

What Does Revelation Reveal?

BY HEROLD WEISS

Revelation continues to capture the Christian imagination because it addresses the tension inherent in having faith in God in an imperfect world. Its placement as the last book in the New Testament, even though it was not the last one written, may be due to its powerful admonition to remain faithful even unto death in an unjust world. Given the apocalyptic atmosphere in which Adventism came into being, it has been at the forefront of Adventist identity. It is often said that Daniel and Revelation are the Adventist canon within the canon. Given the importance of the book throughout Adventist history, I propose to take another look at its message.

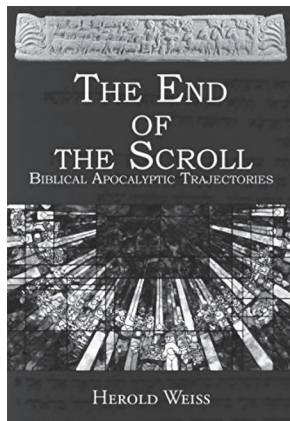
A recent issue of *Spectrum* contained a review by Reinder Bruinsma of three books on Revelation written by Adventists.¹ My book, *The End of the Scroll: Biblical Apocalyptic Trajectories*,² which is not a book about the last book of the Bible but about the rise and development of an apocalyptic theological vision within the Bible, is one of them. The objective of its chapter on Revelation is to show that it cannot be understood apart from the apocalyptic vision to which it contributes. One of the ways in which I demonstrate this is by listing thirty-three instances in which the author recycles details from previous apocalyptic texts to give them a contemporary application. In this short essay I will explore what Adventists have been proposing as the message of Revelation.

When I was a student at the

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Takoma Park, Maryland, in 1956–58, Roland E. Loasby, the inimitable professor of New Testament exegesis, got into trouble with the ecclesiastical authorities in the building next door. Trying to move away from the view that Revelation gives a blow-by-blow account of last-day events, which had been preached by Adventist evangelists for over a hundred years without any of the predicted events ever becoming the last one, he taught us that the book was about Jesus Christ. The *apparatchiks* at the General Conference could not accept Loasby's teaching that Revelation was about Christ, not about last-day events. Apparently, the passage of sixty-four years has now made such interpretation of the text a viable alternative within Adventism. In *Plain Revelation*,³ one of the other two books reviewed by Bruinsma, Ranko Stefanović follows Loasby's lead.

When I took the class on Revelation from Loasby, he pointed out that the book opens with the words, "The revelation of Jesus Christ." This is indeed so and

Stefanovic, like Loasby, finds in this the clue to the subject of the book. Back then, when Loasby argued that the words announced the subject of the book, that was all for the best, but reading the rest of the preface of the book (Rev. 1:1–3) already made me doubt the validity of this claim. John the Prophet claims to have received a message about "what must soon take place." Then he offers a blessing to all those who read the words of the book



aloud and to those who listen to the reading because “the time is near.” (Rev. 1:3). The listeners are told also that the Devil “knows that his time is short” (Rev. 12:12); therefore, the Devil’s efforts to deceive the elect have been increased. In turn, John testifies that his agency did not affect the message. At the end of the book, John reports that the angel that has been showing him the new earth told him, “the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place” (Rev. 22:6). The angel then instructed him, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near” (Rev. 22:10). Then Jesus himself is quoted, saying, “I Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches” (Rev. 22:16).

When the angel began to deliver the message, John the prophet heard a voice “like a trumpet,” which said to him, “write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches” (Rev. 1:11). More specifically he is told, “Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter” (Rev. 1:19). Then, after John had written the letters to the seven churches, he saw “in heaven

an open door! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this’” (Rev. 4:1). In other words, John was told what was going on at the time and what was required of the elect under the present circumstances by Jesus Christ’s dictation of the letters to the seven churches. He learned what will take place “after this” when he was in heaven before the throne of God and was shown by an angel what God had in store for the future.

The members of these churches are admonished to listen carefully to the reading and to refrain from adding or subtracting to what the book says under penalty of being excluded from access to the tree of life (Rev. 22:18). After this dire warning against abusing the integrity of the book, Jesus Christ, the one who testifies to the authenticity of what the book contains, repeats again the announcement, “I am coming soon” (Rev. 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). To underline the urgency of his warning, he tells the Christians of Asia, “Lo, I am coming like a thief!” (Rev. 16:15). To say that the subject



Fresco inside an Orthodox church on Patmos island, Greece

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of the book is Jesus Christ is to discard the words of John the prophet, who is eager to make the elect aware that “the time is near” (Rev. 1:3; 22:10), and that they need to take seriously the message God is sending to them about “what must soon take place.” While Jesus Christ is the indispensable agent and guarantor of the message and the one who is to come soon, he is not the subject matter of the book.

Ever since Joseph Battistone identified the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan as the core of the message of Ellen G. White in his 1978 book,⁴ it has become *the* theme of Adventist theological study.⁵ It had not been so before. In his doctoral dissertation for a degree in theology at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, Sigve Tonstad argued for the notion that the cosmic conflict is the subject of Revelation. His recent commentary on the book makes a full display of his argument for it.⁶ This claim, like the claim that Jesus Christ is the subject of the book, seems to counter John’s description of his message. This proposal faces serious difficulties given the way in which Revelation describes the contenders in this alleged combat and the way the cosmos in which it is supposed to be taking place is conceived.

We could turn to other authors to support this claim. Paul recognizes that the “principalities and powers of the air” have at the moment free rein in the cosmos, and he describes Satan as “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4). According to Paul, since God raised Christ from the dead, he has been engaged in the subjection of the evil powers who are his “enemies.” Only after he has succeeded in putting all of them “under his feet” will God have regained dominion over all of his creation. “When all things are subjected to him [God], then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him [God had actually subjected the ‘enemies’ through Christ], that God may be everything to every one” (1 Cor. 15:25–28). In Paul’s scenario, Christ and the powers of the air are engaged in a current conflict, according to God’s designs.

But this is not at all the universe of John of Patmos. According to him, since the resurrection, God and Jesus Christ sit together on the Father’s throne (Rev. 3:21), and they have the key to Death and Hades (Rev. 1:18), and the key to the bottomless pit (Rev. 9:1; 20:1). Jesus Christ also has the key that makes possible whatever happens. No one can shut what he opens, and no one can open what he shuts; he has the key of paradigmatic king David (Rev. 3:7). According to Revelation, as in the letters of Paul, everything takes place according to the will of God. If evil forces do bad things, it is because God allows it (Rev. 13:7, 14–15). God is the one who “put it into their [the vassal kings of the harlot] hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and giving over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled” (Rev. 17:17). In this, John takes up Ezekiel’s view that God brings about both good and evil according to his purpose (Ez. 20:25–26; 29:20). As the description of the contents of the prophecy says, what will happen is “what *must* take place,” because God and Jesus Christ already control everything that happens. If God is the one who manipulates the displays of both good and evil in the cosmos that he created and is under his full control, there is no room for a cosmic conflict.

After having been summoned to ascend to heaven to see what must “take place hereafter [or “after this]” (Rev. 1:19; 4:1), John weeps because the information is sealed in a scroll that no one is able to open. One of the twenty-four elders consoles him, saying, “Weep not; lo, The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (Rev. 5:5). Are we to understand that the scroll’s content is a cosmic conflict of which the outcome is already known? Not at all. What must take place hereafter can now be revealed because Satan has been defeated and Jesus Christ *has conquered!* As he dictates the letters to the churches of Asia describing what is going on at the time, Jesus Christ claims, “I myself conquered” (Rev. 3:21). As the narration of what must take place “after this” continues, it is affirmed that Jesus Christ,

the 144,000, and a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue, who are also before the throne and worship God in the temple, have conquered (Rev. 4:6; 7:4, 9, 13; 14:1, 3; 17:14). Before the vision of the seven plagues, which are the last, ultimate expression of God's wrath, John sees those "who have conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name standing beside the sea of glass" (Rev. 15:2). This leaves no doubt about the status of one of the contenders in the alleged contemporary conflict. Christ has been victorious over the dragon and has been empowering others to also conquer him. There is no drama in a struggle in which the winner has already been declared.

When John is shown the dragon waiting for the child of the woman clothed with the sun to be born in order to devour him, the child is taken up to God and to his throne (Rev. 12:5). Frustrated, the dragon went on the warpath, and Michael and his angels went out to fight against the dragon. "The dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven" (Rev. 12:7–8). The defeat of the dragon and his angels has already taken place. Does this suggest an ongoing cosmic war in heaven?

As the result of the expulsion of the dragon and his angels from heaven after his unsuccessful attempt to devour the son of the woman clothed with the sun, a loud voice proclaims, "Now the salvation and the power of the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (Rev. 12:10–11). These are again referred to as "the martyrs of Jesus" (Rev. 17:6). The one who had brought about the death of martyrs (martyr = one who testifies) was defeated by Michael and expelled from heaven. In heaven, his opposition took the form of accusations against the righteous (Zech. 3:1; Job 1:9). As a result of his defeat by Michael, he has become "the deceiver

of the whole world" (Rev. 12:9; 20:10). As such, he has been confined to the earth, and once on earth he went after the woman who had given birth. Being unable to get hold of the woman, he "went off to make war on the rest of her offspring," but the only place on which he could stand was "the sand of the sea" (Rev. 12:17). The war against the offspring of the woman is not a cosmic conflict but a conflict in the minds of "the elect," who must be conquerors over the deceptions of "that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan" (Rev. 12:9).

In other words, once cast down to earth, the dragon wished to make war on the human offspring of the woman, but he could stand only on no-man's land, the seashore between the realm of life (the land) and the realm of death (the sea). This is in stark contrast with the mighty angel who came down from heaven "wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. He had a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring" (Rev. 10:1–3). Now, this angel, who looks like the Danielic Son of Man, has control of the two realms in which the dragon could not stand, the sea and the land, and the open scroll gave him knowledge of what "must soon take place." Eventually, the dragon is taken out of no-man's land and thrown further down into the bottomless pit (Rev. 20:2–3).

Unable to function, the dragon gave "his power and his throne and great authority" to a ferocious beast coming out of the realm of evil, the sea. This beast now takes over the task the dragon could no longer perform. He becomes the deceiver (Rev. 13:14). For the rest of the narration, deceit, the only weapon left to those who have been defeated, is the one being used by both the beast from the sea that was given power by the dragon and by Babylon (Rev. 18:23; 19:20; 20:2, 8, 10). In Revelation, Satan is not a cosmic warrior, but a defeated warrior who stands on no-man's land and has to use surrogates in order to do what defeated warriors are left to do, deceive

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those who do not listen to warnings and believe lies.

So, what does Revelation reveal? When seen from a human point of view, the world seems to be under the power of Satan, and those who worship God end up dead for their loyalty. John the prophet was chosen to give a message to the elect whose names were written in the book of life before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8; 17:8). This book reveals how things are seen from a divine perspective. Paradoxically, God knows exactly what is going on, and he is in complete control of his creation. The future is totally in his hands; what must happen will happen. This should be the determining factor in the minds of the members of the church. They should not think that the world is spinning out of control and Satan is winning. Christ is sitting with his Father in his Father's throne; he has already conquered Satan, and has empowered many of the elect to conquer as well.

Satan is a defeated has-been who is now in no-man's land. This should give the elect the strength to conquer the deceptions of those who offer opportunities to belong to the social and economic elites of this world. The idols offered by deceivers are not to become their gods. Under pressure, they need to have "patient endurance" (Rev. 1:9; 2:2; 3:19; 13:10; 14:12) and resist the deceptions of the promoters of idols. The name of anyone who succumbs to idolatry and worships anything other than the God who created and controls the cosmos will be blotted out of the book of life in which it was written before the foundation of the world (Rev. 3:5). Only the names of the conquerors will remain written in the book of life. They will inherit the land (Rev. 21:7, 27).

Some of what Revelation describes is culturally dated. It displays God as a sadistic enforcer of vengeance (Rev. 6:10; 19:2) and this gives twenty-first-century readers reason to be cautious:

1. When the shaft of the bottomless pit is open and out come locusts with smoke from the fire below, God gives them the power of scorpions. This means that instead of normally eating living plants, they torture non-worshippers of God for five months. Their torture is so severe that the victims eagerly desire to die, but God makes death unavailable to them (Rev. 9:3–6).
2. When the Faithful and True, who rides before his

army of white-horse riders, defeats the beast and the false prophet, who had deceived those who worship the beast and its image, he throws them "alive into the lake of fire that burns with brimstone." Their army is then "slain by the sword of him who sits upon the horse, the sword of his mouth." An angel already had issued an invitation to "all the birds that fly in mid heaven, 'Come, gather for the great supper of God' . . . and all the birds were gorged with their flesh," that of the army killed by the sword of the Faithful and True (Rev. 19:11–21).

3. When all the wicked who have been defeated and are dead are later raised in the second resurrection, they are resurrected just to be killed again with fire that "[comes] down from heaven and consumed them." A special destiny, however, is reserved for the Devil. He is "thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet were; and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Rev. 20:9–10).
4. Even more disturbing, when the third angel of Revelation 14 delivers his message, he says that every idolater "shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. . . . their torment goes up for ever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night" (Rev. 14:10–11).

That God denies access to death so that torments may continue, provides a banquet of human corpses to birds, resurrects people only to kill them a second time, and that the Lamb and his angels wish to watch how idolaters are tormented forever is beyond today's reasonable moral parameters.

Revelation also describes a cosmos consisting of three stories, with traffic moving freely between the different levels. Besides the heaven above, the earth beneath, and the waters under the earth, there is a chamber below. It is a bottomless pit with a furnace and a shaft from which smoke comes out when the lid is opened with a key. Whether the lake of fire and brimstone is another name for the furnace of the bottomless pit cannot quite be determined. Since the key to Death and Hades is distinct from the key to the bottomless pit, and is also kept in heaven, this realm



The Last Judgment. Gothic portal of the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp, Belgium

could be the lake of fire or a separate subterranean chamber altogether. Such a cosmos is not compatible with what is known today about the universe.⁷

Most significantly, however, Revelation reveals the path to salvation. It portrays Jesus Christ among the Christian churches, and he knows exactly what is going on in the world. Jesus Christ wishes to inform the elect what they need to do to conquer over the deceptions of the surrogates of the dragon (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). If they conquer and testify, worshiping only the Creator God, they will have the future of Jesus who had faith in God when he faced an unmerited death. That was his testimony. As a result, God raised him from the dead and sat him with himself in his throne. Those who, by the way they live and die, testify of their faith and worship only God shall have the same future with God. The descriptions of “what must soon take place” are there to give an emotional boost to the warning and advice of Jesus. It’s encouragement for the elect to remain firm in their resistance to the deceptions of the surrogates of Satan.

Revelation reveals that idolatry is the unpardonable sin. No message could be more relevant in our time. The temptations to idolatry put forward by the surrogates of the dragon are everywhere. The gods of the state and the markets who enforce the oppressive power of sin are quite active, offering guidance, success, and security through economic and political power. The temptations to idolatry are found both outside and inside the church and this takes away from the church the ability to faithfully represent something other than the gods of the fallen world. Those whose names are found in the book of life must resist and condemn torture, war, racism, nationalism, consumerism, and the economic monopolies that promote deceptions and produce injustices, ills that are rampant in the new millennium.

Making individuals stand alone in a broken society, without any institution between them and the state and the markets, is the way in which the powers of the political and economic oligarchies sap the energies of the people. The church should be the bulwark where the power of the Holy Spirit is manifest, rather than the

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exhibitor of worldly abuses of power. Everyone worships, and many worship idols. Tragically, the idols of the state and the market are also at times worshiped at church.

Writing as a naturalized citizen of the United States of America, I would first of all point out the nationalism that now pervades Christian churches in this country, to the astonishment of the rest of the world. The exaltation of firepower as the only source of safety, and of unlimited freedom to do what one wishes, has blinded many Christians to worship their national sovereignty without regard to the effects interference and abuses in other nations have on their neighbors. Often they worship their denominational identity, or parade their personal freedoms, without regard to the effect they have on their neighbors.

The worship of wealth has become the driver of a new “prosperity gospel,” one which Paul surely would have declared “accursed” (Gal. 1:8–9). According to it, being a good Christian will make you wealthy, and wealth is the source of happiness. Making the Creator God into the idol of good fortune is a deceptive device used by unscrupulous merchants of selfish ambitions who benefit from the greed and idolatry they promote (Rev. 18:3).

Most subtly, the worship of the Bible has made belief in the Bible a precondition for faith in God.⁸ Bibliolatry is the abuse of the testimony of the many authors of the books in the Bible, based on the claim that God is its sole author.⁹ Labeling the Bible as the written, inerrant, or infallible Word of God is the lazy way to dismiss the evidence and unload the burden of proof, but not the way to establish what is the case.

Warning against idolatry and emphasizing the requirement to worship the Creator God is what Revelation is all about. Given the choice between idolatry and death, death is the better option. The judgment of God is going to be severe on idolaters.

The example to be followed is that of those who “have conquered him [the dragon] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death” (Rev. 12:11).

Endnotes

1. Reinder Bruinsma, “What Do Recent Books on The Revelation Reveal?” *Spectrum* 49, no. 2 (2021): 17–23. According to Bruinsma, they reveal that financial dependence on a denominational salary seems to affect the degree to which the authors agree with the official interpretation of Revelation. He advises future readers to choose the book that best fits their thinking about the purpose of Revelation.
2. Herold Weiss, *The End of the Scroll: Biblical Apocalyptic Trajectories* (Gonzalez, FL: Energion Publications, 2020).
3. Ranko Stefanović, *Plain Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2013). It is a concise version of his 654-page commentary titled *Revelation of Jesus*.
4. Joseph Battistone, *The Great Controversy Theme in E. G. White Writings* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1978).
5. See, for example, Richard M. Davidson, “Cosmic Metanarrative for the Coming Millennium,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11, no. 1–2 (2000): 102–119.
6. *Revelation*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2019).
7. See, Fernando Canale, “Importance of our Worldview,” *Ministry* 68, no. 11 (Dec. 1995) for a defense of the so-called biblical one. Herold Weiss, *Creation in Scripture* (Gonzalez, FL: Energion Publications, 2012) for a description of the biblical ones.
8. It is now Fundamental Belief # 1. See, Herold Weiss, “Reflecting on San Antonio: Or, Hermeneutics or Humility or What’s the Bible Really Got to Do With It,” *Spectrum* 43, no. 3 (Summer 2015), 80–84.
9. See Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1: Prolegomena* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2003).



HEROLD WEISS'S latest books are *Meditations on According to John*, *Meditations on the Letters of Paul*, and *The End of the Scroll: Biblical Apocalyptic Trajectories*.