

John's Apocalypse: Some Second Thoughts On Interpretation

by Richard W. Coffen

The evangelist buttressed his sermon on the battle of Armageddon with proofs gleaned from the rest of the Revelation. "You notice, friends, that one of the protagonists in Armageddon is the great red dragon. Now what does the red dragon symbolize? Those two words afford our clues. As we all know, the dragon signifies China, and the color indicates that Communist China will play a leading role."

But the evangelist had more interpretations to share. "Furthermore, Revelation 14:20 predicts that the blood will flow for 1,600 furlongs. You sports fans—how long is a furlong at the horse races? Right, 660 feet. Since eight furlongs equal one mile, 1,600 furlongs, then, make 200 miles. Now, I have a friend who served as a missionary in the Middle East. One day he drove the road that encompasses the Valley of Megiddo, and his odometer showed that it was exactly 200 miles."

As the congregation gasped in amazement, the evangelist adjusted his blacklight diorama. "Soon the armies of the world will fight on that Middle East plain because of the oil there, but Jesus will end the atomic holocaust by coming again. The great clock of heaven ticks away.

Soon it will strike midnight, and Jesus will return. Signs are fulfilling all about us, and shortly the last sign will meet its fulfillment."

The evangelist's hermeneutic—if he had a conscious one—typifies traditional Adventist apocalyptic interpretation, which rests on three presuppositions.

His interpretation of the red dragon as Red China presupposes that the symbols of the Revelation correspond with modern imagery. Our usual identification of the beast with lamb-like horns (Revelation 13) with the American bison illustrates the same presupposition.

The evangelist's use of the racing furlong (660 feet) rather than the biblical furlong or stadium (606 feet) presupposes that John's intended audience would live during the time that the era of horse racing and the era of the 5,280-foot mile overlap. Londoners built the first racetrack about 1170, but the mile was not increased from 5,000 to 5,280 feet until about 1500. Thus, according to this presupposition, John wrote primarily for those living during the past four and three quarters centuries. Our habitual identification of current events as the fulfillment of apocalyptic symbolism—such as the Civil War's being Armageddon and Turkey's playing a dominant role in eschatology—also illustrates the presupposition that the Revelator's primary audience would live in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Finally, the illustration of the cosmic clock inexorably ticking off the seconds presupposes that the time of the Second Coming has been predetermined. We merely await the fulfillment of more signs, then Jesus can come. It also appears that current events rather than God's sovereign will have predetermined the Advent. Our constant appeal to newspaper headlines demonstrates our checklist approach to the Second Coming and the widespread Adventist acceptance of this third presupposition.

Unfortunately, these three well-worn presuppositions lack support from the Apocalypse and its immediate context of the New Testament. Indeed, three radically different presuppositions drawn from a careful examination of the Revelation itself, of the entire Scriptures, and the *Weltanschauung* of biblical times must replace them.

Presupposition One. *God in communicating with John—and with all the other Bible writers—and John, in turn, with his communications, used the idioms and thought patterns indigenous to that particular time and culture.*

A cursory glance at the rabbinic writings, other apocalyptic literature, Babylonian and Canaanite mythology, and even the Old Testament itself convinces the candid student that the Revelation embraces a rich, varied and well-known symbolism.

“Only in comparatively recent times have we come to appreciate that John's symbolism was neither arbitrary nor invented by him, but constituted a language drawn from an ancient tradition which yet spoke eloquently to his contemporaries.”¹

Studies in comparative religious thought have shown that such symbols as stars, stones, trees, lightning, rainbows, reptiles, mountains, women, water, cubes and certain numbers such as seven and 12 hold a generally common pattern of meaning in varying cultures around the world. Thus, for centuries—until, perhaps relatively modern times—almost anyone anywhere could have read the Apocalypse and would have easily grasped the larger meaning behind the imagery.

Paradoxically, our *ignorance* of John's symbols stems from our *knowledge*. The Industrial Revolution and our age of a sophisticated *Weltanschauung* have weaned us from the

land and from our feeling for the numinous. Little about our life, our world and our universe remains mystifying or mystical to the average person. Hence, we have grown ignorant of the imagery that spontaneously arose and captivated the imagination of thinkers for millenniums. We have caused our ignorance by “growing up” into the pseudosophistication of the late twentieth century.²

All this leads to the second presupposition.

Presupposition Two. *John, along with the other Bible spokesmen, wrote primarily to a living, contemporary audience.*

John himself addresses the Revelation to the seven churches, and we should not insist that “seven churches” are code words for the entire Christian church from its inception to the Parousia. John specifically identifies the seven churches as those *in Asia* (1:4). Furthermore, Jesus instructs John to write his visions in a book which he must send to the seven churches, and He enumerates them by name (1:11).

If we argue that only the first four chapters relate to John's fellow Christians, we are implying that the largest portion of the book would have held no meaning to its first readers. Why, then, should they read it? We have no trouble admitting that Paul addressed contemporary churches in his epistles. Why treat the message of Revelation differently? John sent his Apocalypse to his compatriots, who were *to read* and *to keep* its prophecies (1:3; 22:7).

The beatitude of 1:3 implies that John expected the Apocalypse to form a part of church liturgy. The hymnic fragments of the book also point to a cultic *Sitz im Leben* for the Revelation. Leonard Thompson suggests that John based his organization of the Apocalypse on the common worship patterns of the early church.³ None of this should surprise us, for Paul includes apocalyptic “revelations” along with psalms, doctrines and tongues as elements in the Christian worship service.⁴ Since apocalyptic does not fit into our modern liturgy but did form a part of early Christian church services, we conclude again that John had a contemporary audience in mind.

This does not mean that the Revelation had no significance for generations future to John's day. It appears that each succeeding generation

of Christians has taken John's apocalyptic message seriously and gathered hope from it. However, because John wrote the Revelation for his friends, the biblical scholar will look to the current events of the early centuries for possible seed fulfillments of John's visions. For example, when John's first readers compared Revelation 13 with the emperor-as-god cult and with the spasmodic outbreaks of religious intolerance their fellow-Christians had already suffered, they knew that the fulfillment of the vision was all too probable.

Having read Revelation 13:17—written only 87 years before — how would *you* have interpreted the vision if you had lived at Lyons and Vienne in 177? “We are not competent to describe the magnitude of the tribulation here, the extent of the rage of the Gentiles against the saints and the sufferings of the blessed martyrs. . . . *Not only were we excluded from public buildings, baths and markets, but even the mere appearance of any one of us was forbidden, in any place whatsoever.*”⁵

Or what if you had lived during Decius' persecution of Christians (249-251), when every citizen had to obtain a *libellus* certificate documenting that he had sacrificed to the gods and to the genius of the emperor? Surely, Revelation 13 must have seemed very real.

And these suggestions lead us to the final presupposition.

Presupposition Three. *John shared the unanimous conviction of the New Testament writers that Jesus would return momentarily.*

In the King James Version, the Apocalypse opens with the clearcut statement: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass.”⁶ And the book closes in the King James Version with similar words. “These sayings are faithful and true: . . . to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done.”⁷ The Greek, however, is the same in both verses.

Sandwiched between these two identical statements is a symbolical description of those very things God said would transpire shortly. And peppered throughout these symbolical descriptions further statements reinforce the idea of almost immediate fulfillment. The time

is at hand (1:3); persecution will last only ten days (2:10); Jesus will come quickly (2:16; 3:11); the martyrs will rest for a little season (6:11); the locusts will torture men only five months (9:5, 10); time will be no longer (10:6); the Gentiles will trample Jerusalem for only 42 months (11:2); the two witnesses prophesy for 1,260 days (11:3); the two witnesses remain dead only three and a half days (11:9); the woman flees to the wilderness for 1,260 days (12:6) and three and a half times (12:14); the beast from the sea rules 42 months (13:5); the seventh head/king reigns a short space (17:10); Babylon's plagues come in one day (18:8) and one hour (18:10, 17, 19); Satan will be loosed

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only for a little season (20:3); Shortness and rapidity characterize the plot and cast of the Revelation.

Following these supportive statements and the last of the two parallel phrases noted previously, Jesus assures John: “I come quickly. . . . The time is at hand. . . . I come quickly. . . . Surely I come quickly.”⁸

God was reemphasizing what every other New Testament writer had insisted—that Jesus would return in their day.

All four Gospels record such statements of Jesus as: “For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works. Verily I say unto you, there be *some standing here*, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.”⁹ “*This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.*”¹⁰

The apostle Paul taught the same thing. “But this I say, brethren, the *time is short.*”¹¹ “For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord,

that *we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord* shall not prevent them which are asleep. . . . The dead in Christ shall rise first: then *we which are alive and remain* shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air."¹²

The book of Hebrews asserts: "Exhorting one another: and so much the more as ye see *the day approaching*."¹³ "For yet *a little while*, and he that shall come will come, and *will not tarry*."¹⁴

James counseled: "Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. . . . Stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord *draweth nigh*."¹⁵ Peter warned: "The end of all things is *at hand*."¹⁶ And Jude wrote: "Now unto him who is able to keep *you* from falling, and to present *you* faultless before the presence of his glory."¹⁷

The testimony of every New Testament writer substantiates God's statements in the Revelation that time would end soon and that Jesus would come quickly. The second century writer of the *Epistula Apostolorum* believed that the Second Coming would take place 150 or 120 years (depending on the manuscript) after Jesus was first here—in other words, in the early 150s or 180s.¹⁸

As Don Neufeld has pointed out in one of his *Review* editorials, Christ could have come in New Testament times.¹⁹ If that is true, then He could also have returned any time since His ascension. This implies—and is supported by the Revelation—that God has been patiently waiting for spiritual Israel (just as He did for literal Israel) to develop a quality character that He can safely take to heaven. Jesus has been looking for quality in His corner, and as soon as He can

point to a group sufficiently large to accomplish His purposes on earth, He will say, "Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus."²⁰ Then He will return.²¹

Once Adventists realize 1) that God has not predetermined the time of the Second Advent, 2) that Jesus is not waiting for the world to get worse but for His church to get better, and 3) that the Revelation looks for an obedient people dressed in Christ's righteousness, they will properly understand the message of the Apocalypse. Then the revival and reformation predicated on that proper understanding will follow just as Ellen White predicted.²²

No one can interpret the Bible without utilizing presuppositions of some kind, but when the interpreter imposes on the text presuppositions foreign to the genre in particular and to Scripture in general, interpretive problems arise. Has the time come for Adventists to reevaluate and reformulate the presuppositions they take to the Apocalypse? If so, they would do well to keep in mind this advice from the scholar Isbon T. Beckwith.

"For the understanding of the Revelation of John, it is essential to put one's self, as far as possible, into the world of its author and of those to whom it was first addressed. Its meaning must be sought for in the light thrown upon it by the condition and circumstances of its readers, by the author's inspired purpose, and by those current beliefs and traditions that not only influenced the fashion which his visions themselves took, but also and especially determined the form of this literary composition in which he has given us a record of his visions."²³

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, February 1974, p. 78.

2. More specifically, the careful scholar will not ignore the implications of such imagery as the following. The description of God in Revelation 4 parallels that of a sky/storm god. Eschatological silence is the counterpart of primeval silence. The loosing of the four winds draws significance from the Book of Enoch and is the blowing of the seven trumpets. The four levels of the ancient *Weltanschauung*—sky, earth, sea and underworld—each house villains ultimately overcome by the Lamb. The Leviathan and Behemoth imagery of the Talmud and the Old Testament casts light on Revelation 13. Mystical numbers such as three and a half, seven, and 12 hold qualitative not quantitative significance.

3. Leonard Thompson, *The Journal of Religion*, October 1969.

4. I Corinthians 14:26.

5. *The Epistle of the Gallican Churches*, cited in *Documents of the Christian Church*, second edition, selected and edited by Henry Bettenson.

6. Revelation 1:1.

7. Revelation 22:6.

8. Revelation 22:6, 10, 12, 20.

9. Matthew 16:28.

10. Matthew 24:34.

11. I Corinthians 1:7.

12. I Thessalonians 4:15-17.

13. Hebrews 10:25.

14. Hebrews 10:37.

15. James 5:7, 8.
 16. I Peter 4:7.
 17. Jude 24.
 18. *Epistula Apostolorum* 17.
 19. *Review and Herald*, March 29, 1973, p. 13.
 20. Revelation 14:12.
 21. Other Adventist authors have also stressed the conditionality of prophecy. J. N. Andrews in *The Sanctuary and Twenty-three Hundred Days*, second edition, pp. 5, 9, quotes Bliss' *Commentary on the Apocalypse* pp. 7, 8, which sets forth the principle of conditional prophecy. J. H. Waggoner in *Refutation of the Doctrine Called the Age to Come*, second edition, p. 92, refers to conditional prophecy. E. A. Sutherland in *Living Fountains or Broken Cisterns*, p. 81, suggests that had Israel been faithful, earth's history would have been shortened by at least 2,000 years.
- Martin Buber calls conditionality the "prophetic theologem" of Hebrew prophecy, though Buber refuses to apply the contingency principle to apocalyptic literature (*Pointing the Way*, pp. 197, 198).
- The deterministic element which scholars see in apocalyptic does not necessarily vitiate conditionality in the genre. For example, certain rabbis held both concepts in tension when explaining why Messiah had not come. "Rab said: All the predetermined dates [for redemption] have passed, and the matter [now] depends only on repentance and good deeds" (Sanhedrin 97b). "R. Samuel b. Nahami said in the name of R. Jonathan: Blasted be the bones of those who calculate

the end [Messiah's advent.] For they would say, since the predetermined time has arrived, and yet he has not come, he will never come. But [even so], wait for him, as it is written, *Though he tarry, wait for him*. . . . What delays [his coming]?—The Attribute of Justice delays it [footnote: because of Israel's unworthiness of it]" (Sanhedrin 97b).

Furthermore, numerous commentators point out that determinism is not as prevalent in the Revelation as in other apocalypses. "The book of Revelation is not a book to satisfy hungry curiosity. The extent to which it reveals *what will happen* is related structurally to the revelation of *how* what will happen will happen to men according to their choices and loyalties in the present" (David W. Cain, *Religious Studies*, March 1972, p. 40).

"There are . . . in the Apc exhortations and threats that do not harmonize perfectly with a purely deterministic or mechanistic conception of human history" (Pierre Prigent, *Theology Digest*, Spring, 1975, p. 56).

"The deterministic element, though present in Revelation, never suggests man's helplessness, nor does it threaten man's freedom or responsibility. The letters to the seven churches show that John thinks that man's decisions and responses in the world do shape history as well as personal destiny" (*The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12, p. 245).

22. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 113, 114.
23. Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, p. v.