

Question: which Old Testament book does the book of Revelation refer to the most?

Scholars are pretty agreed that the book of Revelation relies heavily on the Old Testament. Many, if not all, of the last-day events depicted in the Apocalypse are directly traced to literal events that took place during the time of the Old Testament. In fact, some scholars even go so far as to say that there is not one portion of Revelation which is not directly linked to the Old Testament.

No doubt, with this in mind, many of us would expect Daniel to be the underlying force behind Revelation's imagery and mysteries. After all, we often pair those two books together. They both have apocalyptic and end-time significance. But if you think that Daniel is book that Revelation alludes to the most, you would be wrong.

The Old Testament book that Revelation refers to the most is **Ezekiel**. I'm sure that many of you have already figured that out, of course, the keen observers that you are. For the next six or seven times that I am worshiping with you, we will be looking at this crazy book. Because, the reality is, we who pride ourselves on knowing so much about Revelation, hardly even pause at Ezekiel.

Admittedly, the book is a bit mysterious and crazy. Ezekiel has been called by modern scholars things such as schizophrenic, psychopathic, clairvoyant. They wonder if he had the gift to levitate. To say the least, this 6th century prophet has been much maligned.

So who really was this man, and what are the circumstances surrounding the book that bears his name? I'm glad you asked.

The first few verses of the book tell us that Ezekiel, whose name means “**God strengthens,**” was the son of a Priest. Presumably, he lived in Jerusalem before being hauled off to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar when he laid siege against the city for the second time. The prophet Jeremiah's ministry started when he was a youngster, and Daniel was a contemporary of his in Babylon. There is no indication that Ezekiel knew either Jeremiah or Daniel personally, but Ezekiel does mention Daniel a few times in his book.

Ezekiel evidently started his ministry when he was 30 years old, just before Judah was permanently wiped off the face of the earth as a nation. Thus, his book, along with Jeremiah's, is really God's last-ditch effort to appeal to His people before the end comes.

Of course, it was a time of extreme immorality, apostasy, and idolatry. And not surprisingly, the majority of Ezekiel's book is aimed towards the leaders of Israel and Judah. Very much paralleling Jesus' words to the leaders of Israel that we read last week, look at Ezekiel's words to the priests in **Ezekiel 22:25, 26**. We're just going to look at this passage very quickly to see just how wicked God's people had become, starting with the leaders.

What a depressing message, full of doom and gloom, isn't it? Oh, and by the way, just as a side note, there is a noticeable word that is absent from Ezekiel's prophetic message. Not one time in his whole book do you see this word? Do you know what it is? The word is “**praise.**” During a

time in which God's people needed to be serious and somber about their predicament, Ezekiel couldn't find the word "praise" in his vocabulary. Not that he didn't praise God, I'm sure, but at this most important point in Israel's history, Ezekiel didn't put on a praise service, he pleaded with the people to repent.

So what is the deal with this depressing doom and gloom? Well, I want to assure you that there is good news in this sermon, especially at the very end. I am going to utilize this white board right here at the very end of the sermon, and you are going to see and understand the Good News. There will be other Good News throughout this sermon, of course—indeed, a message of warning and a call to repentance is Good News as well—but especially at the end of the sermon, so I'd like you to stay in rapt attention through this whole thing.

And so we start on a journey through the highlights of Ezekiel. Are you ready? Certainly, as God's last-day people—those who reflect the message sent to the church of Laodicea—there is something relevant in this ancient book. So, if we are to know God's message for us today, we must tarry for a few weeks in this book.

So I'd like you to open the pages of your Bibles to **Ezekiel 9**. This first section of Ezekiel—the first eleven or so chapters, at least—give a vivid description of just how far from the Lord God's people had wandered. And in **chapter 8**, with Ezekiel in Babylon, the "**hand of the Lord**" comes to Ezekiel and lifts him up by his hair and transports him to the Temple in Jerusalem. This one suggestion is one place where "liberal" scholars say shows that Ezekiel was schizophrenic and off his rocker.

Nonetheless, Ezekiel tells us that God brought him by his hair to the Temple in Jerusalem and there instructs him to take note of what is going on in God's Temple. There are four incredible things going on the Temple, each one worse than the preceding. Each time Ezekiel sees what is taking place, God tells him that there are "**greater abominations**" that he will see. We don't have time to look at them in detail, but when you go home, read chapter 8 for a deeper understanding of what is taking place.

- 1. The people had set up an image of jealousy in the Temple.** We are not told what, exactly, this image was, but whatever it was, God's whole being shuttered at its sight. His jealousy raged within Him, not because He is vindictive or even suffers from an inferiority complex, but because He knows that homage paid to anyone other than Himself is detrimental to humankind.
- 2. Seventy elders of the temple were bowing down and worshipping different idols that had been set up.** At the center of it all was a man by the name of Jaazaniah who, apparently, was the son of a righteous priest, showing just how far God's people had fallen. You always have to be careful of those pastor's kids, don't you? They're always getting into trouble.
- 3. Women were sitting around, weeping for Tammuz.** Tammuz was a Sumerian fertility god. Yet here these women were—a part of God's chosen remnant people, by the way, the ones who had been left in Jerusalem during the exile—crying over this fertility god.
- 4. Twenty-five men turned their back on God's house and bowed down to worship the sun.** This was the clincher for the Lord. This was the worst one of them all. In response

to this, we read in **Ezekiel 8:18**, “**Therefore, I also will act in fury. My eye will not spare nor will I have pity; and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them.**”

So this is the landscape in which our passage takes place. God’s people had backslidden so far that they were crying over fertility gods and bowing to the Sun. Of course, it would be easy for us to simply pawn off Israel’s situation and apply it to everyone else. It would be easy to point to Catholics and apostate Protestants—who worship on the day of the sun—and say that this passage indicts them, not us.

But that would be a tragic mistake on our part. Do we need have our own idols as Seventh-day Adventists? We may not worship on the day of the sun, but worshipping the sun—or any other idol—is simply the outworking of a deeper heart-problem. That is, idol worship is nothing more than the gratification of pride and self. Self is what lies at the center of all idol worship.

I came across an interesting article about a year ago by a theology professor at Creighton University, a small Christian university in Nebraska. The title of the article is called “**Pride and Idolatry**,” and listen to this particular quote that caught my eye in relation to this. You have to listen very carefully to what the author writes,

Pride’s project of finding rest in the self will always find concrete expression as the worship of idols. We try to find a way to satisfy our need to give ourselves away in love and, at the same time, to give our love to ourselves. We fornicate, not with ourselves, because this we cannot do, but with images. . .¹

¹ R. R. Reno, “Pride and Idolatry,” *Interpretation* 60.2 (2006): 180.

Did you catch this heavy idea? The true center of idol worship—whether it is worshipping the sun, or worshipping a celebrity—is the love of self. Deep down within our sinful hearts we do want to give ourselves away, but we also want to love ourselves, so we set up idols who we can control—which are mere reflections of ourselves.

Thus, in the absence of a physical idol (or an idol in time), the devil has set up idols in each and every one of our hearts. Isn't this exactly what the scribes were guilty of in Jesus' time, too? They loved themselves so much that they sought recognition everywhere they went. They wore the nicest clothes, picked the best seats in the houses, all because they wanted to gratify self.

Yes, this passage of scripture has everything to do with us also. The devil has cunningly set up idols in all of our hearts.

And what is God's response to all of this? In apocalyptic terms, Ezekiel says He hears a "**loud voice,**" and then six agents appear on the scene, each having a deadly weapon in his hand. But out from their midst comes a seventh man, who is wearing white linen and holding a writer's inkhorn.

It's interesting to note—and I wish I could spend more time on this, but I can't—that the Hebrew word used to describe what this seventh man is wearing is the same word that describes the priests' clothing in the Pentateuch. More significantly, though, this is clothing that the great high priest would wear as He ministered in the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement. During the daily ministration of the High Priest during the rest of the year, he would wear much more

elaborate clothing, but during the Day of Atonement, he would put on the plain clothing that the lesser priests would wear as he ministered in the Most Holy Place.

At the same time, the same Hebrew word is also used in the book of Daniel to describe the attire that the heavenly being in **Daniel 10** is wearing that Daniel sees. Furthermore, in the Greek version of this passage, the word that is used is the same word that **Revelation 1:13** uses to describe Christ.

So what am I proposing? I'm proposing that this is a Christophany—an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ—as He goes about His apocalyptic, end-time ministry. After all, what does this Man do? The rest of chapter nine tells us that He performs an Investigative Judgment.

Now, I have to admit to you that I am not one who talks much about the Investigative Judgment—that Adventist doctrine that makes many people shutter at its utterance. But the reality is, the Investigative Judgment is a very biblical concept. We see it time and time again in the Old Testament. And the reality is, the Investigative Judgment is Good News. After all, before God can give a verdict, He always collects the facts to show that His decision is not arbitrary.

Just very quickly, in “**rapid fire succession,**” as Dwight Nelson would say, I'd like to give you three portions of scripture—all from the book of Genesis—that illustrate this point. **1. In Gen 3:9-17** before God declares Adam and Eve guilty of sinning, He comes down and collects the facts of the case. **2. Gen 4:9-15,** God approaches Cain and collects information before declaring him guilty. **3. Genesis 11:1-5** God comes down to see what is going on with the tower of Babel,

before bringing a verdict. Before a verdict comes from God's lips, He always comes down and performs an investigation. He has to.

And that's good news, friends, so we know that God's judgments are not arbitrary. What would we think if, in our modern times, a judge pronounced a verdict on someone before he even knew the facts? Just this past Wednesday, two gentlemen—whose reputations are on the line—captivated many American's attention when they sat before the **Committee on Oversight and Government Reform in Washington**, trying to convince the world that their word was the truth. Brian McNamee and baseball legend Roger Clemens fired arrows at each other as to whether Roger Clemens has utilized steroids and Human Growth Hormone over his baseball career.

And, while in the court of public opinion many have already concluded that Clemens is guilty, his guilt cannot be established before an Investigation is first conducted and facts are gathered. This is actually the merciful thing to do, rather than arbitrarily declaring someone's guilt or innocence without knowing where their heart is.

Of course, I realize there are many people who are scared of the idea of the Investigative Judgment, and rightfully so. They've been told that they better be sinless or else God is going to keep them out of heaven. They better keep their hand out of the cookie jar, or not be eating eggs, because they never know when their name might come up during this time. If you happen to be sinning when God reviews your name, you are in deep trouble.

But this is not the reality of the Investigative Judgment, friends. Notice what this heavenly being—presumably Jesus—does during His investigative judgment. He is instructed go move around the city—starting at God’s sanctuary, notice—and mark those who crying over Israel’s abominations.

Does this little scene sound familiar to you? This is what happens in the book of Revelation, where the 144,000 receive God’s seal on their foreheads! God has his heavenly agent “seal” His people, placing a mark on their foreheads. This mark or seal signified God’s ownership; that His people have joined their hearts to His.

This is the primary role of the Investigative Judgment and Christ’s Most Holy Place Ministry. During this time, He is attempting to set His people apart as His holy vessels. But notice, specifically, which people were to be marked in **Ezekiel 9**. God tells this heavenly agent to mark the foreheads of the people who were “**moaning and groaning**” over Israel’s abominations.

I’m not sure what version you have, but the reason I use the term “**moaning and groaning**” is because this is the one of the only places in the Hebrew scriptures where rhyming is actually utilized. The two Hebrew words rhyme. This is extremely rare in Hebrew writings, but Ezekiel employs that method here.

But what are these people doing that the heavenly scribe is supposed to mark them for? He doesn’t tell the heavenly scribe to mark the ones who sing the most beautifully, or know the most scripture. He doesn’t tell the heavenly scribe to mark the ones who have the greatest testimony

during praise time—though these things can be certainly admirable. Instead, He has the heavenly scribe mark the ones who are “**moaning and groaning**” over Israel’s abominations, something we probably don’t give much thought to.

Instead, we laugh at those same abominations. George Knight, one of my seminary professors who has written a lot of books, said in a class I took with him, “**If I were the devil, I would get Christians to laugh at sin and call it a ‘sitcom.’**”

It’s a sobering thought, isn’t it? I’m not here to rail on television—though it probably could use a little railing at some point—but how the devil has fooled us into welcoming sin through our front doors and on to our computer and television screens. I speak about myself as well. Instead of spending time on our knees, weeping over the sins that we and our people have committed, we laugh at it and shrug it off.

More than simply leaving this to our personal lives as well, we parade it on the platforms of our churches. When I was at Andrews University, working for the grounds department, I used to work with a couple of other seminarians. One of them, in particular, would tell me about the times he attended this non-denominational mega-church that is just a few minutes south of Andrews. He would attend there every once in a while, along with a few seminary professors, and they would worship at this huge church.

What caught my interest the most, however, was when my friend told me about this church’s approach to worship. They would often find themes from popular culture and incorporate them

into their worship service, in attempts to bring people into their pews. In fact, at the moment that my friend was sharing this with me, the church was playing off of a *Saturday Night Live* theme, complete with skits from various characters on the show.

Instead of weeping over the wickedness of the world, we far too often welcome it into our front doors! Don't get me wrong: I'm all for meeting people where they are, but sometimes in our attempts to meet people where they are, we allow a Trojan Horse (you know what that is? Something that has the appearance of good on the outside, but is really bad once we welcome it through our doors) into our churches.

Sadly, this non-denominational church, as well as many others like it, are attracting Adventist pastors and administrators by the droves through their doors, all attempting to copy their strategies in order to get more people in their pews.

But wasn't this Israel's exact problem? They mixed the sacred with the profane. They mixed the worship of God with the worship of self.

Again, I am not trying to externalize the problem so much that we make it an **us vs. them** thing. Whether or not we have *Saturday Night Live* skits being performed up front, or we sit here with our sanctified Seventh-day Adventist hymnals, the danger is still the same. We mix the worship of God with the worship of self.

And do you weep over these things? Or is it simply business as usual?

But here's the Good News, friends, and this is absolutely fascinating. We know that this heavenly being—perhaps Christ, Himself—was going around, trying to mark or seal all of God's people—the ones who moaned and groaned over the sins of Israel. But what, exactly, did this mark look like?

If you look in the *SDA Bible Commentary*, they will tell you that this seal—going along with the book of Revelation—is the seventh-day Sabbath. God's people, in these last days, will be identified by those who keep Saturday as Sabbath. This is that seal or mark, they say.

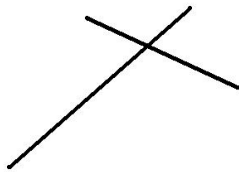
There is definitely support for this, I want to assure you, and, in fact, we will be looking at the Sabbath in another few weeks. We certainly know that God's last-day movement will be confronted with the issue of Sabbath worship. The Sabbath is definitely a sign of God's last-day people.

But that's not exactly what Ezekiel tells us about the sign. In fact, the Hebrew of this passage literally reads that this heavenly being was to mark a **taw** or **tav**, depending on which way you pronounce it, on the foreheads of the people who wept over the sins of God's people. This **taw** is the last letter of the 22-letter Hebrew alphabet. So God instructs the heavenly being to place a letter on the peoples' foreheads.

But the Hebrew alphabet, as it is presently written, was not introduced until about the 3rd century BC, about 200 years after Ezekiel's ministry. Previous to this—and during Ezekiel's time—the

Hebrew language would have been written in what is called the paleo-Hebrew alphabet, which was closely related to the Phoenician alphabet.

And why is this so interesting? Perhaps I've lost a number of you so far, or maybe I lost a lot of you from "hello," but this is the time that I wanted you to pay particular attention to. This is where I share the Good News with you. In the paleo-Hebrew alphabet of Ezekiel's time, the **taw** would have been written thusly:



What does that letter look like? **A cross!** God instructed this heavenly being to mark all those who were to be saved with a cross. Now, you may pass it off as a pure coincidence, or something that is the product of my imagination, but scholars are fairly widely agreed that this is the mark that would have been placed on the forehead of these god fearing people. Not everyone agrees over the significance of this mark, saying that in Ezekiel's time it would not have meant anything, but the early church fathers argued that this was a foreshadowing of the cross.

Perhaps God wanted to show that, even back then, God's people were known by the cross. Perhaps He wanted to show that, even back then, they were saved by the cross. These people who moaned and groaned over the abominations of Israel were touched by God's amazing condescension of love. This love from God—as would be most evidently seen on Calvary 500

years later—touched their hearts and compelled them to weep over the very things that would ultimately bring about that cross.

And what about us? In this time of great judgment, should we not be known for the cross as well? As Jesus goes about His sealing time—trying to cleanse a people in His Most Holy Place—He is sealing them with His cross. While all of our doctrines are important, more than anything else, God wishes to set His people apart by bringing us to the cross. All of these other beliefs—the Sabbath, the health message, even our disdain for the abominations of God’s people—are simply an outworking of the fact that we have been touched by Christ’s cross, much like those people in Ezekiel’s day.

As I was sharing with someone after last week’s sermon, my dad had a professor when he was in the seminary whom he admired greatly. This one professor influenced him theologically more than just about anyone else. What was particular interesting about this man, though, is that he was a bit “unorthodox” in his approach to theology and life, in general. He was not the most popular guy in the seminary, by any stretch of the imagination, and in fact, people viewed him as a bit strange.

As an illustration of the fact that he was a bit different, every year at graduation, when all the faculty at the university marched down the center aisle of the church, and take their seats up front, they are all decked out in their regalia. They wear stately robes and have regalia around their necks, signifying which degrees they have, and which prestigious societies they belong to.

This professor of my dad's, though, would march down in street clothes. He would not wear the robes or regalia because he thought it was too pompous. After all, the regalia that these people wear is nothing more than academic jewelry! So he refused to wear it because he thought it was too much full of self.

So here was a distinguished scholar, owner of multiple doctorate degrees, who refused to “**strut his stuff.**” I guess one could argue that he was going to the opposite extreme, but he was fundamentally against anything that was too much a reflection of pride. This is just the type of person he was. He was deeply concerned for pride and pompousness that was displayed among God's people.

A few years back, after he had died, my dad came across another person who greatly appreciated this man. Being so rare that anyone really enjoyed this professor's views and burdens, my dad and this other gentleman reminisced about the godliness that this professor had shown. And then, in the middle of the conversation, the other person stopped and said to my dad, “**Well, you know why he died, don't you?**” My father wasn't sure what he was getting at, and shook his head.

The man responded, “**I think it is fairly safe to say that he died from a broken heart.**”

“**Really?**” my dad responded, “**Yes, he died from a broken heart because of the condition of God's church.**”

He saw the state of the church, knowing where God wanted it to be, and was deeply saddened and burdened by its condition. So saddened was he by it, in fact, that his heart broke over the church's apathy and glorification of self. All this, of course, a reflection of the fact that we have

not been humbled and touched by Christ's cross. If we were to be, our hearts would be pierced with the pain that Calvary caused, and the pain that still causes Christ's heart to hurt today.

Oh, friends, are you touched with the pain of Calvary? Are you touched with the sin that continues to cause Calvary—even by God's own people? I know that Christ's heart broke as well, as He looked down from that cross and saw the wickedness of those whom He was dying for.

And what about you? Christ—that heavenly being of Ezekiel 9—is “passing over” throughout the city, longing to find someone who has been touched by His cross. He is desperately searching for someone He can seal and place His mark of approval on.

Have you been touched by His cross?