for resurrection and glorification, the completion of our salvation, the final glory.

That final glory is compared to Jerusalem, the holy city of God (21:2-4,10ff); also to the ancient Holy of Holies, which was a cube in shape (21:16) and where God revealed His presence. It is also compared to the garden of Eden, with its river and the tree of life: "paradise lost" will become "paradise regained" (compare 22:1,2 with Gen.2:8-10). And God will dwell with men, "and they shall be his people. And his servants shall worship and serve him; they shall see His face, and his name shall be on their foreheads, and they shall reign for ever and ever" (21:3; 22:3-5).

7. The Call to Persevere or Repent

Faced with the alternatives of doom or glory, and remembering our Lord's redeeming death, present sovereignty, and future coming, how should we respond? We notice in the letters to the seven churches that the first, third, fifth and seventh churches were commanded to **repent**: "Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent" (3:19). The second, fourth and sixth churches were urged to **persevere**: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Be faithful unto death." "Hold fast what you have, until I come." "I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown" (2:10; 2:25; 3:11). And to the individual overcomers in *all* the churches -- "to him who conquers" the world, flesh and devil -- precious and very great promises are made by the Lord, who walks among the churches and knows their works.

So we join the hosts of heaven as they sing:

**"To Him who sits upon the Throne, and to the Lamb,
be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!"**

VOICES From The FIELDS

**Paul and Virginia Kitmiller Sept. 9, 1999 Russian Mission
Hamburg Church of Christ, 8921 Newberry Road, Sellers-
burg, IN 47172**

Virginia and I will soon be busy at work in St. Petersburg, the second largest city in Russia. There will be a number of opportunities for outreach in our new location, but the main reason for our going there will be to work with a small congregation of Russian Christians. These 15-20 young Christians are willing to work, but need much guidance and teaching.

Your prayers for this work are extremely important to us. We believe that God has blessed and sustained this ministry, in part, due to the intercession of brethren like you. Thank you for including us in your prayers.

Please continue to pray for the Russian people--the young Christians in St. Petersburg and especially our contacts in Kineshma where we have been working. We ask also that you pray for us: we will need a large supply of wisdom and grace as we enter a new area of ministry in Russia. And, please ask the Lord to grant us safety and good health, especially in Russia.

Susan Brooks Mozambique September 18, 1999

I teach full-time at a Christian school in town. The school is attended by many missionary kids, but we also have a few children from the international community who are sent by their parents to our school only for the academics, in spite of the fact that it's a Christian school, not because of it. Recently a child from one of these families was quoted as saying to his father in exasperation,

"What are they (our school) trying to do to me, make me the pope?!!" (His background is Catholic.)

Last week I was teaching my elementary music class, and we were singing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." I explained that the song is about the second coming of the Christ, and my little second through fourth grade sponges started asking questions right and left! They asked: "How old will He be?" "Won't it be scary?" (the "terrible swift sword" and all). "Where is that in the Bible?" Then there was the question that struck me and touched my heart because of the source. We have a beautiful little Hindu boy in the school. His family is from India, but they've lived in Mozambique for a long time. He

looked at me with his big brown eyes and asked, "But didn't He die?" As I explained that Jesus died and rose again, I was filled with compassion for this child who didn't know about Jesus, and for whom the second coming could indeed be "scary," if he continued in Hinduism.

Here in Mozambique we have so many needing to hear of Christ. Hinduism, Islam, and animistic beliefs are among many false ideologies that keep people from the truth of God's word. We need your prayers for wisdom to know how to deal with such confusion.

Martin is enjoying teaching the young men at our Bible college. We pray that they will go out from us to spread the gospel in the northern provinces from which they came. In addition to this teaching at the college, this week Martin and the other missionaries on our team have been invited to conduct some leadership training seminars for a group of local churches in the evenings. We appreciate your prayers for wisdom and stamina for the wonderful opportunities that the Lord is bringing our way.

We now have a more secure P.O.Box. Here's the address:

Martin and Susan Brooks, Good News for Africa, Box 15294, Nelspruit 1200, South Africa

**Mark and Candy Garrett
Thies, Senagal, W. Africa**

August, 1999

We continue to make new contacts through our English classes. One of the classes held in the Fall included two doctors, a pharmacist, an accountant and a bureaucrat. Among the current students there are three teachers. May God use us to influence the "influential" in this land!

Friends after Class? We invite the students to a Saturday morning "American breakfast" each term. This gives them at least one experience in an informal setting with their teacher. We also want them to "catch" a few things about a Christian family, like how we pause to thank God for our food before we eat.

This week, the students came to our home to get the results of a test. After our discussion in English about the test the conversation turned to spiritual things. It was kind of interesting how everyone switched into Wolof sprinkled with French at that point. We talked about who Jesus is and the significance of His sinless life for us. Only the One who never sinned can pay the debt of others like you and me who have sinned.

Two students in particular are expressing interest in more discussion along these lines. So continue to pray for us that we will be "salty salt" and a "bright light" here in this land filled with animism and Islam.

[Some months ago] we traveled 2-1/2 hours to a conference for Wolof speaking Christians. Over 100 Senegalese believers from all over Senegal attended the day of singing, Bible teaching, Bible study, and great fellowship. The theme of the day was "The Christian against the wiles of Satan."

The highlight of the conference for us was the testimony of a local pastor. He told us that he had been a part of an evangelism campaign in a certain village. The village chief gave permission for them to speak and show the Jesus film but warned the evangelists not to near a certain Baobab tree in the village. After the evening program, forgetting about the chief's warning, this pastor left the room where he was staying and went out walking and praying around the village. He passed right under that baobab tree when suddenly a light shone on him from up in the tree. He knew that this was not an electric light. It was the presence of an evil spirit. He didn't think that he could outrun whatever it was and so began to pray in Jesus' name. The light began to move away and the more he prayed the more it moved. Then he began to talk to the evil spirit. He said, "God created this ground, not you. You don't own it, God does. I am a child of God and He owns me, not you, and you can't touch me." Then the light fled and disappeared.

The next morning the village chief asked if anyone had gone out the previous night. The pastor went and spoke with the chief in his room. He said, "You warned us last night not to go under the baobab tree but I forgot when I went out walking and I saw something." The chief replied, "You are not mortal! I was watching it all from my room. You and your companions are more powerful than men (super-human)!" The pastor replied that he and his companions were not amazing at all but that the One who accompanied them was amazing and His name was Jesus!

The pastor told us that after this the chief began to seriously consider the claims of the Gospel. Now he hears that the chief is following Jesus. Praise God!

To receive the Garretts' complete newsletter, write:

The Garrett Grapevine
c/o 399 College St.
Winchester, KY 40391 USA

NEWS and NOTES

Edited by Bennie Hill

Soon-Coming Events

25th Central Louisiana Christian Fellowship, Nov. 15-18 at Glenmora. Sorry we don't have a list of speakers, topics & times to share with you. Call Dennis LeDoux for details: (318) 748-4243.

Louisville area Thanksgiving Day Service, from 10-11:00 at Atherton High School. Robert Garrett from Zimbabwe will speak, & the Portland Christian chorus will sing.

For Praise & Prayer:

George Galanis' family & church members were not affected by the earthquake near Athens, and no missionaries nor Japanese believers known to us were harmed in the nuclear leak that occurred there (though some live nearby).

Though Irene Allen became seriously ill with pneumonia, the latest word is that she seems much better.

The 'fulfilled' Jews (Christians) of Joseph Shulam's congregation in Jerusalem are being harassed & threatened. Orthodox Jews wait outside their meeting place with video cameras, taking pictures of all who enter. The believers have been bold despite this, but pray for their protection.

Remember that due to Y2K it may be wise to send both Dec. & Jan. funds to overseas workers at the same time, well before the end of '99.

School of Biblical Studies fall semester began the week of August 23, 1999. Classes being offered include: Life & Work of the Preacher (Mike Abbott); Daniel/Revelation

(Jerry Carmichael); Doctrines (Alex Wilson); Homiletics II (Bennie Hill); Isaiah/Jeremiah (Jim Embree). Enrollment includes: 4 crediting students; 6 audit; and 7 Sr. audits. SBS is considering moving to a house owned by the Portland Christian School on property behind the school.

Portland Christian School continues in their building expansion program. The alumni association is a vital part of this continuing work of faith. This year's **White Elephant Sale** is set for Saturday, November 6th. Make plans to come for a day filled with fun, food, and fellowship. All Alumni are asked to help us update our records and help us find missing Alumni.

Salem Church of Christ is having a Homecoming Celebration on Sunday, October 17th. A full day of activities is being planned with an afternoon service beginning at 2:30 p.m. By faith and a lot of hard work, the renovating project is now complete. Join us in this time of celebration and thanksgiving to the Lord.

Crowley, Louisiana. What a great meeting God gave us! It has been a long time since the Ave. E church has felt such a moving of God among us. God used Bro. Sonny Childs in a marvelous way to stir our hearts not only to be better people in our homes, but a more dedicated people in all our service. We started out with 79 present for Bible School. Average attendance for the meeting was 100.2 for each service. (Bro. Valdetero)

Senior Citizen's Week at Woodland was a wonderful week of rest, recreation, fellowship and revival.

This year over 100 campers registered. 6 states and one foreign country were represented: Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, Texas, Missouri, and Zimbabwe. Newcomers included Howard & JoAnn Sawyer from Chattanooga, TN and Wayne and Alacia LeDoux from Dallas. Robert Garrett was the morning chapel speaker each day and Joy Garrett taught a ladies class. Ladies from the Shiloh congregation provided meals on Monday and Bro. Eugene Pound and helpers from the Summerville congregation cooked delicious meals the rest of the week. Anyone over 50 should consider attending this week next year. It is usually scheduled for the 2nd week in September (Jackie Gill)

Belmont church has been blessed of the Lord in having a revival meeting with Don McGee. Prayer preparation was excellent, as was attendance throughout the meeting. Seven responded for prayer and/or rededication, and one, Matthew Charles, accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. Many were revived spiritually as a result of the meeting. Friday evening and Saturday morning, about a dozen of the men of the church went to Antioch Christian Camp for a retreat to pray about and discuss the Lord's work at Belmont. Several men meet 3 mornings a week at 6:30 for prayer and fellowship.

Waterford. Bro. Bud Ridgeway reports a good meeting with this sister congregation. Emphasis has been on

what the small church can do to keep going and remaining faithful to the Lord. Lessons were geared toward "Equipping the Saints." Bro. Joe Stone is their minister.

Eastview (Lowell Steele) We have been blessed to have Bro. Jim Wilson with us for the past two weeks preaching God's Word in my absence. Bro. Jim is taking some classes at SBS.

Highland Community. Sunday was a day of rejoicing because Nathan Anguiano and Sheryl Christian demonstrated their obedience to the Lord in baptism.

Sellersburg concluded a meeting with Julius Hovan in early October. Emphasis was placed on **Personal Evangelism**. A special session was held with our Outreach Committee to stress the need for goals, methods, and a purpose for personal evangelism. The messages delivered by Bro. Hovan were practical and challenging (Dale Offutt)

Tell City (David Johnson) Bro. Jerry Carmichael led us in a fantastic revival. Attendance and attention were well above average. Special singing included the combined choruses of Tell City & Lilly Dale. Bro. Danny Miller was our worship leader and did a magnificent job coordinating the music to the messages. Danny & Tammy & Amy Miller also sang a touching trio one night.