

# CHRISTIAN STUDIES

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## Reading Revelation Today: A Word to a Complacent Church

Allan J. McNicol

If we look back through the history of preaching we can observe that there have been great sermons preached on Revelation. I recall from my youth hearing stirring evangelistic appeals based on Revelation 3:20, “Behold I stand at the door and knock.” For some reason most of these sermons managed to culminate with a description of Holman Hunt’s painting of Jesus standing outside a very worse-for-the-wear door holding a lamp, knocking, and seeking entrance. Of course the punch line was that there is no handle on the door. Only the one inside can let him in.

After listening to these sermons, you can imagine my amazement when I was walking around in a vestibule one day in St. Paul’s cathedral in London; I looked up, and there, to my astonishment was that painting. It was almost an epiphany. But anecdotes aside—though the illustration is instructive—it sheds little light on what John was saying in Revelation. There is much more to Revelation than an offer to accept the invitation! We must view this carefully composed literary work against a wider and more suggestive backdrop.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is in honor of my long-time colleague Michael Weed. Professor Weed has carefully guided *Christian Studies* as editor of the first twenty-five issues. I chose to write some things on the book of Revelation for two reasons. First, this occasion allows me to express similar ideas to a wider audience than would not have access to my academic study *The Conversion of the Nations in Revelation* (Library of New Testament Studies 438; London/New York, T&T Clark, 2011), especially

In this essay I intend to offer a brief overview of the book of Revelation. The overview falls into two parts. Initially I am interested in sketching the main perimeters a current Christian reader should observe in reading this first century book. What is John saying? In doing this I will attempt to develop a sense of appreciation for the scope of the argument of Revelation—the flow of the text.<sup>2</sup> Thus I wish to spend some time putting on the table what I see as the basic point of the book of Revelation.

Second, I intend to discuss why this word is still significant for the church today. Hermeneutically speaking, the believers addressed in the churches of Asia faced a situation that parallels what people today encounter who are serious about their faith. Like the Sirens who sought to lure Odysseus to his doom, powerful elements in Roman society, as well as contemporary Western culture, offer attractive alternatives to the exclusive lordship of Christ. Revelation is a call not to heed those Sirens.

The prophet John was God's agent for making known the revelation of Jesus Christ to the churches in the Roman province of Asia. What he had to say to that ancient church is a message, I believe, that is far too often obscured in interpretation and preaching; what is more amazing, this message is seldom communicated in the mass of details of the modern commentary.<sup>3</sup>

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chapter 5. Second, I have come to learn much from Michael Weed's famous article in an earlier issue of this journal titled "The Twilight of the Gods: Pluralism, Morality, and the Church," *ICS Faculty Bulletin* 3 (1982) 5-16. This article along with two works by Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame/London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), and Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), have been influential in allowing me to see the importance of the call of the prophet John for the church to be a contrast-society or alternative community to the powers of the age that still maintain their grip on much of humankind. Both the author of the Apocalypse and Michael Weed have given attention to this reality.

<sup>2</sup> This is roughly something like the Germans call *die Sache*.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the conservative evangelical commentary of G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 1999) is 1243 pages; the well-known Word Bible Commentary on Revelation written by David Aune spans three large volumes. There is much that is helpful in these works. But it is sometimes difficult to

A necessary pre-condition before drawing lessons from the Apocalypse is that we hear its basic claim as John unpacks it. Only then can we begin to contemplate the full impact of its message. In the same way that “we can’t teach something that we don’t know,” we can’t understand a book until we have grappled with its fundamental message. That is what we plan to do in this overview.

Thus I wish to spell out the essence of the message that John wrote his prophecy to convey to the seven churches of Asia.

### **The Essence of the Message**

The book of Revelation opens with these words:

A revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him to show to his servants what is necessary to come to pass—soon; And having commissioned it through his angel, he showed it to his servant John.<sup>4</sup>

At the outset we discover two major items of prime importance for the reader. First, we are told that the revelation is information about “What is necessary to come to pass—soon.” Second, we are told that this information comes from the Ultimate One: God; and was communicated from Christ (in the presence of God) to the angel and then to John.

It should be noted that this “revelation of Jesus Christ” has actual content. This is a point of importance for understanding the book. The fact that the content of the revelation is verified through a chain of witnesses is also important—especially with regard to understanding its structure.

What is the content of the revelation of Jesus Christ? What is it that was told to John that must soon come to pass? It is my conviction that the whole structure and drama of the book is built around revealing the content of this message which had major implications for the small, struggling early Christian communities in the Roman province of Asia.

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escape the impression that the vision of the woods (the message) is hindered by a focus on individual trees.

<sup>4</sup> Except as otherwise noted, translations are the author’s.

A brief survey of the book will show how its pattern unfolds. After the initial vision of the risen Christ walking among the churches (the seven lampstands), there is an initial assessment of them in chapters 2–3. The nature of this assessment is often misconstrued. Because of what follows in Revelation, the average reader is predisposed to think that the major problem for the churches at the time of writing is persecution (cf. Rev 2:13). Yet while hostility to Christians is clearly in evidence, the primary crisis that John sees facing the churches is a growing desire to accommodate to the debased civic culture of Western Asia. This seems to be promoted by their increase in wealth and commensurate desire for social acceptance. Gentile converts who had become leaders in the churches were tilting strongly in favor of friendly interchange and accommodation with the wider culture.

The apostle Paul had a legacy in this region. Some may have quoted him as favoring such accommodation in his teaching on buying meat in local markets earlier sacrificed to pagan gods (cf. Rev 2:14). John brands certain teachers in the church who favor cultural accommodation as followers of Balaam and Jezebel (Rev 2:14, 20–24).

This process of striving for social acceptance leads to a loss of fervor for the gospel and complacency in material success (Rev 2:4; 3:17). It is to these people that the heavenly Jesus addresses a strong call to repentance (Rev 2:5, 16, 21–22; 3:3, 19). They are the readers addressed most directly in the book. In light of the message about to be revealed, strong reasons will be given for them to change. These reasons reinforce the hortatory message of the book. No less than the opponents, the accommodationists within the church are in danger of being excluded from the kingdom when it fully arrives. Believers in the churches should not settle for the seductive (but paltry) benefits of present societal acceptance in place of the infinite benefits that will accrue to those who will walk the streets of the coming New Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> The rest of

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<sup>5</sup> At the core of the book are seven macarisms (statements of blessings) addressed to the earliest believers highlighting the need to remain faithful to a particular view of reality (Rev 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). These words represent the divine mandate for action in light of the essence of the message of the book.

the book, the heavenly vision of what is to come (4:1–22:9), portrays the impending conflict and its resolution in the coming of the new heavens and new earth. This is the thrust of Revelation.

### **The Eternal Vision**

Chapter 4 begins with a vision of God in the heavenly sanctuary. That vision culminates at 5:1. After an oblique description of the heavenly Father we are startled to find that in his right hand is a scroll. Within the scroll are the words which reveal what must soon come to pass. Most of the commentators rightly dwell on analogues of familiar court scenes taken from the time when the Roman emperor was seated upon his throne and held in his hand a *libellus*: either a petition from the people or a letter announcing his judgments. This would be in the form of a scroll.

What is noteworthy here is that the scroll is closed. The issue is raised in chapter 5 as to who is worthy to open the scroll. After considerable drama a search proceeds throughout the whole cosmos to find the one eligible to open the scroll. No one is found worthy to open it. In a scene reminiscent of Abraham finding the ram shortly before he was about to kill Isaac, the Lamb is discovered by God's throne. It is as though there had been a great oversight that renders the cosmic search moot. The Lamb is the one who is worthy to open the scroll and thus to make known God's will for the immediate future.

Then with chapters 6–7 the scroll begins to be opened. The first four seals reveal a growing number of disasters which affect the ecology of the Empire. Then, beginning with the fifth seal and an interlude, we hear the cries of the people of God who have not capitulated to the imperial powers and gods of the age. They cry out to God to bring them relief soon by exercising fully his sovereign claim over the world. The people of God are not immune from persecution. But there is some solace because they are sealed against spiritual separation at the final judgment.

At this stage it is important to note that the opening of the seven seals in chapters 6–7 is not itself the message of the apocalypse. The function of the opening of the seals is to provide an anticipatory setting for the revelation to

begin to unfold at the midpoint of the book. There (10:1–10) the prophet digests the scroll and prepares to express its message. The three cycles of plagues in chapters 6–16 (the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls of wrath) highlight God’s judgments against a rebellious world. The action in the seven seals is from the first coming of Christ to the time of destruction and the second coming of Christ (6:1–17; cf. 1:7 and 16:17–20).

Chapter 6 opens with the famous four horsemen of the Apocalypse. For an ancient reader it is hard not to see that they represent the true nature of Roman rule and its expansionist military policies.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, Rome or any other idolatrous power that claims to bring peace by the sword is mistaken. This kind of empire eventuates in chaos. The seven trumpets, seven bowls of wrath, and accompanying interludes give greater detail of what will take place during this time which inaugurates the Day of the Lord. Then the full fury of the wrath of God is poured out upon those who do not honor the Creator. These plagues are not thunderbolts of a Zeus-type figure being hurled capriciously at poor unfortunate mortals. The plagues are a measured wake-up call to the peoples who suffer under idolatrous powers. The nations who have allied themselves with Rome are to learn that it is not the political and economic powers of the age that are ultimate, but the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> Despite their increasing intensity, these judgments do not evoke repentance. Thus we come to a crucial point in understanding Revelation.

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<sup>6</sup> Marko Jauhiainen, “Recapitulation and Chronological Progression in John’s Apocalypse: Towards a New Perspective” (New Testament Studies 48, 2003, 548). cf. I Thess 5:9.

<sup>7</sup> It is critical in interpreting Revelation to understand that the units on the seven trumpets (8:2–11:18) and seven bowls of wrath (11:19–16:21) are expansions of what takes place in the sixth seal (6:12–17). In my book *The Conversion of the Nations in Revelation*, 114, I ask readers to visualize a set of Russian dolls. Instead of unpacking the next one placed inside another in decreasing size the opposite takes place here. The units on the seven trumpets and seven bowls of wrath give expansive greater details of 6:12–17. J. Lambrecht, “A Structuration of Revelation 4, 1–22, 5” in *L’Apocalypse johannique et l’apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament*, BETL 53 (ed. J. Lambrecht; Leuven; Leuven University Press, 1980) 77–104, calls this process “encompassing.”

The rest of men who had not died as a result of these plagues [i.e. those who had suffered directly by God's measured judgments]—did not repent of the works of their hands nor did they give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot either see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders of their sorceries or their immorality or their thefts (Rev 9:20–21).

The quality of the moral life in the wider Western society in which we live has degenerated to an unbelievable degree of depravity, even in my lifetime. Evidence of that is everywhere around us. But we ought to be under no illusion that this awareness of cultural degeneration will, in and of itself, bring a change for the better. The Apocalypse warns us that this will not be the case. Indeed, in the last set of plagues, when God no longer restrains his judging wrath—and goes all out against the forces of evil—men openly curse God (16:9, 11, 21). They would rather die clinging to their depravity than turn to acknowledge the sovereignty of God. Until the very end men blame God for the terrible state of affairs which emerged as the direct result of their idolatries. Something more has to be brought to bear before humankind will acknowledge the rule of the Father above. This something else is a key feature of the message of the scroll.

In chapter 10 the scroll—which holds the secret purposes of God for establishing his kingship over the created order and which has been opened by Jesus Christ in heaven—is finally ready to be revealed to the people on earth. In keeping with Revelation 1:1 the scroll is brought down to John by an angel (Rev 10:1).<sup>8</sup> After John receives the scroll he internalizes its message by eating it. In Revelation 10:11 he begins to give utterance to its message.

That message is found in summation in Revelation 11:1–13, a much discussed section of the Apocalypse. It occurs in the latter part of the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpet. Essentially, the message is this: a

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<sup>8</sup> The possibility that 10:1–11 referred to a “little,” or “open scroll” (diminutive) does not mean this is a different scroll from the one mentioned earlier. There are several textual variants here; even if the diminutive is the correct text, the Greek of Revelation allows for us to use language variants incorporating diminutives.

brief time of horror will emerge (as already anticipated in Revelation 6:12–14). Indeed, echoing Daniel, John conceives of it as the fulfillment of Daniel’s 1260-day period of tribulation (Dan 9:24–27). During this period, the people of God—the true believers—will be “measured” in the sense of being spiritually protected against the horrors of the Last Judgment (11:1; cf. 7:3; 9:4). But idolatrous and compromising Christians will suffer the same fate as the idolaters of the wider culture unless they repent (11:2).<sup>9</sup>

During this time, the steadfast church (symbolized by the two witnesses, 11:3–14) will maintain its prophetic witness to the world. It will be persecuted and scorned for that witness. The faithful servant-witness of that church manifesting the true claim of God shown in the life of his suffering Son will shine forth. *But even this testimony will fail to bring to repentance the idolatrous powers of the age.* Only God’s direct intervention at the Second Coming will furnish the necessary changes. Then the kingdom will fully come. An anticipation of this event emerges in Revelation 11:12–18.

Revelation is not only a minority report on the failure of human initiatives to bring peace; it is also an alert to the possibility of martyrdom for the faithful. God’s judgment carried out in the plagues (chaps. 6–16) does not bring about the repentance of the nations.<sup>10</sup> Even the suffering witness of a martyr church, which does not resort to violence, is not enough to prepare the nations to turn to God in repentance.

Here is a message of substance for the church today. In America, after each Presidential election there are some who believe a great time of peace and prosperity has arrived—but it never happens. If we believe that the re-

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<sup>9</sup> See *The Conversion of the Nations in Revelation*, 110, where I make a case for the reading that those “trampled in the holy city” refer to the apostates. In Revelation the apostates are those who embrace the teaching of Balaam and Jezebel—John’s opponents in the seven churches.

<sup>10</sup> Here I strongly contest the position of Richard Bauckham who argues that ultimately the suffering-servant witness of the church in this age will lead to ‘the conversion of the nations.’ See his important study *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993) 238–337; also his more readable work on the subject is worthy of notice. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 144–164.

sults of any political election or change of government will bring about the repentance of the nations, from a biblical perspective, we are sadly mistaken. The canonical text asserts that it will be only through direct action and intervention from God that the world will finally be made right.

### **The Ultimate Outcome**

Simply put, after chapter 11, Revelation 11:19–22:9 articulates the revelation and works out the implications of this message. Revelation 12–15 gives greater specificity to what John envisions with the coming great onslaught (the symbolic 1260 days) against the people of God. The onslaught will be led by the great triumvirate of Satan, the sea beast (the revival of the demonic political-religious power shown earlier in the reign of Nero), and the earth beast, the priesthood which fosters the veneration of this idolatrous power.

Hearing the prayers of the saints, God eventually brings judgment upon these powers that hold such a strong claim over the nations. His final judging wrath is now exercised against them (Rev 15:5–16:21). Interestingly enough, as the wrath falls on this demonic system that holds power over the nations, there is still no repentance from this arrogant group.

They were severely burned, and cursed the name of God who had the power to inflict such plagues; but they did not repent and do him homage (Rev 16:9).

In 16:21b, after Babylon is visited with huge hailstones, we are told that the people “cursed God because the plague of hail was so severe.” The lesson is that there is a strain of evil so deeply embedded in the cosmos that it will never be removed except by God himself. The continual persistence of evil and rebellion is central to the message of the book.

Thus, in order, the centers of power of the demonic system are obliterated. First is the evil city (17:1–19:10).<sup>11</sup> Then the two beasts are destroyed—

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<sup>11</sup> The “evil city” is Babylon (Rev 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21). As noted, this is a cipher for Rome, as most commentators acknowledge. There remains a persistent

presumably with the coming of the Lord Jesus (19:11–18). Here we are reminded of Paul’s words in 2 Thessalonians:

It is just that God should balance the account by sending affliction to those who afflict you ... when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in blazing fire then he will mete out punishment to those who refuse to acknowledge God and who will not obey the gospel of Jesus Christ (2 Thess 1:6–8 REB).

Finally, the dragon himself (Satan) will be banished (Rev 20:10). Under the symbol of the millennium the ones who had been in a continuous conflict and struggle unto death during the 1260 days (3 1/2 years) are vindicated to reign for a thousand years (20:4–6). The time difference between 3 1/2 years and a thousand years is important. The 3 1/2 years symbolize a brief inevitable crisis culminating in the Day of the Lord. Times will be bad; but these are manageable compared to the joy of the final overwhelming victory which cannot be compared with the short duration of the coming conflict. *To grasp this reality is to get at the core of the revelation of Revelation.* Therefore one should conclude that accommodation with these idolatrous powers by the people of faith is folly. At the second coming, the idolatrous nations will crash in their own excesses. Then the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of the Lord and his Christ.

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group of interpreters (a number of whom affiliate with the Restoration Movement) that continue to insist that Babylon is the old Jerusalem of the first century of our era. The major grounding for this argument is the reference to “the great city” in Rev 11:8 as the place “where the Lord [Jesus] was crucified.” This is an obvious reference to Jerusalem. The terminology “great city” also occurs in Rev 16:19; 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21. Thus some conclude that Babylon is Jerusalem. On the other hand, although a case could be made that “the great city” of Rev 16:19 is Jerusalem there can be little doubt that what takes place in Rev 17:1–18:24 is John’s prophetic description of God’s wrath being poured out against Rome. Only part of this evidence is such things as the descriptions of the commerce of “the great city” (Rev 18:11–13). Babylon having the power over the kings of the earth, and the clear echoes from the numismatic evidence of the goddess *Roma* sitting on the seven hills overlooking the waters of the Tiber (cf. Rev 17:3, 9) supplements this. All of this points to Babylon being Rome. It is very questionable whether these descriptions could be applied to Jerusalem. Rather, just as certain places in the Old Testament (Egypt, Tyre, Babylon) are routinely dredged up as bad places, so old Jerusalem (11:8) and Rome function in a similar way in the Apocalypse.

In harmony with Revelation 11:15, the nations, no longer held captive by the dragon and his allies, stream into the New Jerusalem.

By its light shall the nations walk and to it the kings of the earth shall bring its splendor ... the splendor with wealth of the nations will be brought into it (Rev 21:24–26).

God will be all in all! The prayer that Christians have prayed for two millennia, “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” will be fulfilled.

Having received this revelation, the believers in the seven churches are given a world-view with which to endure the things at hand (symbolized by the 1260 days). In the face of the Nicolaitans (Rev 2:6,15) and the prophets and prophetesses, who are given such pseudonyms as Balaam and Jezebel, John’s hearers are urged not to compromise with the unholy system. Toward the end of the book there is a subtle warning that unless they repent they will not enter the New Jerusalem (21:27; 22:5). They are to be an alternative community, or contrast-society, to the world. As such they are destined at present to engage in a mortal struggle with the gods of the age, but faithful believers will emerge as the victors. Therefore John’s audience is urged not to sell out to the local authorities (as advocated by some prophets) for the few paltry benefits found in “going along to get along.”

With this word of hope the revelation comes to a close. It is in this context that I see real hermeneutical possibilities for use of the message of Revelation for the church today. One wishes that we would focus on the message that the crisis we face from the hostile forces of idolatry is paltry compared with the quality of the Lamb’s victory (the revelation of Jesus himself) and install it in the pulpits of the contemporary church. Our preaching would have far more power. It is to the contemporary situation that we now turn.

### **The Message of Revelation for Today**

An abiding value of the book of Revelation is its many reminders that life is not all that immediately meets the eyes. From Revelation 1:1 onward the book claims that there is a hidden dimension to the existence of the church—God’s viewpoint. Our perspective on reality is this side of heaven. It

is always incomplete and distorted. We need to see reality in a different way. We need to see that our lives play themselves out in a much larger theater—that of the divine perspective. From a human perspective those who engage in mortal conflict with the gods of the age are losers; but from the divine perspective it is an entirely different picture. Believers triumph in the end. As is often said, “In Revelation, the victims become the victors.”

A helpful way to look at the book for today is to note who, for John, was the ultimate enemy. There is little doubt that in John’s era it was the Roman imperial power that, especially in the Eastern provinces, sponsored an entire apparatus of veneration of itself as ultimate. This was leading some, even among the people of God, away from the true object of worship. Throughout the book, time and time again, we are confronted with various images of the emperor and the system he spawned as a counter-point or even a parody of the Holy One who sits upon his throne in the heavenly sanctuary. But for the forces of Rome—as for all idolatry—the days are numbered. It comes as little surprise to encounter the fate of Rome in the taunt of Revelation 18.

It is not breaking news to observe that the Roman imperial power no longer exists. Given the public’s low opinion of politicians today, we need not be concerned with a revival of the worship of leaders of state. But there are syndromes of power in our society that do function as contemporary analogues to the ancient power of Rome. Today these forces claim ultimate allegiance and loyalty for those who are fully enmeshed in them. Following the ground rules of functional atheism, paradoxically, they themselves serve as centers of power demanding ultimate claims on our allegiance—indeed, our very souls. I refer to such syndromes of power as those found in big business, the scientism of higher education, the media, big government, and even sports at the top competitive level. These are the contemporary equivalents of the claims of the Roman imperium that face those who would owe full allegiance to the gospel of Christ.

Phillip E. Johnson, former professor of Law at the University of California, Berkeley, has observed that in the past fifty years the established public

philosophy of America allows God little or no place in law, science, or the schools. Johnson claims that this philosophy, based on the materialistic thinking that nature is all there ever was, is, and will be, has become the new paradigm for imparting knowledge in the schools.<sup>12</sup>

At present in popular best sellers, we see a militant type of atheism abroad that treats believers with condescension and contempt.<sup>13</sup> The attitude of many elites is, “How dare you consider the God of Abraham and Jesus to be a factor in this world?” Larger numbers of Christians than we may think (as in the first century) are drawn into these syndromes of power and enticed into living by these naturalistic presuppositions.

Whether in the church or not, a careful reader can see that Revelation calls this idolatry. For those in the church who seek accommodation with these powers, Revelation recommends a strong dose of repentance. I do not think it is too much of a stretch for us to see that the power of the sea and earth beasts is abroad today. It is not the Roman Empire, but it is the same old idolatry. By emerging in an enticing new dress of contemporary syndromes of power, it has merely taken on a different guise.

### A Final Word

A difficulty that we encounter in reading Revelation is that the book promises throughout that resolution to the church’s problem is close at hand.<sup>14</sup> At the outset we are told that the revelation of Jesus Christ is of “what must soon take place” (Rev 1:1). Later we are informed that the critical period of confrontation between the forces of the Lamb and the forces of the dragon is 1260 days, or in the language of Daniel, “a time, times and half a time.” Readers often lose enthusiasm for Revelation when they find out the

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<sup>12</sup> Phillip E. Johnson, *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law and Education* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1995) 35-50.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006) is the most prominent of these works.

<sup>14</sup> Seven times the formula “I am coming [soon]” is referred to highlight the Lord’s coming in judgment and vindication of the righteous (Rev 2:5, 16; 3:11; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20).

book's description of the war between the forces of the Lamb and the dragon does not literally fit any reasonable interpretation of the history of the Roman Empire in the days immediately following the writing of the book of Revelation. But was prophecy ever totally neat and tidy? When we read the lives of the Old Testament prophets we often see that, by the grace of God, the wrath of the Day of the Lord, for various reasons, was often delayed. Yet the promise is never lost that God's eternal purposes, although endangered, would finally win out. This is the word that must not be ignored.

Moreover, to be precise, John did not predict the imminent "end of the world"—only a coming terrible confrontation with the gods of the age and a resolution for the faithful far superior to the present tribulation that they must undergo. Just as the Old Testament prophetic books are given a new dimension of meaning by the coming of Christ, so the ongoing course of history gives more depth to the message of the Apocalypse itself. We learned that evil is embedded in all sorts of locales and syndromes. It is difficult to sort out, but ultimately it is self-destructive and will destroy all those who enter into a Faustian bargain with it. Needless to say, this reading of Revelation challenges the view that the book is a code or time clock detailing how future events will unfold. Rather, Revelation is a statement of great faith that the followers of the Lamb will be the ultimate victors.

Evil may situate itself in all sorts of places and institutions before the nations submit to the witness of Christ and the martyr church; but one day the nations will bow the knee to his lordship. John was telling his first-century readers that it would be a tragedy if, having started the course with Jesus as Lord, they switched to Caesar, and thus in the end lost everything. Dare we fail to exhort our own hearers likewise?

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