

A Study
of
Biblical
Eschatology

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by

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is a modest one. It is to set forth some of the certainties of Biblical eschatology. It is our conviction that no one has all the answers to questions about the future. It is also our conviction that the history of the Christian Church teaches us to be modest in our claims, and tentative in many details of our doctrine of the future. Yet, having said this, it is also our conviction that the main things that we need to know about the future are clearly revealed in the Holy Scriptures. The material that we will present in this study is intended to demonstrate this fact.

We begin, then, by clearly stating the following time-tested principles of sound bible interpretation that we will follow in this study.

[1] We must always begin with the things that are more clear, and then work at the problem of understanding the things that are less clear. For example: we do not begin with the book of Revelation, and then — after we interpret it — go back and impose our interpretation on the gospels and the epistles. No, we begin with what the gospels say about future things, and then move on to more difficult passages in the book of Revelation.

[2] The only infallible interpreter of the bible is the bible itself, and the bible is sufficient. There are those, for instance, who say that there are things in the bible — concerning the future — that cannot be understood today because we just don't have the resources that we need for understanding them. We believe this is incorrect. It—in effect—denies the sufficiency of the bible. But the truth is that our problems are not due to some imagined deficiency in the bible. No, the source of the problem is rather in us — we do not study the bible sufficiently and carefully enough.

[3] The Westminster Confession of Faith is correct when it says “the true and full sense of any Scripture. . .is not manifold but one. . .” It is often assumed, for example, that there is such a thing as a double (or even a triple) fulfillment of specific

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prophecies in the bible. But in this study we will seek to show why we sharply disagree with this assumption. It is rather our view that Biblical prophecies are quite specific, and that they refer to singular events. This does not mean that there can be no application of the truth contained in a specific prophecy to other times and places. There are many things spoken of in the bible that can only happen once — for example, the world-wide flood. To expect another world-wide flood is wrong, yet this event does provide many lessons — and teaching principles — which can rightly be applied to people throughout subsequent history. But what this means is that the application of abiding principles of truth taught through this event is by way of analogy, not double fulfillment.

[4] The Reformation was right when it insisted on the *perspicuity* of Scripture. This term they meant that the bible was written clearly enough to be understood by God's 'little' people. This is what perspicuity means: we can understand what the text of the bible says by reading it ourselves, while making use of the means that God himself has provided. The 'means' are things such as the historic creeds of the church, a good dictionary, an exhaustive concordance (and the use of the kind of commentaries that men such as John Calvin wrote comparing scripture with scripture in order to show which doctrines are true to the Scriptures).

[5] It is therefore our conviction that the logical place to begin, in developing a correct view of the future, is the Book of Genesis.

In the book of Acts we read of one Jewish Synagogue existing in the Apostolic age that accepted the teaching of the apostle Paul. The people of the Berean Synagogue accepted his teaching because they found—by carefully studying the Old Testament—that his teaching was in full accord with these inspired scriptures (Acts 17:11). So we begin this study with a summary of the eschatological teaching of the Old Testament. After this we will deal with material found in Matthew 23-25 (with the parallel passages in Mark and Luke), and then go on to other New Testament material that deals with the same subject.

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Questions:

1. How many principles of bible interpretation, quoted in the introduction, can you restate from memory?
2. Why is it unwise to try to begin to develop a doctrine of last things by starting in the book of Revelation?
3. How would you prove that God's written word was intended to be read and understood by other than scholars?
4. Name some prophetic predictions that cannot possibly have a double fulfillment.
5. Does the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture mean that it is easy to understand the bible? (Can a thing be clear and yet difficult at the same time?)
6. Give at least one good reason for starting the study of Eschatology in the book of Genesis.

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I - THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

What do we mean by the term ‘eschatology’? One dictionary defines eschatology this way: “It is: (1) a doctrine of the last or final things, especially death, judgment, heaven, and hell; (2) the branch of theology dealing with these doctrines.” But in this study we will take the word to mean whatever God has revealed concerning things still future when God revealed them.

Reliable information about the future is one of the distinguishing marks of the true Christian religion, which is taught in the holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. No other religion has anything like the amount of information about the future that we find in the bible. Likewise, no other religion has anything that even begins to compare with the evidence the Christian religion has in terms of the historical verification of its predictions.

It is also a fact — contrary to popular misunderstanding — that biblical eschatology is essentially clear and simple. The bible does not give us a detailed account of the future, as if it was like a history book written before things happen. Neither does it tell us many things that we would like to know. But it does provide information about the main things that are going to happen — all of the things we need to know — and that is what matters.

From Creation to the Fall

Eschatology has been a reality, in God’s inspired word, right from the beginning. God began to reveal his plan for the future right after the human race fell because of Adam’s first sin (Gen. 3:15). God told Satan there would be conflict between his seed and the seed of the woman, and that he (Satan) would be crushed by her seed [the word seed, here, is masculine singular and was fulfilled by Jesus as the descendant of Eve]. The rest of the bible is essentially (1) the true story of the manner in which God prepared for the coming of this promised ‘seed’ person, through the events recorded in the Old Testament, and (2) then of how God fulfilled that ancient promise in the person and work of his only begotten son, as recorded in the New Testament.

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From the Fall to the Flood

In preparation for his promised victory over Satan God determined, first of all, to allow the fallen human race to display its true character. This is exactly what we see in the early chapters of the book of Genesis. As the descendants of Adam multiplied there was an increasing prevalence of moral and spiritual deterioration. As one generation succeeded another and yet another, the world was more and more filled with violence (Gen. 6:11), and wickedness (Gen. 6:5,12). Yet in spite of — and in the midst of — this process of degeneration, God gave a wonderful indication of his ultimate intention to bless mankind by his translation of Enoch (Gen. 5:21-24). The fact that Enoch, who was known as one who walked with God, was taken to heaven by God, must have had a profound effect on the ancients.

Finally, when the wickedness of the human race had manifested itself fully, God sent the world-wide flood. And although the flood was an awesome revelation of God's wrath against human sin, the preservation of Noah and his family proved that the God's promise remained steadfast (Gen. 9:9-11).

From the Flood to the Tower of Babel

After the world-wide flood God revealed to Noah a general outline of the future history of mankind, in which he also revealed his intention to show redemptive favor to two of the three major branches of Noah's posterity (Gen. 9:26,27). And "*although*" — by God's own announced verdict after the flood, as before — "*the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth*" (Gen. 8:21), he promised that he would never again destroy every living thing as he had by the flood.

God also acted at that time to impose new restraints on the inherent wickedness of the human race. (1) He gave mankind permission to put murderers to death (Gen. 9:6); and (2) divided the human race into factions by confusing their speech (Gen. 11). It is commonly thought that division is a great evil, and indeed this is sometimes the case. And it is certainly a result of evil. But it can also — as in this instance — be a great blessing because it

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tends to divide Satan's forces, so that one group of his servants works against another. Just imagine how difficult it would be for us Christians today if all of the ungodly forces of the world were united? (Its to our benefit, for example, that there are sharp divisions among the Islamic people!) God instituted division in the first instance by causing a confusion in language. This resulted in the scattering of the human race over the entire world (Gen. 11:8).

The Patriarchal Era

After the human race finally did begin to multiply and disperse over the earth, God called Abram out of the traditional idolatry of his family line (Josh. 24:2) in order to establish his covenant of grace in the world (Gen. 12:1-3) saying "*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*" This promise was repeated and enlarged upon throughout the patriarchal period (the era of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob).¹ Especially, as recorded in Gen. 22:17,18, God made it clear that while his promise was concentrated in Abraham's seed [singular, meaning Christ (cf. Gal. 3:16)] it would nevertheless also embody a multitude of people comparable to the number of the grains of sand on the seashore, or of the stars of heaven (Gen. 22:17). Later promises — centering in and revolving around the nation claiming Abrahamic paternity — were never such as to eclipse the grandeur of that original promise.

Abraham himself prophesied that his descendants would suffer affliction and servitude for about 400 years, and yet emerge from that ordeal as a nation (Gen. 15:12-14). And the patriarch Jacob — as he was dying — prophesied the special Kingly role which was to emerge from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:8-12), an event that was then still hundreds of years in the future.

The National Israel Era

Then, more than three hundreds of years later, God raised up Moses to deliver his people from their bondage in Egypt, and to

¹ See Gen. 18:18, 22:18, 26:4 etc.

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establish them as a nation. Without question therefore the nation of Israel was favored by God — for many centuries — far more than any other nation (see especially Deut. 4:1-14). Yet even during this early history true believers in the nation of Israel always recognized that this special status was not given to them because they deserved it (Deut. 7:7,8). Even Moses, who was given a place of unparalleled authority over God's people, did not exalt himself to any kind of supreme or ultimate status, but spoke of a future prophet whose word would have an authority surpassing his own (Deut. 18:15-22).

Throughout the entire history of the nation of Israel, inspired prophets always kept in mind the original promise (that in Abraham's seed all nations of the earth would be blessed) or, in other words, that the promised Messiah's dominion would be world-wide in extent (Ps. 72:8,11,17; Isa. 49:6 etc.). So, in spite of Israel's long-held — and highly privileged — position, it must never be forgotten that there was a constant manifestation of antagonism toward God within that nation. The writings of prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah are full of proof of Israel's unfaithfulness. And Jesus himself summed up the truth about Israel's constant tendency to depart from God in his parable of the Wicked Vine-dresser (Mt. 21:33-44). In this parable Jesus showed how, again and again, the nation of Israel persecuted the prophets that God had sent to them, and then, in the end, were even ready to kill the son of the owner of that nation. He ended this parable with a warning: *"Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it."* And the Apostle Matthew says *"the chief priests and Pharisees...perceived that he was speaking of them."* What this meant was the inescapable fact that the unfaithfulness of the nation of Israel was reaching its ultimate point in that generation. This was further brought out by our Lord himself in his lament over Jerusalem. *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,"* he cried, *"the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is left to you desolate"* (Mt. 23:37,38).

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As the Old Testament period of history drew to a close, then, we see that there was a seemingly insoluble problem! How could God [1] deal justly with an increasingly apostate people and yet — at the same time — [2] keep the promise that he had made to Abraham (that all nations would be blessed in his seed)? The answer to that seemingly insoluble problem was [1] the person and work of Jesus Christ and [2] the emergence of the Christian Church. Jesus commanded his Apostles to begin the task of taking the message of salvation to all of the nations (Mt. 28:18-20). And that message was to the effect that all people who repent of their sins and believe in him as the promised Messiah are, by that very fact, *“Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise”* (Gal. 3:29). For—as the Apostle Paul put it—*“in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made both one...for through him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father”* (Eph. 2:13,14,18). *“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise”* (Gal. 3:27-29). *“For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation...so as to create in himself one new man from the two, thus making peace...Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit”* (Eph. 2:14-22).

This astonishing change — terminating the special status of the Jewish people while enhancing the status of the Gentiles — surely ranks as one of the most momentous events in all history. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that it was difficult for people to adjust to this change. It was also very difficult for Peter (see Acts 10:9-16, 28) and for the other apostles (Acts 1:7,8). It is also clear that this momentous change was a constant issue that Paul encountered in the Jewish Synagogues he visited throughout the Roman

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Empire. It is no doubt for this reason that he dealt with this issue in his letter to the Romans. In Ch. 11:1 he asks: “*Has God cast away his people?*” His answer is: “*Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.*” To many Jews living at that time Paul’s teaching seemed to them to imply the very thing that he was careful to deny. But no, he says, “*God has not cast away his people whom he foreknew*” (v. 2). He then goes on to prove that this ‘problem’ that seemed so strange to them was not really anything new. He cites as proof the fact that when the Northern Kingdom of Israel — as a whole — became idolatrous, God reserved 7,000 in the midst of the apostasy who did not bow the knee to Baal (1 Ki. 19:18). Then he says “*even so, then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace*” (11:5). In other words, God has never allowed all of the members of his church to fall into unbelief and ungodliness. No, he has always preserved at least a small remnant.

It’s not possible to go into much detail here, but in his Epistle to the Romans the Apostle brings out certain principles that vindicate his claim that God did not go back on his word. For proof he cites two unarguable principles: (1) The first is the fact that “*they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham...*” (Rom. 9:6). In other words, being born a Jew never was enough, in and of itself, to guarantee salvation. There always were some descendants of Abraham who were not true believers. (2) The second principle is therefore the fact that “*he is not a Jew who is one outwardly... but he is a Jew who is one inwardly...of the heart, in the Spirit and not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God*” (Rom. 2:28,29). Far more important than being born of Jewish parents is the new birth spoken of by Jesus (John 3). If you have that new birth then you will be saved even though you are not a physical descendant of Abraham.

Old Testament history clearly proves that these two principles have always been evident in God’s dealings with people. The following facts demonstrate this conclusively. (1) When Abraham was given circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant it was also given to several hundred men (Gen. 14:14)

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in his household none of them being descendants of Abraham according to the flesh — except for one, Ishmael, who turned out to be an unbeliever (Gen. 17:23). (2) Throughout Old Testament history there were some Gentiles who were assimilated into the Jewish Nation, in other words they became Jews (think of Rahab, Ruth, and the Rechabites (also note Ex. 12:43-49). (3) Old Testament history also shows that significant numbers of those who were born Jews (even ten of the twelve tribes) were cut out of the covenant nation (2 Chr. 11:13-17, 2 Kings 17:6). These undeniable facts prove that God's covenant was never based on mere fleshly descent. (From the beginning having Abrahamic blood in one's veins was not required for full membership with the covenant people [see Ex. 12:43-49], nor was it a guarantee of continuance in it).

From all this it follows that God did not go back on any of his promises when he reduced the status of the nation of Israel, and transformed Israel into the international entity called the Christian Church. Indeed: this is precisely what was promised from the beginning! Just as Paul expressed it in Romans *“Just as you [Gentiles] were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they [the Jews] too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”* (11:30-33).

In other words even though Israel's loss of status was — in and of itself — a momentous event in a negative sense (a great calamity) for them, it was also a momentous event in a positive sense for us, because it ushered in the final period of redemptive-history (in which the stone of Dan. 2:35 - or the mustard seed of Mt. 13:31,32 - began its course of incredible enlargement in accord with the original promise to Abraham).

This was clearly revealed to Daniel the prophet some 600 years before the first advent of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. In a series of visions that God gave to Daniel the course of world history, until the time of Christ, was unveiled before him. The chart on page 13 shows clearly that the various visions that Daniel re-

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ceived and interpreted, had to do with the four great world Kingdoms that were destined to precede the coming of the promised Messiah.

There are a number of things here that merit comment.

- (1) **It is clear that God used a series of different visions covering the same future historical period.** He first gave a representation of four great Empires under the figure of a great statue or image of a man. There were four distinct sections visible in this image, the first being the most glorious (represented by the head). The three sections below the head were each less glorious than the one preceding it. Then, later on — in subsequent visions — various characteristics of these same successive Empires were revealed under the symbolism of various animals.
- (2) **We learn from this series of diverse visions in the book of Daniel that when God gives a number of different visions we are not to just assume that each vision is meant to indicate something later in time than what was disclosed in a previous vision.** The visions contained in the book of Daniel, to a large extent, are meant to give us more and more information about different aspects of the same sequence of historical events of the future.
- (3) **The third thing which is self evident is this: the sequence of events revealed in these visions was to culminate in an event of momentous importance.** As we see in the first vision, a stone was destined to come down out of heaven and it would bring to nothing and replace the first four kingdoms of men. It would be something far greater than any — and all — of these man-made kingdoms. It was to be the kingdom of God, and it was destined to grow until it would fill the whole earth.
- (4) **What should impress us most of all is both the essential simplicity—and continuity—of biblical eschatology.** The true God does not change. Later prophesies are therefore in harmony with earlier ones. The future can only be what God has decreed, and therefore in full accord with his promise to

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Abraham. In Abraham's seed — the Lord Jesus Christ — all nations of the earth will be blessed.

(5) It follows, therefore, that biblical eschatology is not — and was never meant to be — so difficult that ordinary believers cannot 'get it.' No, like all of the central doctrines of our faith, there is perfect harmony between old and new revelations. The new only makes the old clearer than it was in the beginning.

A PARALLEL COMPARISON OF THE PROPHECIES OF DANIEL

Chapter 2	Chapter 7	Chapter 8	Chapter 9	Chapter 11-12
(The vision of a great image)	(The vision of the four beasts)	(The vision of the two beasts)	(The prophesy of the 70 weeks [or sevens])	(The final vision)
Head of gold (Babylon)	Lion with eagles' wings			
Chest of silver (Medo-Persian)	Bear rising higher on one side going	Ram with 2 horns last one higher	70 weeks (or sevens) beginning with 'the going forth of a word'	3 kings remaining in persia
Belly of brass (Greece)	Leopard with 4 wings & 4 heads	He-goat with 1 horn becoming four	(divided as 7 sevens then 62 sevens, & a final 7)	Great Greek King 4 divisions
Legs of iron & toes of iron & clay (Rome)	Dreadful beast with 10 horns			K. of S. fighting K. of N -- until Antiochus Epiphanes (the vile person)
Stone becoming a mountain destined to fill the earth	Ancient of days & Son of man coming on clouds		in last (70th) seven six accomplishments 1) restrain iniquity 2) complete sin 3) cover iniquity 4) bring in eternal righteousness 5) seal vision prophesy 6) anoint holy of holies	Abomination of Desolation and cessation of sacrifice

Another common mistake that people make with respect to Biblical prophecies is their failure to recognize that the same truth can be expressed in various ways. The last 8 chapters of

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Ezekiel, for example, present visions of an enormous future temple. But it is quite clear that the things pictured under the likeness of a building are not meant to be taken literally. When Ezekiel says he saw “*something like the structure of a city*” (40:2) it should be immediately clear to every reader that he was not describing a literal city. As the great Scottish commentator Patrick Fairbairn has demonstrated, what Ezekiel saw was a representation — under Old Testament forms — of the future Israel and the future Temple. The New Testament clearly shows that God’s final Temple is not a building made by human hands from stone and mortar, but is the Christian Church (1 Cor. 3:16-17), the final Israel of God (Gal. 6:16) which is an assembly that no man can number made up of both believing Jews and believing Gentiles (Eph. 2:19-23). In other words, under an entirely different symbol or figure, Ezekiel was predicting the very same thing that Daniel predicted — a vastly expanded Israel of God, made up of people from all the nations of the world just as God had long before that time promised the patriarch Abraham.

Questions:

1. What did God promise — or predict —right from the beginning?
2. State the two principles, clearly revealed in earlier bible history, that many Jews failed to understand.
3. State the biblical facts that prove these principles to be true.
4. In what way are Daniel’s vision of the stone and Ezekiel’s vision of the city and temple alike?
5. Why is it very important to distinguish between the “what” and the “how” of things God has predicted.
6. Which of these was clearly revealed to Old Testament people?

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The Final Crisis for National Israel

From the very beginning of God's prophetic revelation he made it clear that great things were going to happen for the benefit of the whole human race. It may well be that many — perhaps even most — of the people of Israel tended to forget this. It may also be that they concocted their own ideas of just how this great future would come about. It seems clear from the New Testament that the very Apostles themselves still clung, to a great extent, to wrong ideas about the future. Even after Jesus had risen from the dead, and had commanded them to go into all the world to make disciples of the nations, they still asked: "*Lord, will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?*" (Acts 1:6). This sounds very much as if they were still thinking that fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham had to be a kind of triumphant political supremacy for the Jewish nation (like a revival of 'the good old days' of Kings David and Solomon). Yet we know from the parables of our Lord that this sort of thing was a mistaken expectation. Did our Lord not say, himself, "*my Kingdom is not of this world*"? (John 18:36).

It was at a unique moment in the history of redemption that our Lord spoke clearly to the Jewish people to challenge — and leave them no excuse for — holding on to misconceptions and false expectations. This becomes clear as Jesus — having described the deeply ingrained wickedness of the Jews of that generation (Mt. 23:2-31) — said to the Jews of that time "*See, your house is left to you desolate*" (v. 38). This could only mean that the Jerusalem temple (which they so highly prized) was about to be, if it had not already been, repudiated by God. It would henceforth be *their* house, not *his* house. This was made even clearer when Jesus went on to say to them that upon them [the Jewish people of that generation] would come God's judgment because of "*the blood shed on earth from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom*" he said to them, "*you murdered between the temple and the altar*" (Mt. 23:35). In other words, their guilt was cumulative. Every time the Jews repeated the sin of apostasy, which God had clearly revealed to be the most heinous sin in the past history of the Jews, they be-

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came even more guilty than those who had committed that same sin before them.

Our conclusion, then, is this: there is nothing else of this sort in the history of the world that quite equals that momentous time when the Jewish nation, as a whole, was disowned by the Lord Jesus. As Paul explains in Romans 11 this did not mean that all of the Jews — every last one of them — were now to be disenfranchised.² No, far from it: the Christian Church itself was mostly Jewish to begin with. It is also true that there has always been a remnant of Jewish people who have believed in Jesus as the true Messiah since that time. But is also true that from the first century to the present time the vast majority of the Jews have remained under “*a spirit of stupor*” (Rom. 11:8) so that they cannot see or understand the truth of the bible.

This era — in which most of the Jewish people refuse to believe in Jesus as the Christ of God — may yet come to an end. But it will only end if and when the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of those who call themselves Jews to enable them to believe in Jesus. Only then can they again become worthy to be called God’s people. To confess that Jesus (his name as a human) is LORD (in other words God) and the Christ (the one anointed to be our savior) is just as necessary for the Jew as it is for the Gentile.³ Whenever that happens they recognize — as did Paul — that all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ are “*Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise*” (Gal. 3:29). For, as Paul says in Galatians 6:16 “*as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, even the Israel of God*” (my translation).

To put it another way, it was never God’s intention that the Old Testament nation of Israel would be the final form of God’s

² “I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom. 11:1).

³ “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Acts 4:12

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church or kingdom. It was always God's intention to terminate 'the middle wall of partition,' and to extend the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant to all nations. This is not something that was added later on. No, it was clearly implied in God's promise to Abraham from the beginning. In other words it was always God's intention to terminate the historical period in which the Jews, in a certain sense, had exclusive possession of the means of grace. The Christian Church, in contrast, is clearly set forth as the final form of the covenant people until Christ's second coming. It will not be terminated as the Jewish Temple was in 70 A.D. No, the Christian Church *is* the final temple (1 Cor. 3:9-17). And because — as our Lord Jesus said — "*the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*" the Church will remain on earth until the consummation.

It should be obvious that this does not mean that everything that is *called* a Christian Church is guaranteed immunity to apostasy and consequent desolation. Certainly not. If the Jewish church was not immune to God's wrath, then surely it is also true (if not even more true) of any and all predominately Gentile assemblies. But our Lord's prediction and promise does guarantee that there will always be a true church on earth until his second coming [παρουσια].⁴ Wherever believers gather in the name of Christ (or in other words, are in real submission to *him* by way of submission to his word in scripture) he will be there in the midst of them, and he will preserve them.

This means that there will never be another calamity in the history of the world comparable in spiritual magnitude to that which came upon the Church during that final generation while it was still confined to the Jewish nation. This was clearly stated by Jesus, himself, in his great Eschatological Discourse. "*For then*" said Jesus — speaking of what was about to happen in that generation — "*there will be great tribulation such as has not been from the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be*" (Matt. 24:21). The long historical period in which Jews and Gen-

⁴ As the Westminster Confession of Faith says: "The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will."

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tiles were (by God's design) separated by what Paul called "*the middle wall of division*" (Eph. 2:14) was ordained by God's sovereign will. But so was the termination of that division that came in what this same Apostles calls "*the fulness of time*" (Gal. 4:4). It came to an end just as God had planned from the beginning. It came to an end as a result of the sinless life, the substitutionary death and — bodily resurrection — of our Lord Jesus Christ. For as Paul said "*He himself is our peace, who has made both one... that he might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity*" (Eph. 2:14,17).

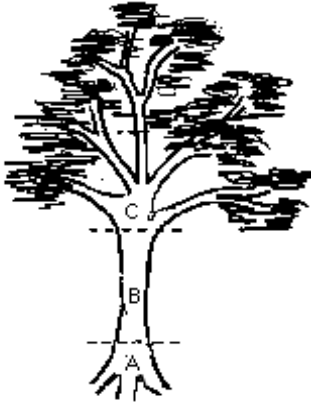
The events that took place in the first century — including the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 A.D. — were then (and are still) of momentous importance. There will never be another 'moment' in history when such a change will take place? And in all of this one thing is clear: the only hope of either Gentile or Jew is to be "born again" from above in order to see and enter the Kingdom.

In the historical period ending with the momentous events of 70 A.D. God removed most (but not all) of the natural branches from his great 'olive tree' (a symbolic representation of the redeemed people of God [Rom. 11:11ff]). This excision has now continued for 2,000 years! But God is able to do seemingly impossible things. He is able to "*turn away ungodliness from Jacob*" (Rom. 11:26). "*For*" as Paul wrote to the Gentiles in Rome, "*as you were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their disobedience, even so these also have now been disobedient (so) that through the mercy shown to you they also may obtain mercy. For God shut them all up to disobedience, that he might have mercy on all*" (Rom. 11:30-32). There is no reason to think that there will ever be a time when *all* Jews will become Christians. Just as there were some who did believe when most did not, so there may come a time when many Jews do come to believe, while yet some remain stubbornly unbelieving. God's great work is not always recognized by blind and sinful people, even when it is happening. And there are Jewish people, today, who have come to believe that Jesus is indeed the Christ. So it may well be that what Paul wrote of in Romans 11 happening right now without any fanfare. God does move in mysterious

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ways too perform his wonders. And it all goes back to God's covenant promise to the patriarch Abraham.

The following illustration gives an overview of the Olive Tree figure as a representation of the over-all eschatology of the bible.



A - Represents the Patriarchal Period. It began with God's promise to Abraham that in his seed all nations of the earth would be blessed. (Gen. 12:3, 18:18, 22:18 etc.)

B - Represents the Old Testament Period from Moses to the coming of Jesus Christ, during which the Church was confined to the Nation of Israel. (Dt. 7:6-11, Jn. 4:22).

C - Represents the New Testament era (which continues today) in which the Church is extended to all nations. (Rom. 11, Eph. 2:11-16, 19-22).

Also: compare this diagram with Mt. 13:31,32; Mk. 4:30-32; Lk. 13:15-24, and 31:18,19.

In the book of Romans the Apostle Paul himself pictures redemptive history under the figure of a great Olive Tree. Speaking of Jew, during the Apostolic age, he says "*some of the branches were broken off*" (11:17). He also says that it was "*because of unbelief (that) they were broken off*" (11:20) and that you, or I, as Gentiles, can even say that "*branches were broken off that I might be grafted in*" (11:19). He warns us, however, that we should "*not be haughty, but fear*" (11:20) because what happened to them could also happen to us, if we are not careful. Our sovereign God also has the power to bring about another reversal, if we repeat the same sin that they sinned. And there certainly are those, today, who sin the same way that the Jews did in the time of the Apostles. Because people today can look back upon their fathers and say 'my ancestors were God's covenant people, they were the apple of his

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eye' and so on, they too can just assume that the organization inherited from their ancestors is immune to apostasy and destruction. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, bases its entire existence on the premise that it is the organizational continuance of the one true Church of Christ, and that *therefore* God never will reject it. Surely, what happened to the nation of Israel should be a sufficient warning against this delusion!

There are many examples, in Church History, of people succumbing to this delusion. Our loyalty must therefore never be to any organization merely because it calls itself Church — not even if it can trace a line of organizational continuity back to a time when it really was a true Church. This explains why our Reformation Fathers refused to define the identity of a true church by mere organizational continuity or connection, but rather defined it by certain doctrinal and spiritual qualities set down in the Bible, and which have always marked the church when it has been faithful — and which were lacking when it was not faithful.

What counts, in other words, in identifying who the people of God really are is determined by answering a few important questions: (1) Does this church faithfully teach God's true and final revelation in Jesus Christ and the bible? (2) Does this church faithfully administer the signs and seals of his covenant? And (3) does it faithfully uphold the biblical standards righteousness and truth by faithful discipline?

We need to remember what Jesus said, as a pastor, to his little congregation: "*Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom*" (Lk. 12:32). At that time most of the Jews thought the true church (God's Israel) was that institution that could trace its history back to the time of Moses, and which — at that time — continued to exist under the authority of the Scribes and the Pharisees as successors of Moses. But they were wrong. It really belonged then — as it does now — to those who qualify according to our Lord's own definition of true church members. "*Who is my mother and who are my brothers?... whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother*" (Mt. 12:48,50).

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Questions:

1. What did the Apostles say they expected after Christ's resurrection and before his ascension? (Acts. 1:6)
2. What did Jesus say about the immediate future of the Jewish nation and Temple? (Mt. 23)
3. How did the Apostle Paul describe this momentous event in Romans 11?
4. Was this development contrary to the original promise of God to Abraham? (Include scriptural proof for your answer).
5. Is there a better future in store for the mass of Jewish people?
6. Why did the Reformers identify the true church by spiritual qualities rather than organizational continuity?

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II - THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AS EXPRESSED IN MATTHEW CHAPTERS 23-26

INTRODUCTION

One of the reasons for so much confusion today in eschatological thinking is the loss — or at least a serious weakening — of the reformational principals of biblical exegesis. The Reformers strongly emphasized the importance of what has been called “grammatico-historical exegesis.” As R.C. Sproul put it: “Discerning the original, intended meaning is called grammatico-historical exegesis. We do not have any right to look at a biblical text from the perspective of the twenty-first century and change its meaning.”⁵ In other words we need to look at any biblical text with a serious effort to read it in such a way as to understand its originally intended meaning — the way the original hearers (or readers) would have understood it. This means that we need to discern (1) the historical situation of the time and place in which the text was written, and (2) the rules of grammar that were recognized by people then living. When we keep this simple, but vital, truth in mind we will be amazed at how often both of these considerations are neglected in much present-day eschatological thinking and writing.

In Matthew 10:23 we find these words: “*When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of man comes.*” These words were spoken by Jesus. They were spoken to the twelve men he had just chosen to be his apostles (10:2-4). We believe these words should be understood in the same way that you would understand me, today, if I warned you of some danger and asked you to do something that could expose you to persecution. But — because of a common assumption as to the meaning of the final phrase “*the son of man comes*” — this verse has been taken to mean one of two things (neither of

⁵ *Truths We Confess*, A Layman’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith, Vol. 1, p.29. Published by P&R, 2006.

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which is in accord with the principles of ‘grammatico-historical exegesis’). (1) One way of taking these words is by simply saying that Jesus was mistaken. The famous organist, missionary and New Testament scholar Albert Schweitzer came to this conclusion because he insisted that Jesus was speaking here of his second coming [παρουσία]. Since this did not happen in that generation he concluded that Jesus was mistaken. (2) The other way of taking this statement of Jesus as referring to his second coming is by simply saying his words were primarily addressed to people who were not to exist until the time of his second coming. This, of course, is to do violence to the grammar. For it is a fact that Jesus was speaking to real people who were standing right there in front of him. He addressed them with the word ‘*you*’ and to them he said ‘*you* will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the son of man comes.’ To pretend that Jesus wasn’t really speaking *to them*, is to handle the word of God deceitfully.

Another text that has received similar treatment is found in Matthew 16:28. Here our Lord says — to his disciples — “*Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.*” Everyone knows that the disciples who were living at that time — when Jesus said this — are no longer with us. How, then, can we possibly avoid saying that Jesus was mistaken *if* he meant that they would see his second coming before they died? One way is to simply imagine that Jesus was really addressing these words to any and all ‘disciples’ — including those who would come into being many centuries later. Another way is to take his words to mean that, a short time later, three of these disciple (Peter, James and John) would see his transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-9). But when we remember what Jesus said to the Sanhedrin, some time *after* his transfiguration and shortly *before* his crucifixion, it becomes quite obvious that these attempts are simply evasions of the clear meaning of the text. When the high priest said to Jesus “*I put you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God!*” Jesus said to him, “*It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven*” (Mt. 26:63-64). There is no escape from the meaning of Jesus words.

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He was telling them (the members of the Sanhedrin) that, within the lifetime of many people who saw and heard him while he was on earth, he would be “*coming on the clouds of heaven.*” So the question that cannot be avoided is this: was Jesus mistaken? It is our conviction that he was not mistaken. How could he be mistaken about a thing like that if he was the promised Messiah — the Son of God who came down from heaven?

This leaves only one other possibility: perhaps the problem is not in the *text* of scripture, but in *people* who misread it. When the writer of this study was growing up in central Iowa — in what was then called ‘the Bible Belt’ — these texts became a serious problem. Whenever these texts were discussed it was just assumed that Jesus was talking about his second coming. In order to avoid saying that Jesus was wrong people were willing to impose a sense on his words that contradicted their natural meaning. It was only after years of study that it became clear to the writer of this book that the solution is really quite simple. Jesus *did* mean what he said to people who were standing there as he spoke. Many of them *did* live to see him “*coming on the clouds of heaven.*” You see, those words (“*coming on the clouds of heaven*”) are taken from the book of Daniel. And the simple truth is that they were never intended to be *misunderstood* as a description of Christ’s second coming. No, what they were intended to describe is what we call ‘the ascension.’ Not the coming of Jesus Christ *from* heaven *to* the earth, but rather the going of Christ *from* the earth *to* the right hand of God in *heaven*. Read the words of Daniel yourself, carefully, and you will see that it is so:

*“I was watching in the night visions, and behold, one like the Son of Man, **coming with the clouds of heaven.** He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before Him. Then to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed.”* (Dan. 7:13,14)

There is no need at all to say that Jesus was wrong. And there is no need to pretend that he was not speaking specifically to those

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he was addressing, face to face, to tell *them* what they would soon experience. Grammatico-Historical exegesis removes all of these evasions by faithfulness to *language* and *historical context*.

Questions:

1. Why is it that Matthew 10:23, 16:28 and 26:64 have been so perplexing for most people?
2. Where do we need to go in the Old Testament to properly understand them?
3. What words in Daniel 7:13,14 make it clear that the misunderstood words do not refer to Christ's second coming?
4. Why should we think of Christ's ascension rather than his second coming whenever the bible says "coming on the clouds"?
5. What grammatical violation is removed by this understanding?

THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

What was happening when Jesus was saying the things narrated in Matthew 23? Is it not an accurate historical description of Jesus Christ as he pronounced the knell of doom upon the apostate Jewish 'Church?' Again and again our Lord pronounced woes on the Scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders in Israel in that generation. Yes, for in the Jewish people of that time — to whom Jesus was speaking — the history of the persistent apostasy of their nation had reached its culmination [see vv. 34,35]. Jesus made it very clear that the doom that he was threatening would not be long in coming. "*I tell you the truth*" said Jesus, "*all this will come upon **this** generation*" [v. 36]. "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem*" cried our grieving Savior "*how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate*" [vv. 37,38]. Up to this time in their history, the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was

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still acknowledged — even by Jesus himself — to be the house of God. That is why Jesus had cleansed the Temple, denouncing the way in which they had made his father’s house a den of merchandise (Jn. 2:16). So now, at this point, he speaks of a day rapidly approaching — a day which was to arrive within the generation then living [v. 36] — in which the Temple would no longer be acknowledged as God’s house. No, said Jesus to the unbelieving Jews who were standing right there before him, when that day comes it will be “*your house,*” and it will be left to you “*desolate!*”

We can well imagine the shock-waves that these words must have caused, as it reverberated through the tradition-bound mindset of these disciples. ‘What, this house left desolate — this great Temple of God in Jerusalem? Surely not that!’ This was very unpleasant to hear, and even more difficult to accept. So, as they were leaving the Temple that day, “*his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings*” [Mt. 24:1]. ‘Look, Lord’ they were saying — in effect — as they pointed to those great buildings: ‘surely you can’t mean that these things are going to be reduced to desolation!’ To them this was simply unthinkable. But that is indeed what Jesus meant. We know this because he answered them saying “*I tell you the truth: not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down*” [Mt. 24:2]. They were utterly astounded. This shattered all of the fixed ideas in their minds. It turned their whole idea of the future upside down. You see, they too were expecting that when the Messiah finally came he would restore the Kingdom to Israel, making the ‘good old days’ of Kings like David and Solomon live again, as it were. We know this because the disciples still tended to think this way even after Christ’s death and resurrection.⁶ Yet here was the Messiah himself saying the time for the destruction of the Temple was drawing near. No wonder his disciples began to jump to conclusions. Isn’t that what we all tend to do when we have to deal with highly emotional issues — especially when it comes to predictions of the future?

⁶ Cf. Acts 1:6

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So the disciples asked Jesus a question which — by its very structure — shows the conclusion to which they had ‘jumped.’ “Tell us,” they said, “*when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming* [Greek: παρουσίας] *and the end of the age?*” From this question it is clear that they had simply assumed that these two things would happen together (at the same time). If Jesus was right, and (1) this house was going to be left unto them desolate (and if this was going to happen in that generation) then surely — they reasoned — it also had to mean (2) that Christ’s second coming in glory, and the end of the age would also come in that generation.

But it was right there — in that giant assumption — that they made their big mistake. And the amazing thing is that so many Christian people keep right on making virtually the same mistake today. No, they do not make it in exactly the same way. But what is the common interpretation, today, of Matthew 24? Is it not that Christ was talking about two entirely different things as if they were one? Yes, this is the most popular interpretation. Many say that Jesus — in Matthew 24:4-35 (as he answers his disciples) — was describing not only (1) the coming destruction of Jerusalem (which was destined to take place, and did in fact take place, in 70 A.D.); but also (2) a similar series of events, destined to take place shortly before his own visible return [παρουσίας] at the end of the age (which is still in the future). And because of this assumption they go on to insist that Jesus listed a number of signs that apply, equally, to both of these events. So, they say, false christs, false prophets, wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, etc., were not only intended as signs for *that* generation — to warn them of the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple — but also to serve as signs to enable a generation destined to live many centuries (now more than 20 centuries) later to know when the second coming [παρουσίας] of Christ is about to happen. This view is the most popular view today in Evangelical circles.

We cannot possibly agree with this interpretation. The reason for this is that we do not think our Lord uses one set of words to predict two entirely different events. No, in answering the disci-

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ples — as we will seek to demonstrate — the Lord divided the disciples question into two parts, and then proceeded to carefully discriminate between the two things they were confusing.⁷ In the first section of Matthew 24 (vv. 4-35) our Lord deals specifically with “*all these things*” about which he had solemnly warned the Scribes and Pharisees.⁸ In speaking of “these things” he was not talking about things far off in the future, at the time of his second coming and the end of history. This is made doubly clear from chapter 24, verse 34, where he says again (just as he had in 23:36) “*this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened.*” This answered the ‘when’ question.

Then, after making this point quite clear, our Lord went on to deal with the ‘what’ question (as recorded in Matt. 24:36-51, and chapter 25). And the main thing that Jesus emphasized about this is the fact that *there will not be any signs at all to indicate the nearness of his second coming* — Greek: παρουσία — and the end this age.

We could sum it up this way: Jesus clearly and carefully distinguished between the two things that the disciples mistakenly merged together. They had just assumed that these two things — (1) the destruction of Jerusalem and (2) the ‘parousia’ — would have to happen at the same time. Our Lord was therefore careful to patiently explain to them that this was a wrong assumption. We will go on to discuss this in the next part of our study.

Questions:

1. Underline as many phrases as you can in Matthew 23 which show that the final crisis had arrived for the Jewish Church.
2. To what erroneous conclusion did our Lord’s disciples jump?

⁷ The first part deals with the “when” question (“when will these things be?”); the second deals with the “what” question (“what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?”)

⁸ See all of Matthew 23, but especially v. 36, where he says “*Assuredly, I say to you, all these things shall come upon this generation.*”

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3. Why did the disciples do this?
4. Were these disciples the last to make this mistake? Explain:
5. Our Westminster Confession (Chap. I, sect. ix), says the '*full sense of any Scripture... is not manifold, but one.*' Give a few examples of bible prophecies that could not possibly have a double fulfillment.
6. Do you understand the difference between (a) multiple *fulfillments*, and (b) multiple *applications*?
7. Why do you think our Lord repeats, in 24:34, the statement already made in 23:36?

“ALL THESE THINGS”

Unless we are prepared to give a strained interpretation to Matthew 23:36 and 24:34, we must believe that “*all these things*” predicted by Jesus as certain to happen in that generation, *did* indeed happen in that generation.

- (A) But there are those who say ‘No, this cannot be the true understanding of what Jesus said because these things did not *all* happen in that generation.’ In order to try to make sense out of the passage, then, they are forced to change the sense of the word generation to mean ‘race’ (as in ‘the Jewish race’ as a type of people) instead of a specific generation (as in ‘our generation’ as describing a particular time in history). The meaning, with this change, would be that the Jewish race will not pass away until all of these things have been fulfilled. We are convinced that this is not a legitimate solution. If you, the reader, will take a good concordance of the bible and study the use of this word ‘generation’ [in Greek: γενεά] in the New Testament scriptures, it will soon be apparent that the word has a well-defined meaning. It means the average or common time span of human life that we ourselves are familiar with. All that we can say about this interpretation is that it cannot possibly be right, because it imposes

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a sense on the Greek word that has no other support in the bible. When Jesus said “*O unbelieving and perverse generation...how long shall I stay with you?*” (Matt. 17:17) he was not referring to the whole Jewish race as perverse and unbelieving. No, he was characterizing that portion of the Jewish race which was living in Palestine while he was here on earth. When he said “*This is a wicked generation*” (Matt. 16:4) he was not saying this about the entire Jewish race. No, he was saying this about those Jews who were living at that time in Israel, while he was here on earth. He did not say this as if *all* Jews, at all times, were unbelieving, but because most of the Jews at that time — while he, the very Son of God, was standing among them — were so unbelieving.

- (B) If we understand the words in Matthew 24:34 in their normal sense, there is no escape — Jesus was referring to the generation of Jewish people who were alive while he was here on earth. What needs to be demonstrated, therefore, is that “*all these things*” did indeed take place in that generation just as Jesus said they would. It is to this that we now turn as we proceed with this study.

[1] To begin with, then, Jesus warned the people who were standing before him as he spoke to beware of being deceived by false claims of pseudo-messiahs. His words were not intended as a direct warning to people living today. And that there were false claims by pseudo-messiahs in that generation we have abundant evidence. Acts chapter 5:36,37 informs us that the famous Rabbi Gamaliel⁹ spoke of two such pseudo-messiahs — Theudas and Judas the Galilean. This indeed happened in that generation. We also learn, from the 1 John 2:18,19, and 4:1-4, that there already were “*many antichrists*” at the time when this letter was being written. This, too, was something that happened in that generation. And it is interesting that we even have further confirmation

⁹ Gamaliel was a prominent Rabbi who taught in Jerusalem during the Apostolic period. Acts 22:3 says the Apostle Paul himself studied under Gamaliel's before he was converted.

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from the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus,¹⁰ showing that the phenomenon of pseudo-messiahs was well known in the period of time leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem. We therefore maintain that this specific prediction was, indeed, fulfilled in that generation. This is further confirmed by Luke's account of the words of Jesus. Luke, who was himself a Gentile by birth, wrote his gospel account with a special effort to be understood by Gentile readers. He therefore explained some things for their benefit that needed no explanation for Jewish readers. In Luke's gospel (21:8) we read that Jesus said "*the time is near*" as he warned his disciples not to be misled by pseudo-messiahs. Jesus was speaking to his disciples. He was warning *them*. How strange the interpretation is, therefore, that ignores this self-evident fact, and treats the words of Jesus as if they were spoken to people many hundreds of years (even thousands of years) later.

[2] In the second place we read about "wars and rumors of wars" (v. 6). In Josephus [Book IV, chapter 9], we read that (prior to 70 A.D.) "sedition and civil war prevailed, not only over Judea, but in Italy also." And again, in Book IV, chapter 10, he says "about this very time it was that heavy calamities came about Rome on all sides." Was this not exactly what Jesus predicted? For that generation — since it only 'lived once' — a warning such as this had urgent meaning. When they saw the dark clouds of war beginning to gather over their own heads, as it were, they had a very clear sign — warning them of the soon coming destruction (70 A.D.). But according to the common and popular interpretation which envisions a second and even greater fulfillment, at the end of this age, there is utter confusion. Was World War I a 'sign' of the second coming of Jesus (παρουσία)? Evidently not. Neither was World War II. But if these great wars are not enough to serve as signs of the near coming of Jesus, what wars could be? The writer can remember — when the war clouds were gathering back in 1939 — that more than a few preachers were confidently saying that the things which were happening then were signs of

¹⁰ "Now as for the affairs of the Jews, they grew worse and worse continually, for the country was again filled with robbers and impostors, who deluded the multitude. Yet did Felix catch and put to death many of those impostors every day" (*The Wars of the Jews*, Book II, chapter 8).

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the nearness of the second coming. Some even put a limit on the time that was supposed to be left before that event came. But (as usual) they were wrong. They were wrong because wars and rumors of wars are not a sign of the second coming [παρουσίας]. But wars and rumors of wars *were* a sign indicating the nearness of the destruction that came during that generation — a sign of the fact that the city of Jerusalem and the apostate Temple were soon to see desolation.

[3] In the third place we note that, after repeating the basic idea of war — namely, that nation shall rise against nation — our Lord next spoke of various calamities that we associate with ‘nature.’ He spoke of “*famine and earthquakes in various places*” (v. 7b). And, again, anyone who reads Josephus’ history of the Jewish people will have no difficulty in seeing that this was fulfilled “in that generation.” Here is a typical excerpt taken from his account:

“The madness of the seditions did also increase together with their famine, and both of these miseries were every day inflamed more and more...children pulled the very morsels that their fathers were eating out of their mouths ...so did the mothers do as to their infants; and when those who were most dear were perishing under their hands, they were not ashamed to take from them the very last drops that might preserve their lives” (Book VII, Chapter 10).

Later, in the siege of Jerusalem, the famine became so intense that it “confounded all natural passions; for those who were just about to die looked upon those who were gone to their rest before them with dry eyes and open mouths. A deep silence also, and a kind of deadly night, had seized upon the city” (Chapter 12). We also note (in addition to the data in Matt. 27:54, 28:2, Acts 4:31 and 16:26 — which is decisive) that Josephus records a great earthquake in Book VI, chapter 5.

[4] In the fourth place, it is interesting to note that Luke — who wrote for Gentile readers — again adds important information (Luke 21:12). Luke writes that Jesus said this to his disciples:

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“but before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them.” As we see it the meaning is clear: Jesus was speaking to people who were living in Palestine when he was here on earth; he was telling *them* what was going to happen *to them*. Think, for example, of what happened to Stephen. When he testified to the Jewish leaders *“they gnashed at him with their teeth...they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and...cast him out of the city and stoned him”* (Acts 7:54,57,58). So the very things predicted by Jesus as things that would happen in that generation, did indeed happen to those people. What strange exegesis it is to say these words were addressed to people far removed (even thousands of years removed) from that generation! And this is only one example. Anyone who has studied the book of Acts will know that *“these things”* did happen to the Apostles and their associates. If words are to be interpreted in their natural sense, there is no reason whatsoever to take these statements out of the context of that generation. Our fourth point, then, is the fact that this also happened in that generation.

[5] The fifth thing predicted (in Matt. 24:10) was apostasy from the true faith, with betrayal and hatred. Some might argue that this could be taken to refer to the apostasy of the Jewish people, and their factional conflicts. We know, again, from the writings of Josephus that this was one of the most terrible aspects of the calamity that came on the Jews during the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans. However, when our Lord speaks of turning *“away from the faith”* it is much more likely that he is speaking of Christians — those who had professed that he was the promised Messiah, and then went back on that profession later on. And, again, there is clear proof that this too happened in that generation. The entire New Testament was written in that generation. And there is hardly a book in the New Testament that does not reveal evidence of apostasy and declension by professing Christians. How soon the people in Galatia turned to what Paul calls *“a different gospel — which is really no gospel at all”* [Gal. 1:6,7]. The Church of Corinth was sadly divided by factions. And some of

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the Churches were at, or at least near, the point of being repudiated by Jesus [Rev. 3:15].

We tend to idealize the Apostolic age. But we should not do so. There was a veritable thicket of problems in the churches. There were some who had professed to be Christian believers who then turned away from the faith. These “*godless men*” were described by the Apostle Jude as “*unreasoning animals*” (Jude 4 and 10). The book of Hebrews has many references to Jews — of the very generation that Jesus himself had personally confronted — who had professed faith in him as the Messiah, and were in grave danger of falling away (Heb. 2:3; 4:1,11; 6:1-8 etc.).

[6] The sixth item of information was the fact that there would be false prophets. And here, again, we not only read of such things in the New Testament (Rom. 16:17,18; 1 John 4:1; Gal. 1:6,7; Acts 13:6, etc.), but Josephus also speaks of the large number of false prophets that came along to stir up vain hopes among the Jewish people. “A false prophet was the occasion of these people’s destruction, who had made a public proclamation in the city that very day, that God commanded them to get upon the temple, and that there they should receive miraculous signs of their deliverance. Now there was then a great number of false prophets suborned by the tyrants to impose on the people, who denounced this to them, that they should wait for deliverance from God; and this was in order to keep them from deserting, and that they might be buoyed up above fear and care by such hopes” (Book VII, Chapter 5).

Now with reference to these predictions and their fulfillment in that generation there has been rather general agreement. Even those who apply these things partly to the future, admit that these things — outlined above — did indeed happen in that generation. But, they also say that from here on in Matthew 24 [down to verse 34] there are several things which did not happen in that generation. Therefore, they argue, we are forced to admit that our Lord also predicted things that would only come to pass toward the end of the age in which we, today, are living, and *not* in that generation.

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At this point it may be well to say that the writer also, at one time, held this view — and yet was never satisfied with it. The reason is that it required a very forced interpretation of the 34th verse. The more the writer studied the word ‘generation’ as it is used in the Greek New Testament, the more clear it became that a choice had to be made between two alternatives: (1) either Jesus was wrong in what he said in verse 34,¹¹ (2) or I was wrong in thinking that some of “*these things*” are still future. It was therefore necessary to study much more carefully “*these things*” that Jesus predicted to happen in that generation. And when this was done it became clear — to our surprise — that these other things, too, did indeed happen in that generation. It is to these things that we turn in the next section of this study.

Questions for Further Discussion:

1. Consult your concordance to see if you can find a instances of the use of the word generation where this term cannot mean ‘race.’
2. Luke’s gospel cites our Lord as having said ‘the time is near.’ From the context of that statement can you see what time Jesus refers to?
3. Why is it that a conjunction of ‘wars and rumors of wars’ and ‘earthquakes and famine’ could serve as signs for that generation, when they can’t to our generation?
4. To what did Jesus refer when he said ‘but the end is not yet’ (v. 6) [the end of what?]
5. Underline any words in the verses 4 - 13 that clearly indicate that Christ’s warning had to do with that generation:
6. What significant word does Luke add (in 21:9) to help Gentile readers understand these things?

¹¹ This was the conclusion reached by the famous missionary to Africa, Albert Schweitzer.

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7. To what does v. 8 (see also Mark 13:8) refer when it speaks of ‘travail’ or ‘birth pains’? (Hint: Isaiah 13:6-10)
8. In Luke 21:13 we read: “*But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony.*” How does this tie in with the ‘birth pains’ idea, and how does it argue against the common interpretation?

COMMONLY MISUNDERSTOOD ITEMS

In this section we are concerned with the material found in Matthew 24:14-31. There are several items here which are commonly assumed to be ‘yet in the future.’ It is our conviction that this common assumption is wrong, and we hope to show this as we comment on each of these items in the discussion that follows.

[1] In Matthew 24:14 we read: “*this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*” The supposed problem here is quickly solved if we consult Greek usage. For the Greek term translated “world” here does not mean the entire world or globe in the geographical sense. No, what this term means is the entire civilized world of that day — or, in other words, the entire Roman Empire. Take, for instance, the statement of Luke 2:1 that Caesar Augustus sent out a decree that “*all the world*” should be taxed. The word translated “world” here is the Greek word οἰκουμένη which meant the Roman Empire.¹² And the fact is that the gospel was preached throughout that world — the entire Roman Empire — in that generation. Take, for instance, Luke’s statement in Acts 2, verse 5. He says that — on the day of Pentecost — there were “*devout men out of every nation under heaven*” in Jerusalem to hear Peter’s preaching. And in Colossians 1:6 the apostle Paul says that even as he was writing “*All over the world [οἰκουμένη] this gospel is producing fruit and growing*” (1:6). Yes, says Paul, it “*has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven*” (v. 23).

¹² It is used the same way in texts such as these: Luke 4:1, Acts 11:28, 17:6, 19:27, 24:5, and Romans 10:18.

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To us this may sound like an exaggeration, and it certainly is an instance of the use of hyperbole (a deliberate exaggeration used for effect). But when scripture speaks as plainly as this, it is not our place to argue with what it is saying. There is therefore no reason to insist that the fulfillment of Matthew 24:14 can only be in the future? When Jesus said “*and then the end will come*” he meant that after “*all these things*” had happened — including the seemingly impossible spread of the Christian faith throughout the entire Roman empire — the final destruction of the Temple (and the special status of the Jewish nation) would immediately follow. Something that had existed for many, many centuries did come to an end in 70 A.D. But already, before *that* happened, “*all these things*” — including the Empire-wide spread of the gospel — were accomplished just as Jesus said they would be.

[2] The second problem that many see in our view is the prediction in verses 15-16. “*When you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by the prophet Daniel — let the reader understand — then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.*” It is common among Christians today to see, in this, a prediction of a still future Antichrist. But again, we would argue that there is good reason to see this as fulfilled in that generation — the generation of the people to whom our Lord was speaking. For the sake of the greatest possible clarity we will here list our reasons.

- 1) It is clear that Christ said “*this generation will not pass away until all these things are fulfilled*” (v. 34). The only natural interpretation of this statement is that the abomination of desolation (which was one of “these things”) also took place in that generation.
- 2) With this agrees the direct reference, here, to the disciples to whom Christ was speaking. He said “*when you see... ‘the abomination of desolation.’*” This indicates that they, themselves, would see it. What meaning could this statement have had for those disciples who heard Jesus say this, if the event was not to happen in that generation, but only thousands of years later?

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- 3) With this also agrees the statement which follows (vv. 16-17). Our Lord instructed the people living in Judea as to what *they* should do when this event took place. *They* were instructed to flee (v. 16). If *they* were on the housetop *they* were warned not to come down into their houses in order to try to take anything with them. In Jerusalem, in those days, the roofs of the houses were flat. So one could go across housetops to get to a wall to escape (as the story of Rahab indicates in Joshua 2). This was common in ancient cities in that era. This would not have much relevance today, where people are seldom up on housetops — and cannot go anywhere without first coming down into the house. By what principle of Biblical interpretation is this simply ignored by those who talk of a future fulfillment?

- 4) Luke wrote his gospel with special effort to communicate the truth to Gentile readers. Note, then, how he speaks of this same event. “*When you* [again, note that important word **you**] *see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near*” (Luke 21:20). Jews could be expected to understand the meaning of the phrase ‘the abomination of desolation.’ They were familiar with the Old Testament, and knew that this phrase is found in the book of Daniel (Daniel 9:27). Gentiles, however, would not be expected to be so familiar with the book of Daniel. They therefore needed further explanation, and Luke gave it to them. The Gentiles who saw Jerusalem surrounded by the Romans saw the very same event that the Jews recognized as ‘the abomination of desolation.’

- 5) Our fifth point is the confirmation we find in the writings of Josephus (who was an eye-witness of the downfall of Jerusalem). His account says the Roman army did surround the city. And those who had taken the words of Jesus seriously acted according to what he said as a literal warning to them. When they saw the Romans coming they wasted no time in getting out of the city, fleeing to the little town of Pella. Can there be any doubt, then, that this prediction of our Lord was fulfilled in 70 A.D. — and fulfilled in such a way as to make it rather strange, to say the least, to speak of a future fulfillment?

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[3] In Matthew 24, verse 21, we come to a third alleged ‘problem.’ For here it says “...*then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.*” What should not be overlooked here is the fact that Jesus does not speak of this event as something that will come at the end of world history.¹³ No, quite the contrary: he speaks of it as an utterly unparalleled event — unparalleled in the sense that nothing before that time, *and nothing after that time*, would ever be its equal. Now it should be obvious that if our Lord had been speaking of something which was only going to take place at the end of world history there would have been no need to add “no, nor ever shall be.” It should also be obvious that he would never have said this if he envisioned a double fulfillment, with the second and final fulfillment being the greater of the two.¹⁴ But if this event, of which the Lord is speaking, was to come in *that* generation — and *only* in that generation — then there was a very good reason for contrasting it not only with all that had happened before but also all that would happen afterwards.

Here, again, the historical account of Josephus supports this conclusion, as he described the horrors that came upon the Jews shut up in Jerusalem by the Romans. The words of Luke, written for Gentile readers, also confirm this. “*There will be great distress upon the land [Greek: ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς] and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled*” (21:23,24). How could our Lord have made it more clear that he was predicting a calamity which was to come on the unbelieving Jews of that generation?

[4] The next item is our Lord’s warning to his disciples, lest they should be deceived, during this time of distress, by false teachers

¹³ “[W]e should note that ‘nor ever shall be again’ confirms that this passage is about a historical event, not about the end of the world” quoted from *The Gospel of Matthew*, by R.T. France, p. 915. France also notes that Josephus himself “claims that none of the disasters since the world began can be compared to the fate of Jerusalem.”

¹⁴ Commonly assumed by those who think “**the** great tribulation” is still future.

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[Matthew 24:22-27]. What deserves special attention here is the emphatic way in which he directs his word to the disciples who were present as he was speaking. “*At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it...if anyone tells you ‘There he is, out in the desert’ ... or ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms’ do not believe it.*” Again we are constrained to ask: what kind of bible interpretation is it that tries to remove this from that generation? It is certainly true that Christ speaks, in verse 27, of his ‘parousia’ [Greek: παρουσία] that is, of his second coming. “*For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so will be the coming [παρουσία] of the Son of Man.*” But the reason for a reference to the second coming, here, is quite obvious. Our Lord mentioned the parousia at this point in order to make an important contrast.¹⁵ He was warning his disciples not to be misled or deceived, when they — in that generation — heard rumors of his second coming. (Incidentally, Josephus¹⁶ records the fact that there were many false rumors at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem). In order to prepare his disciples to be able to withstand this danger our Lord reminded them by way of contrast: his second coming — when it does come — will not be secret. To the contrary, it will be so public that no one will need anyone else to tell him when it happens.

Questions for Further Discussion:

1. How do we know the Greek word οἰκοῦμενη (usually translated world) doesn’t mean the entire surface of our planet?
2. What are some of the historical facts which indicate that “the abomination of desolation” is a thing of the past and not of the future?

¹⁵ “This verse is a sort of ‘aside’ which draws a sharp distinction between the events of the siege and the still future *parousia*... The time of the siege and capture of the city will be characterized by the claims and counterclaims of those who pretend to a messianic role, but the *parousia*... will need no such claims or proofs: everyone will see and recognize it... He is thus setting the *parousia* and the end of the age decisively apart from the coming destruction of the temple.” (R.T. France, p. 918)

¹⁶ Josephus, *War* 4:503-44

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3. What phrase in verse 21 clearly indicates that ‘the great tribulation’ predicted by Christ could not be at the very end of history?
4. What specific information does Luke supply — in 21:23 & 24 — which confirms the fact that this ‘great tribulation’ was to happen in that generation?
5. If this section (Matthew 24:14-28) is not predicting Christ’s second coming (παρουσία) then why is it mentioned in verse 27?
6. How do the statements in verses 16-17 argue for a first century fulfillment?
7. How do verses 19 and 20 argue for a first century fulfillment in Palestine?
8. How does the interpretation defended in this study help us understand verse 28? [Hint: The apostate nation of Israel = the dead carcass. The Roman Army with its ensigns = the eagles].
9. What does Luke put in the place of ‘the abomination of desolation which was spoken of by Daniel the prophet’ in his description (in Luke 21:20)?
10. What further statement does Luke make (in 21:22) that confirms the view defended here?

THE MOST DIFFICULT POINTS

Many bible commentators are willing to admit that — up to this point in his eschatological discourse — our Lord was indeed speaking, at least primarily, about things destined to take place in that generation. But, at this point, many will still say: “but what about verses 29 to 31? Surely we can’t say that these things have also happened!” It is, therefore, to these supposedly more difficult points that we now turn in our consideration of this chapter.

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Here is the statement as we find it in Matthew (24:29-31): *“Immediately after the tribulation of those days ‘the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heavens will be shaken.’ Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the land will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the one end of heavens to the other”* [the author’s own translation].

[1] It is not hard to see why many people have difficulty with this part of the Lord’s statement. The writer of this study also, at one time, had difficulty in seeing how this could possibly be one of the things accomplished in that generation. But closer examination of what is stated here completely cleared up this problem. In the discussion that follows we will now consider the facts that cleared up the problem.

- (1) In the first place, a reading of the Old Testament prophecies shows that the prophets often used expressions very much like the words used here by Jesus. In Isaiah 13:9-11, for example, we find the same kind of reference to ‘the lights going out’ when mighty Babylon was overthrown. *“The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw... Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. I will punish the world [Hebrew תבל translated as οἰκουμένη in the Greek Septuagint] for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless.”* Ezekiel also does much the same thing, in chapter 32:1-8, when he speaks of the overthrow of Egypt. *“Son of man, raise a lamentation over Pharaoh king of Egypt and say to him: ‘You consider yourself a lion of the nations, but you are like a dragon in the seas; you burst forth in your rivers, trouble the waters with your feet, and foul their rivers. Thus*

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*says the Lord GOD: I will throw my net over you with a host of many peoples, and they will haul you up in my dragnet. And I will cast you on the ground; on the open field I will fling you, and will cause all the birds of the heavens to settle on you, and I will gorge the beasts of the whole earth with you. I will strew your flesh upon the mountains and fill the valleys with your carcass. I will drench the land even to the mountains with your flowing blood, and the ravines will be full of you. **When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord GOD.**”*

The study of these — and numerous other similar passages — will show that this is a standard type of prophetic expression. It never did mean the literal destruction of the physical universe, but rather the overthrow of a nation or civilization. Amos, for instance, in chapter 8 says “*And it shall come to pass in that day,*” says the Lord God, “*That **I will make the sun go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation**”* (vv. 9-10). The prophet Micah expresses the same idea when he says “***The sun shall go down on the prophets, and the day shall be dark for them***” (Ch. 3, v. 6). It is the same idea that Jeremiah expresses when he says “***her sun has gone down while it is day***” and Ezekiel says “*I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon will not give its light. **All the shining lights in the heavens I will darken over you; I will bring darkness over your land***” (vv. 7 & 8). Is it not self-evident from these quoted statements that there are two kinds of light? And does that not explain how it can be dark (in a spiritual sense) while it is not dark at all (in the physical sense)?

When these inspired prophets spoke in this manner, in other words, they did not mean the literal end of the physical universe. And the same is true of the prophetic expressions of Jesus. He accepted the divine authority of the Old Testament, and was not ashamed to use the language of those inspired

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prophets in his own prophetic statements. He was not speaking of ‘the end of the world’ in the sense of the physical universe, but of the end of the Old Testament age in which Israel held the special position as God’s only covenant people. And here, again, Luke clarifies the meaning for Gentile readers. “*And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon and in the stars*” he says, but then hastens to add “*and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring*” (21:25). It is possible, as some of the older commentators supposed, that there could be a reference here to an eclipse of the moon by the earth (when the moon does, as a matter of fact, turn to the color of blood). It is also possible that there is a reference here to an event which was common in ancient warfare. We refer to the fact that when cities were burned the smoke was often so great that it did — for a time — blot out the sight of the sun and moon. But be that as it may one thing is clear: Jesus was not predicting a collapse of the physical universe. What he was predicting was the overthrow of the Jewish nation. Incidentally, this is still the way people speak of this kind of catastrophe. During the second world war, for example, when the very existence of England was severely threatened, there was a song that used a similar expression: ‘When the Lights Go on again, all over the world.’ There are some things that ordinary language is not sufficient to express. One of these is the traumatic experience of seeing the overthrow of one’s own nation. Even today, when something like this happens it is felt to be such a great calamity that it requires the very same kind of language that Jesus was using.

- (2) Another point that should be noted is the fact that Jesus said “*the powers of heaven will be shaken*” (Luke 21:26). I understand him to be referring here to the spiritual powers belonging to Satan.¹⁷ Christ’s victory became visibly manifest precisely in the fact that the destruction of the Jewish nation and temple came to pass just as he said it would. This was what he meant when he warned the Scribes and Pharisees

¹⁷ Cf. Colossians 2:15, Ephesians 1:19-22 & 4:8-12,

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that their house was about to be left to them desolate (Matt. 23:38). Christ's victory over Satan began with the end of the historical period during which the visible Church was confined within the Jewish nation. From that time on the Church was destined to spread out to all nations. The nations which — before this time — had been held in the chains of darkness by Satan, now saw the great light sent to them from heaven (see Isa. 9:2 as quoted in Matt. 4:16). At that very time when the heavens became dark over the Jewish nation (Ezek. 32:7), the glorious light of a new day dawned upon the rest of the world made up of the Gentile nations. Now Satan was bound, in other words, so that he would no longer be able to deceive these nations (Rev. 20:3) as he had been able to deceive them before, for so many centuries. Now Christ has been exalted "*far above all principality and power and might and dominion*" (Eph. 1:21). And "*now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places*" God is making "*known by the church the manifold wisdom*" which he "*purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Ephesians 3:10,11). Having spoiled principalities and powers, in other words, he has made manifest his triumph over them (Col. 2:15).

So, calamitous as these events were for the Jewish nation, it was anything but the end of what God had planned to accomplish in world history. As was the case many times before, in redemptive history, the seeming triumph of Satan (in the great Jewish apostasy) became the the occasion for the greatest advance of all time in God's Kingdom (the world-wide extension of the new Israel which is the Christian Church). The conclusion is clear: this also took place in that generation.

[2] We now come to what some would call 'the Achilles heel' of our interpretation. In Matthew 24:30-31 we read of "*the sign of the Son of man in heaven*" and of his "*coming on the clouds of heaven.*" At this point a reader may well be saying: 'now surely you'll have to admit that *this* did not happen in that generation.' Yet — amazing as it may seem, at first sight — the fact is that it *did* happen in that generation. This is true for the simple reason that Jesus was not referring here to his second coming [παρουσία].

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No, what he was referring to in this statement was his exaltation to the right hand of God and his present reign, there, in glory. We here present the evidence that demands precisely this conclusion.

- (1) Note first of all, then, that Jesus did not say that the Son of Man, himself, would appear in heaven, but rather that a sign would appear to indicate that he was in heaven. The Greek text doesn't say "then *the Son* of Man will appear," but "then *the sign* of the Son of Man in heaven will appear." There is a big difference between the two. Yet how constantly this fact is overlooked. A sign is not the same as the thing it signifies. The rainbow is 'the sign of' God's promise that he will never again send a universal flood, but the rainbow is not — itself — that promise. Again, baptism is 'a sign of' regeneration and renewal. But it is not — itself — regeneration. The bread and wine used in the Lord's Supper are 'signs' of the body and blood of our Lord. But they are not themselves — and do not become — Jesus' literal flesh and blood. There is, in other words, a very important difference between a *sign* and the *thing signified* by the sign. The same is true here. To say that "*the sign of the Son of man will appear*," is one and the same with saying that it will not be Christ himself who will visibly appear. That is the very reason why the sign is needed! A sign, in biblical language, is a visible representation of something invisible.
- (2) But what does it mean, someone may ask, when it says "*They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory?*" (v. 30). The answer is that the meaning is found in one of the prophetic visions of Daniel. Here is Daniel's account of this vision: "*I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*" (Dan. 7:13-14 ESV). It is clear that Daniel was not describing the second coming of the Lord Jesus (παρουσία). To speak of "*coming with the clouds of heaven*" does not have that mean-

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ing in prophetic language. To the contrary, what it refers to is Christ's exaltation — his ascension to the right hand of God the Father, in glory. Daniel's vision was a preview of Christ's enthronement in heaven, in which the Father gave all authority in heaven and earth to him (Matt. 28:18-20).

The prophecy of Daniel, in other words, looked forward to the time when the Kingdom of God and Jesus Christ would supplant all other human efforts to found a universal Kingdom. And it is perfectly clear that this has been fulfilled (by the ascension and enthronement of Jesus) and continues to be fulfilled in the world-wide extension of the Kingdom through the preaching of the gospel. Surely it is clear that when our Savior was exalted to sit at the right hand of God the father, it was in order that he might receive the authority which he now exercises over all things. Yes, this is indeed true. But we can't see him with our physical eyes at this time. That is why our Lord spoke of this visible "sign" of his reigning in glory. And what was that sign? It was precisely the fulfillment of his threat to bring wrath upon the apostate Jewish teachers — and the apostate Jewish nation. When the Romans came, the lights went out, as they made the city and temple a scene of complete desolation. The reprobate Jews refused to believe that Jesus could make good on his threat against them. But he did. *That* was the sign that made it perfectly clear that he was reigning in glory. And his ascension from earth, to heaven, to reign in glory is, in Daniel's terminology, a coming [ἐρχόμενον not παρουσία] on, or with, the clouds of heaven. It meant that Christ's work was (and is) moving forward — coming more and more to realization — because he is no longer in a state of humiliation but is now in a state of exaltation (enthroned above the clouds of heaven).

It should be noted here that this fully agrees with other seemingly enigmatic statements of Jesus. Speaking to Jewish people who were near him while he was on earth our Lord said "*Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming* [the

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Greek word here is ερχομενον]¹⁸ in His kingdom” (Matthew 16:28, Mark 9:1, Luke 9:27). Just as there are two kinds of light, so there are two kinds of “seeing.” This is why Paul prayed for the Ephesians, asking “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened”(2:17,18) Those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah promised and sent by God, and who had understood the truth as he taught it, could “see” from the destruction of Jerusalem that their ascended Lord had provided the proof that he was indeed enthroned at God’s right hand. And it all happened in that generation. How, then, can this possibly be reasonably interpreted to refer to some far-off time, long after the death of all of those people? Such interpretation, common though it is, is a dishonest handling of Scripture. Jesus was either wrong (which, of course, we deny) or “all these things” actually happened (which we gladly affirm). And when we realize that he was referring — by his very expressions — to the prophetic witness of Daniel, we can ‘see’ that it really did happen. So, in truth, there is no problem.

- (3) A third thing that we need to notice is the fact that Jesus said “all the tribes of the land will mourn” [v. 30 my own translation]. The problem here is not in the text — as it stands in the original Greek — but in the misleading translations of it in English (and even recent translations persist in this error). The New International Version says “all the nations of the earth will mourn.” This makes it — in this particular instance — one of the worst of all the translations. The New American Standard and the New King James versions are better, but still far from satisfactory, when they translate this phrase as “all the tribes of the earth.” This still gives an English reader the misleading impression that our Lord, by this statement, had in mind all of the people in the whole wide world. But he did not. What he had in mind was “all the tribes of the land [Greek: τῆς γῆς]”

¹⁸ It is worth noting that the Greek Septuagint, the O.T. translation used by first century Christians, used this same word (ερχομαι) in Daniel 7:13.

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(meaning the land of Israel). We see this clearly if we compare Matthew's version with the parallel passages in Luke's gospel. Since his gospel was written with particular concern to make things clear to Gentile readers, it is noteworthy that he does not even mention this statement. If Christ had really predicted that 'all the tribes (or nations) of the whole world' would be in mourning just before the sign appeared, is it conceivable that Luke would fail to record that fact. No, of course not. If, on the other hand, these words were intended specifically for the Jews alone, and not the entire human race, there was no reason for Luke to mention this to the Gentiles since it was not something that would directly affect them. And conversely, there was good reason for Matthew to record it (since he wrote primarily for Jewish readers). They were the ones who would (and did) indeed mourn throughout the land when their house was left to them desolate!

- (4) We do not usually think of the present age in terms of what is stated in Matthew 24:31 which says: "*And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*" Yet this is really what is now going on throughout the world. This is true regardless of how we understand the word "angels."¹⁹ Scripture sometimes uses this term to refer to mere men who are sent forth as God's official messengers. And sometimes it is used to refer to heavenly beings that we usually think of when we hear the word 'angel.' And since there is sufficient evidence in scripture to support either of these ways of understanding the reference to 'angels,' we think it unwise to be dogmatic on one side or the other. It seems to us, however, that the word — in this instance — probably does refer to heavenly beings, because the Book of Revelation often

¹⁹ As R.T. France put it "the ingathering of the chosen people may be expected to be through the work of human 'messengers,' and it would be possible to take *αγγελοι* here in this sense, which it carries in 11:10. But in all other cases in Matthew (including 16:28, which is also based on the vision of Dan. 7) it denotes heavenly beings, and in this context of the heavenly authority of the Son of Man it probably refers to the spiritual power underlying human evangelization." (Op. Cit. p. 928)

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speaks of them as sounding the trumpet. These trumpets, of course, are not literal trumpets that we can hear. They are rather symbolic representations of announcing the execution of the decrees of God.

In any case there is one very important fact that we know for sure. The angels of God are indeed involved in the gathering of God's elect. This is the very thing that unbelieving Jews found so startling — and offensive! Would God really leave their house to them desolate? Would he really go out into the highways and byways of the world in order to gather others in — even *Gentiles*? And would the very angels of God be involved in such an activity? This was simply unthinkable for most of them (See Matt. 22:1-15, especially v. 15). Yet, even as Jesus spoke these words, the hour of fulfillment was fast approaching. That is why Jesus went on to say: “*Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near, at the very doors*” (vv. 32,33). And here again it is self-evident that these words become quite strained if we try to transpose them from *that* generation, to what is still future. If Jesus had intended his words to be understood to refer to something far off in the future, he would surely have said something like this: ‘Now don't imagine that summer is near, just because the fig tree says it is! No, it is still a long way off. So — when you see these things — don't get excited. It isn't going to happen for more than 2,000 years. It's not at the door for this generation.’ But of course Jesus did not speak in this manner. The reason is that these things were *not* in the far distant future, but were going to happen in *that* generation. “*I tell you the truth*” said Jesus, “*this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened*” (v. 34). Then — as if to add one more hammer blow for emphasis — he said “*heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away*” (v. 35). As much as to say: ‘incredible as it may seem to you unbelieving Jews this is absolutely certain — all these things are going to happen within this generation.’ Yes, and that's what *did* happen.

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- (5) This becomes even more certain if we go on to observe the manner in which Christ went on to speak, specifically, about his second coming [παρουσία] (from Matthew 24:36 to the end of chapter 25). It is not our purpose, in this study, to give a full exposition of this part of the teaching of Jesus. It will be sufficient to emphasize here the fact that Christ draws a contrast. Once before (in verse 27) Jesus had mentioned his second coming [παρουσία] by way of contrast. He did this to remind people then living that his second coming would be like the lightning that comes out of the east and shines to the west. When it does suddenly come, in other words, there will be no need for anyone to announce it to others, and therefore no excuse for being duped by deceivers. It is this point that Jesus elaborated on, in the rest of his teaching as recorded in this passage. He first said that no one knew — or can know — the day or hour of his second coming [παρουσία]. This was one of the secret things known by the father only.²⁰ This being the case, it follows that it cannot be predicted. This is the point of our Lord's comparison between the time of his second coming and the time of great flood in the days of Noah (24:37-39), and the thief that comes in the night (vv. 42-43). If the second coming of our Lord is not known as to the time appointed — if it is to come like lightning that unexpectedly lights up the night sky — like a thief in the night — like the world-wide flood in the days of Noah — then surely we cannot use material from the earlier part of Matthew 24 in order to try to calculate when it will happen! Yet this is precisely what is so often done. People often say that Christ's second coming is very near because of all the signs — the wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, and so on. Yet this misunderstanding was the very thing the teaching of Christ was designed to prevent! The one common feature of these three things — the lightning, the thief in the night, and the flood of Noah — is that they each come (or came) without any warning signs. And so it will be with the second coming of Jesus.

²⁰ As Moses said to the children of Israel, long ago: “*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and our children forever*” Deut. 29:29

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Some people find it hard to accept the fact that the majority can be so wrong. But popularity never was a valid test of the true Christian doctrine. The truth is that our Lord was right. *“All these things”* did come to pass in that generation. And the very force — or purpose — of the teaching of Jesus was to warn against the error so common today. It is an error to confuse the momentous events of 70 A.D. with our Lord’s second coming. There were signs to warn of the one. There will be no signs to warn of the other. No, our Lord will return ‘as a thief in the night.’ His second coming (παρουσία) will be as sudden, and as unexpected as a lightning flash way off on the horizon on a summer night in mid-west America. It will come like ‘the flood of Noah.’ It will, in other words, be without any warning signs. The only warning will be the Scriptural warning (just as the only warning of the worldwide flood was Noah’s preaching [2 Peter 2:5]). So when the παρουσία does come it will be much like it was then, for *“when they say ‘Peace and safety!’”* writes Paul, then *“sudden destruction comes upon them...and they shall not escape. But you, brethren,”* he says, *“are not in darkness so that this Day should overtake you as a thief.”* (1 Thessalonians 5:3,4). It is certainly true, as Paul informed Timothy, that *“in the last days perilous times will come”* (2 Timothy 3:1). But we must never forget that ‘these last days’ began with the ascension of Jesus (Cf. Acts 2:17, Hebrews 1:1, etc.). Can anyone study the history of the Church without seeing that in many places, and at various times, perilous conditions have come? Think of the Christians burned by Nero. Think of the Protestant believers tortured during the Roman Catholic Inquisition. Think of the Christians killed under the tyranny of Adolph Hitler. Think of what happened to Christian churches in China during the rule of Mao. Yes, and it could happen to us. If the apostasy of the Western Church continues, it could be that perilous times are ahead for us. But this is a very different thing from what we read in Matthew 24:1-34.

Christ was speaking to people who were standing before him about things that were certain to happen in their generation. He gave them a series of ‘signs’ by which they could know

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for sure that Jerusalem's destruction was near. But it is not that way with the second coming of Jesus, for of that day and hour God has provided no human foreknowledge. It has not pleased him to reveal it. That is why Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, repeats the very teaching of Jesus. "*But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night*" (1 Thess. 5:1,2). The very purpose of Christ was to carefully distinguish these things that differ. How strange it is that so many persist even yet in confusing them.

What does the future hold? It is our conviction that it holds no such gloomy and pessimistic a scenario as many imagine. Christ is on the throne. He is reigning right now and he will continue to reign until he has put all of his enemies under his feet (1 Corinthians 15:23-28). Yes indeed, perilous times will come. But so will seasons of refreshing (Acts 3:19). Dreadful apostasy may well come here, while over there we see another great revival. But the world as a whole will simply continue with the wheat and the tares growing together until the harvest (Matt. 13:24-30, 37-43). Then, without any warning signs at all, the Lord will appear in glory. May the Lord enable us to be ready for that great day.

Questions for Further Study and Discussion:

1. To what does Christ refer in Matthew 24:29 according to the popular view?
2. To what does Christ refer in Matthew 24:29 according to the analogy of Scripture (comparing Scripture with Scripture)?
3. How do most people today misunderstand Matthew 24:30?
4. What was '*the sign* of the Son of man in heaven'?
5. What is the common error of interpretation made with respect to the phrase "*coming on the clouds of heaven*"?

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6. What does this phrase really refer to?
7. What does Matthew 16:28 (or Mark 9:1 or Lk. 9:27) mean?
8. How do translators add to the popular misconception of the meaning of verse 30?
9. What are the two possible ways of understanding ‘the angels’ of v. 31?
10. How does v. 32 confirm the conclusion that ‘*all these things*’ (including the things mentioned in verses 29-31) had to happen in that generation?
11. What is the main point of Christ’s teaching in the remainder of this section (24:36 to the end of Chapter 25)?
12. Read what Paul said about the second coming of Christ, in I Thessalonians 5, and underline anything that you find which confirms the above conclusions.
13. In what ways is a correct view of the future of great importance to God’s people today?

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THE THESSALONIAN LETTERS

The second great prophetic passage in the New Testament is found in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. His two Thessalonian letters were probably written early in the Apostolic age, probably not later than 55 A.D. This means that approximately 25 years had passed since our Lord's great prophetic discourse (recorded in Matthew 24), and that about 15 years remained before the destruction of Jerusalem (and "*all these things*" that he had predicted). Yet it is clear that already, in the Church at Thessalonica, the very errors that Jesus had carefully warned against (Matt. 24:4,23,26) were appearing. A careful reading of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 will show that some people in the Thessalonian church assumed that Christ's second coming (the *παρουσία*) would take place before that generation had passed away. It was for this reason that they sorrowed with an unseemly sorrow for those who had already died (4:13). They erroneously supposed that such persons would miss out on blessings to be enjoyed by those who would still be alive at our Lord's second coming. This notion the Apostle strongly opposed (vv. 13-16). But the interesting thing to observe is this: Paul did not say it was impossible that Christ would appear in that generation. Indeed, he clearly indicates that he considered this a distinct possibility. For he says "*we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming (παρουσία) of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep*" (v. 15). And if our interpretation of Matthew 24 has been right this is precisely what we would expect Paul to say. Had not our Lord said that no one [not even Jesus himself in his estate of humiliation] knew when his second coming would happen? And saying that was one and the same with saying that it might come sooner or might come much later. If Paul had denied the possibility that Christ might come back during that generation, he would have claimed to know at least something about the time of his second coming. But Paul did not have any such knowledge. No, says Paul, "*about the times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night*" (1 Thess. 5:1,2). In other words — as we have already pointed out in our discussion

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of Matthew 24 — the second coming will come without any warning signs. No one, not even an inspired Apostle, knew (or could know) when it will take place.

So here, in the second Thessalonian letter, Paul carries the matter a little further. He again takes up the danger of these people being deceived (2 Thess. 2:3).²¹ Because they had (rightly) accepted the possibility that Christ might return sooner, rather than later, they were dangerously near to being deceived by various rumors to the effect that the second coming had already happened. Observe what the Apostle writes: “*we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come*” (2:1,2). The Greek term here [ἐνέστηκεν] is in the perfect tense. It indicates an accomplished thing. The trouble is that many of our English translations fail to express this faithfully (the NIV is excellent here). The sense, in the original, is that some were saying that the second coming had already happened. And this was exactly the danger that Christ had predicted, 25 years earlier (Matt. 24:23,24). Were they “*so soon*” to be “*unsettled*” or “*alarmed*” by false rumors and alarms? Not if Paul could help it. And what better way than to refresh their memory and understanding of what was certain to happen before the visible return of Jesus? This, as we have seen, was the predicted ruin of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. This our Lord himself had solemnly promised as an event certain to take place in “*that generation.*” It was, therefore, impossible that “*that day*” (Christ’s second coming or παρουσία) could come before “*all these things*” were fulfilled. Remember this epistle was written about 15 years *before* that awesome destruction came.

THE DIFFERING VIEWS

Before we begin our discussion of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, it may be well to briefly describe the three basic types of interpretation that have been made of this passage.

²¹ “*Let no man deceive you by any means*” (1 Thess. 5:3) echoes Jesus warning in Matthew 24:23-27.

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- (1) The first is that which regards this as *a restatement of what Christ had already taught* (as recorded in Matt. 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21). The falling away, on this view, refers to the great Jewish apostasy. They fell away from God when they rejected Jesus as the Messiah, and continued to reject him even after he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. The man of sin is therefore a description of the one who came and made desolate the Temple and the 'holy' city. According to this view the events predicted here have already happened.

- (2) The second interpretation is *that which was held by most Protestants at the time of the Reformation*. It saw the great apostasy in the rise of the Papacy and the false doctrines of Mariolatry, and the like, in the Romish Church. The man of sin was taken to mean the Pope. This view is set forth in the original version of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 25:6. According to this view the events predicted in 2 Thessalonians have taken (and still are taking) many centuries to fulfill.

- (3) The third view is *that which takes Paul's description of the man of sin, and the great apostasy, as yet future* — to be fulfilled near the end of time, prior to (and near to) the second coming. The falling away, on this view, is taken to mean a nearly complete apostasy of the visible Church, near the end of time. And the man of sin is taken to be a person of extraordinary power and authority such as we have not yet seen in history. According to this view the fulfillment is yet future.

The views may be diagrammed as follows: (with M standing for the appearance of the 'Man of sin,' and P for the 'Parousia').

Matthew 24 and 2 Thessalonians 2

(Man of sin = M 70 A.D. = ^ = unknown time Parousia = P

[1] (Jesus)_____ (Paul) M^.....P

[2] (Jesus)_____ (Paul) _^.....M.....P

[3] (Jesus)_____ (Paul) _^.....M/P

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The first line in the above representation depicts the view which is defended in this study (with all of “these things” specifically predicted by Jesus as happening in that generation, and so already fulfilled in past history). The second diagram represents the view which was generally held by Protestants at the time of the Reformation (with the man of sin seen as a progressive fulfillment, over a long period of time, in the Roman Catholic Papacy). The third diagram represents the view held today by many Evangelical Christians (with the list of events predicted in Matthew 24:4-35 seen as still in the future as respects their most important and horrendous fulfillment).

With respect to these views the following should now be clear.

- (1) The third view cannot possibly be correct (popular though it is today) for the simple reason that it contradicts the clear teaching of Jesus. He said there would be no warning sign by which we could calculate the time of his second coming. (Remember the three illustrations Jesus used — the thief, the lightning, and the flood of Noah? The thing common to all three of these is the absence of any specific warning signs).
- (2) It is clear that either of the first two views does preserve one main point in the teaching of Jesus: namely, the fact that he will return without warning signs. If the man of sin prediction was fulfilled in the events around 70 A.D. then obviously this cannot be a sign to tell us how soon our Lord will return. Likewise, even if what is said about the man of sin is taken as a prediction of the rise of the Papacy (as was the view of some, at least, of the great Reformers), it still cannot serve as a time indicator to tell us when Christ is about to return.
- (3) Again, on either of the first two views it is possible to take seriously the fact that what Paul was talking about was already present. This point is completely ignored in the third view. The Apostle said “*the secret power of lawlessness is already at work*” (v. 7). He also says there is “*one who now holds it back*” and he said this “*will continue...till he is taken out of the way*” (v. 7). It is obvious that this fits well with the first view. But it might also be argued that the predicted apos-

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tasy, that culminated in later history in the Papacy, had already begun in the Apostolic age when Paul was writing this letter (See 2 Pet. 1, Jude, 2 Tim. 2:16-18, 3 John 9, etc.).

- (4) So, since we do not see anything in either of these two views that obviously contradicts what we have already learned from the teaching of Jesus, we will now proceed to consider this passage and then try to determine which of these — if either — is the correct one. In the interpretation of this passage the following points are crucial:

[1] Who is the man of sin (or lawlessness)?

[2] When does he appear?

[3] What is ‘the falling away,’ and what is its relationship to the man of sin?

[4] Who is the restrainer?

In the following section we will examine this passage carefully with these questions in mind. (We will also try to be honest enough to admit it when there are problems we are not able to solve).

Questions for Further Study and Discussion:

1. What was wrong with the people in Thessalonica (as evidenced in 4:13-5:11)?
2. Did Paul think that Christ would return in that generation?
3. What danger predicted by Jesus was on the verge of being fulfilled in the Thessalonians?
4. What are the three types of interpretations of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12?
5. What Scripture disproves the futurist (to be fulfilled just before Jesus returns) view?

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6. Is there anything in the text of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 to help us decide between the first two views? If so, what?
7. What — if anything — in the text of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 would (at first sight, at least) appear to be a problem for interpretation type #1?

THE MAIN POINTS

In the previous parts of this discussion we gave our reasons for rejecting the interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2 which is so popular today. (The view that places the final fulfillment of “*all these things*” as something still future, just prior to Christ’s second coming). We now want to show why we have been driven to adopt the view which says this prophecy *was* fulfilled in Paul’s generation. And also why we can no longer fully agree with the view of many Protestants at the time of the Reformation.²²

(1) The first reason is that Paul warned the Thessalonians not to be deceived by those who were being misled to think the day of the Lord had already come (v. 2). No, says Paul, “*for that day will not come until the rebellion²³ occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed*” (v. 3). Christ’s second coming could not take place, in other words, until this event (the rebellion) had been completed. But to what event was Paul referring? We believe it can be none other than that already predicted by Jesus (in Matthew 23 and 24:1-35). We have already shown, in our previous discussion, that there was to be the overthrow of the Jewish

²² It is one thing to say that the prophecy concerning the man of sin has had its one and only specific **fulfillment** in the Apostolic age. But this does *not* mean that it has no further **application**. The false doctrine of the Pope as the Vicar of Christ is very much like the blasphemous claims of the man of sin of which the Apostle spoke. It is therefore appropriate to cite this passage of Scripture in condemning this false claim of the Roman Catholics. But it is important that we do not confuse things that differ. A legitimate *application* of a principle taught in a prophetic passage is not at all the same as to say it is that prophecy’s *fulfillment*.

²³ The Greek term here is ἀποστασία from which we get our word apostasy.

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Theocracy because of their rejection of Jesus as the promised Messiah, and that it was to happen in “that generation.” Paul says “*Don’t you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you **these things**?*”

Please note that the words (above) in bold type, are also found also in Matthew 23:36 and 24:34! “*These things*” were precisely the things that Jesus had spoken of to the apostate Jewish leaders (Matthew 23) and then to his disciples (as recorded in Matthew 24:4-34). Because all of the New Testament scriptures had not yet been written, copied and circulated among all of the churches in the early years, it was therefore necessary for Paul himself to teach the Thessalonians “*these things*.” But having heard “*these things*” from him they ought to have remembered that Christ could not return until “*all these things*” were fulfilled. Since this had not yet happened, when Paul sent this letter to them, there was no reason whatever for them to be deceived by these completely false rumors.

(2) A second fact of great importance is the constant time indication in this 2 Thessalonian passage. Paul did not say that “*the secret power of lawlessness*” would come some day in the (far off) future. No, what he said is that it was “*already*” at work as he wrote. He said there *is* “one who **now** holds it back” and that, it hasn’t yet been “*revealed*” (v. 6). Observe: the man of lawlessness was not spoken of as *nonexistent* at the time that Paul wrote these words, but only as *not yet revealed*. Paul spoke of him as one who already existed, but who was — for the time being — still hidden.

Observe also that, in verse 10, the Apostle said there were people who had *already* become apostates. They were *already* perishing because they had *already* persistently refused to love the truth so that they could be saved. And because this had already happened the inspired Apostles says: “*for this reason God is sending* (Greek: πέμπει, present tense) *them a powerful delusion so that they have believed* (Greek: πιστεύσαι, aorist active infinity) *the lie*” (v. 11 author’s own translation). Because the majority of the Jewish nation at that time had refused to believe in Jesus as their

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Messiah, therefore God himself was hardening their hearts in that unbelief as Paul wrote. The time indicators quite clearly show that Paul was writing about something that was already happening as he wrote. This very clearly supports the first interpretation listed above.

The Falling Away

What, then, is “the falling away?” The Greek word translated “falling away” is ἀποστασία, pronounced ‘apostasia.’ We usually translate it ‘apostasy’ (which means a fatal falling away from the God of the bible). It is interesting to note, however, that in the Greek Version of the Old Testament (and in some New Testament passages) this term can also mean ‘divorce!’ That is very significant because, in Biblical language, the greatest divorce in history was the severance of the bond between Israel and Jehovah. But either way we take this Greek word, the historical event that it refers to was indeed both an apostasy and a divorce. It was also the momentous event prophesied by our Lord in Matthew 23. Think of the woes pronounced by our Lord and promised to take effect in that generation! And already it was coming to pass when Paul wrote this letter. Time after time the Jews — to whom Paul went first with the gospel message — rejected his demonstration from the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus was indeed their promised Messiah. But what usually happened was that they stubbornly refused to receive the truth so that they might be saved. Therefore God was already sending them a strong delusion so that they would believe ‘the lie’ (2 Thessalonians 2:11).²⁴ Therefore, Paul could already say “*the wrath of God has come upon them at last* [or, as some translate, *to the uttermost*]” (1 Thessalonians 2:16). It was near, even at the doors, the dreaded hour of spiritual darkness, in which a vast majority of the Jews would be cut out of their own olive tree (Romans 11:17). Truly this was the great apostasy (and the great divorce) that no other event in history can equal.

²⁴ “Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the anti-christ, he who denies the father and the son.” (1 John 2:22 ESV)

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The Man of Lawlessness

So who was this “man of lawlessness?” It is our opinion that this phrase most likely was the government of the Roman empire as an institution and to Caesar himself as their conqueror. We say this for the following reasons.

[1] “*The Abomination of Desolation*,” spoken of by Daniel, was the thing specially warned of by our Lord (Matt. 24:15). But we know, both from Luke 21:20,21 (written for Gentile readers) and from the book of Daniel that this phrase originated in the desolation of the Temple by Antiochus Ephiphanes in 167 B.C.²⁵ Daniel 11:30-32 indicates this clearly. We cannot give an extended exposition of Daniel here. But most bible commentators agree that Daniel’s first prediction of the “abomination of desolation” (11:32) was indeed fulfilled by the desecrating activity of this Antiochus. Viewed from the stand-point of his standing in the world, at that time, he was relatively insignificant. He did not begin to compare in fame or stature with such Empire builders as Nebuchadnezzar, or Alexander the Great. But from the perspective of redemptive history Antiochus was very important indeed. During a brief moment in history this man aspired to, and conspired to attain, a sphere of great power and glory. He had ambitions to become a ruler of importance in one of the geographical sections of the empire left by Alexander the Great when he died at the age of 33. But when his grandiose plans were frustrated he took out his frustration by desecrating the Temple. He even compelled Jews to sacrifice swine on the holy altar (See 1 Maccabees 1:10-24).

Since Christ expected the Jews — who were familiar with the book of Daniel (and probably the Books of the Maccabees also) —

²⁵ Antiochus called himself Θεός Επιφανής (meaning ‘God manifested’, or just manifested, or illustrious, for short). But most people were of a very opposite opinion. They changed one letter in his name to make it Επιμανής (meaning mad man, or insane) calling him Antiochus Epimmanes. The account of what he did to desecrate the Temple and to alienate the Jews from their spiritual heritage, is found in the Second Book of the Maccabees (a book of Jewish history which, though not considered part of the Old Testament, was published as part of the Apocrypha included in the Greek [LXX] version of the Old Testament).

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to understand this historical reference, it is clear that the final abomination predicted in Daniel 12:11 (which was taken up by Jesus in Matthew 24) was destined to be something very similar to what the Antiochus Epiphanes had done.²⁶

[2] The great error in the popular view is the assumption (without any scriptural warrant) that “*the man of sin [or lawlessness]*” had to be someone of world-wide authority (or, in other words, a man of unparalleled importance from a worldly point of view). There is no such teaching in this passage, nor is it supported by the analogy of Scripture. It is not the position of the man of sin with respect to the world that counts, but his position with respect to the Jewish Temple which was still standing when Paul wrote these words.

If it be objected that the Roman Emperors did not make the awesome claims that are ascribed here to the man of sin, we can only reply that they did. In fact, the scripture tells us that it was common for ancient rulers to make similar claims to divinity. In Ezekiel 28:2-10, for example, we are told of the prince of Tyre (hardly a man of world-wide authority and importance) saying “*I am God, I sit in the seat of God*” (v. 2). Similarly, Isaiah says the Emperor of Babylon said “*I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High*” (Isaiah 14:14). By analogy of Scripture, therefore, when Daniel (11:35-45) speaks of the “*...king who will do as he pleases and magnify himself above every god...etc.,*” there can hardly be any doubt that he intends for us to understand him to be like these others in the bible who were described with just such terminology. In other words, the analogy shows this to be a common designation for heathen civil rulers in history.

We therefore see, from this analogy of the Scripture, that the “man of sin” is almost certainly the Roman Caesar.

The Restrainer

²⁶ We have a similar phenomenon today in our use of the word ‘holocaust.’ The murder of millions of Jews by Hitler became known as the holocaust. It is now used to emphasize the wickedness of things, as for example abortion.

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The one who restrained the man of sin for a while can also be determined by the analogy of Scripture. In Daniel's day, the prince of Persia was Israel's oppressor. The Lord therefore came to Daniel (10:10-12) to inform him that his prayer had already been heard, from the first day he began praying. "But" said the Lord "*the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days*" (10:12-14). So it was the Lord himself — or, more accurately, the angel of the Lord (whom we take to be the pre-incarnate Christ) — who restrained this Prince. Again, in 10:21, we read: "*there is none who contends by my side against these except Michael your prince.*"

Behind the struggle between this great heathen prince and the Jewish people, in other words, stood the higher powers in the invisible world. In other words, behind the struggle here on earth was a conflict between the spiritual principalities and powers in heavenly places. And since—in this Thessalonian passage—this human ruler ("the man of lawlessness") is described as functioning as an instrument of Satan (2:9,10) it follows, as night follows day, that there is no one powerful enough to restrain him but this same great angel of the Lord (Cf. Jude 9). One popular interpretation understands this to mean that (in Paul's day, at least) the Roman Government itself was the restraining power. But the difficulty with this interpretation is the (well-known) fact that it was the Roman Government that soon (during the first three centuries of the history of the Christian Church) began to persecute Christian believers. It is much more in harmony with history, and the analogy of Scripture, to see the Roman Empire as headed up in Caesar, as the thing restrained by the Lord. But that restraint was removed in 70 A.D. And when it was removed the Romans came and fulfilled the woeful predictions of Jesus.

The Relationship

It may be objected, on this view, that there is no clear connection between (1) the apostasy and (2) the revelation of the man of lawlessness. This objection fades away, however, when we remember the analogy of Scripture. In the revelation given to Daniel the inner connection is apparent. When the Old Testament church was unfaithful (falling away from God) God

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then permitted the princes of the world kingdoms to oppress them. In other words, the work of Satan has two aspects. On the one hand he works with “*lying signs and wonders*” in order to deceive those who profess to be God’s people. Then, when *they* are deluded — because they have not received the love of the truth — God permits Satanically directed forces to get a mastery over them. Was this not the very thing that Jesus had promised in that generation (Luke 21:24)? A study of the eye-witness account of the Jewish historian Josephus (who witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple) should be enough to convince the most skeptical that the final apostasy of the Jews came on the crest of the wave of just such lying signs and wonders. The final inundation came when Titus — representing Rome’s Imperial power — came to sit down in the Temple in Jerusalem.

In the popular misconception prevalent today, “*sitting in the Temple*” is taken to mean some kind of [future] supreme authority over the whole Christian church, which will be possessed by one supremely evil man. The writer of this study once held this view himself, for the simple reason that he had heard it so often in his early life. But a closer study of the original Greek text of this passage finally dispelled this error completely. The Greek word found here is *ναὸν*. It is often translated by the word Temple but was originally intended to refer to ‘the inner sanctuary’ of the Temple, and not the Temple as a whole. Furthermore, in the New Testament this term is only used with reference to believers who have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them (1 Cor. 3:16,17; 6:19; and 2 Cor. 6:16). Nowhere in the New Testament do we ever find anything to suggest that *apostate* people could be called God’s Temple. How, then, could some future “man of sin” sit down in this spiritual temple composed of true believers? Those who reject God’s truth have no part in God’s Temple in the New Testament but are rather identified as a Synagogue of Satan (see Rev. 2:9). Therefore no man (who, on this wrong, view would head up a great apostasy) could ever really sit in God’s New Testament Temple because, by definition, this term [*ναὸν*] refers only to true believers.

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But on the basis of the interpretation that we have outlined above, there is no problem at all in understanding this point. Until 70 A.D. there was a Temple in Jerusalem. Up to that time in history it had been acknowledged by God himself as his Temple. Until the great divorce between God and Israel—announced by the Lord Jesus—it was still God’s house. But Jesus warned the unbelieving Jews that soon, very soon, their house would be left to them desolate. And that is what actually happened. The “*man of lawlessness*” came to Jerusalem and sat down in that Temple, as if he was Divine. And it all happened ‘in that generation’ exactly as Jesus had predicted.

Questions for Further Study and Discussion:

1. What is the proper translation of the last phrase in 2 Thessalonians 2 verse 2?
2. With what, in Matthew 24, does this tie in?
3. To what does Paul probably refer when he speaks of ‘these things’ in verse 5?
4. Find some ‘time indicators’ in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. What do they show?
5. To what does Paul refer when he speaks of ‘the apostasy’?
6. Who was the Man of sin?
7. What O.T. evidence strongly supports this conclusion?
8. Who was ‘the restrainer’?
9. What O.T. evidence supports this?
10. What is the relationship between the apostasy — the removal of restraint — and the revelation of the man of sin?
11. What N.T. data stands in the way of the Reformation type interpretation of the man of sin sitting in the Temple?

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THE ANTICHRIST

The antichrist is mentioned in the New Testament only in the Epistles of John.²⁷ We here quote these texts in full from the NASB. “*Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen; from this we know that it is the last hour*” (1 John 2:18). “*Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son*” (1 John 2:22). “*And every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world*” (1 John 4:3). “*For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist*” (2 John 7).

The most common interpretation of these texts is — again — that which envisions a future ‘superman’ of evil. The writer also, at one time, was held in the spell of this popular idea. This was the case for one simple reason: this was what the writer had so often ‘heard.’ But here again it turned out that a closer study of these texts revealed some startling things when they are carefully compared with other texts of scripture.

What did John mean when he wrote “*you **heard** that antichrist is coming?*” Did he mean that what they had heard was the truth? Or did he merely indicate that they too (those first-century Thessalonian Christians to whom he was writing) had fallen under the spell of an erroneous, but common, tradition? We can’t help but recall that Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount, used this very same expression (Matthew 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43). “*You have **heard***” he said, again and again in that sermon. But when Jesus said that did he mean that what they had heard was the truth? No, that was just the trouble: it wasn’t! That is why Jesus went on to correct serious errors and distortions in the traditions those people had heard so many times. And it was exactly

²⁷ 1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; and 2 John 7.

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the same, later on, when John came to write about this antichrist doctrine. John did not say that there was no truth at all in what people had been hearing. But he did make it clear that there was serious error in what they had heard. That is why he — following the example of his Lord — wrote to correct error and clarify the truth. So in John's corrected statement of the antichrist doctrine the antichrist was (1) not something future, but rather something already present; (2) not something to be found in one 'big' antichrist of a distant future, but in many antichrists; and (3) not a superman at all, but rather a supernatural spirit of error.

The time of "*the antichrist*" was already present when John wrote this Epistle. How could he have said more clearly? "*Children*" he wrote "*it is the last hour.*" And how did John know it was the last hour? Well, he knew it because he could say "*even now many antichrists have arisen.*" The Greek here is decisive. John said the antichrist had come in that historical era in which he, himself, was living (2:18). It was an accomplished fact with an abiding result when John wrote, prior to 100 A.D. Is this not often ignored — yes, even denied — on the common view of the antichrist? It is often said, of course, that there were forerunners of the antichrist. But observe: John did not say that. He did not speak of 'little antichrists' in his day leading up to the 'big one' at some time later in history. No, what he said is "*this is the last hour.*" It was, in fact, precisely because so many antichrists had already arisen that John knew it was the last hour. For "*this is the antichrist*" he said "*the one who denies the Father and the Son.*" As Professor B. B. Warfield stated it "predecessors of antichrist might prove that the 'last hour' was approaching; only actual antichrists could prove that 'the last hour' had already come. There can be no question, then, that John volatilizes the individual antichrist (i.e. the rumored superman of evil) into thin air, and substitutes for him a multitude of 'antichrists.'"²⁸

This conclusion is only further strengthened by the teaching of 1 John 4:3. In this text we clearly see that there is what can be

²⁸ From Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield, Vol. 2, p. 360.

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called an anti-christian spirit in the world. But the remarkable thing is that John said that what they had heard was *going to come* into the world was, in fact, *already present*. “*Now it is already in the world*” wrote John. “John not only erases the individual antichrist from the scroll of prediction,” wrote Warfield, “but reduces him just to a heresy.” For “*who is the liar, but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist*” (John 2:22). In fact, “*every spirit which confesses that Jesus is Christ come in the flesh is of God; and no spirit which does not confess Jesus, is of God: and this is that antichrist of which you have heard that it is coming: and it is now in the world already*” (1 John 4:3). In other words the antichrist phenomenon was not future even when John wrote these words. It was already there. And it was not there in some small, preliminary way. No, it was there in its fullness.

But what difference does it make, it might be asked, which interpretation we adopt? Well, it is our conviction that it makes a big difference. Imagine, for argument’s sake, a young theological student. The second world war had just ended. He had just enrolled in a theological seminary that was drifting away from the faith. ‘Ah well,’ he might have said to himself, ‘this isn’t very significant: at least I don’t live during the terrible time of the coming Antichrist.’ So, in his foolish naiveté, he might have relaxed his guard and the spirit of antichrist could have destroyed him. In a false sense of security engendered by the idea that the real Antichrist — the ‘big one’ — is still some distance in the future, he could have become the victim of the many antichrists (controlled by the antichrist spirit of the age) of which the Apostle warned in these letters. Suppose, on the other hand, that this same young man came to see the three simple elements of John’s teaching (that the antichrist is *present*, not far off in the future — *many*, not just one — and *spirit*, not flesh). This insight would at once put him on his guard, and therefore he would not become a victim.

When we look at the sad state of many Churches today, is not this lesson apparent? Instead of looking for the one big Antichrist assumed to come in the future, Christians ought to have been on guard against the many antichrists of the present. For —

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as John has assured us — “*the Antichrist*” is anyone “*who denies the Father and the Son*” (2:22). How, we might well ask, could John have made it any clearer? Since “*every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God*” (2:22), and since “*many deceivers have gone out into the world...who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh*” does it not follow (as John has assured) us that “*This is...the Antichrist*” (2 John 7). Any theologian, college teacher, or minister of the gospel, who denies the historical truthfulness of the bible, is under the dominion of the Antichrist spirit. All attacks of the Antichrist have this as their essence. The sad thing is that so many churches have been carried away by this spirit while many of the church members were utterly unaware of what was happening to them. They thought they were safe because they always ‘heard’ that the antichrist was still in the future. In actual fact they became victims of the real antichrist of the Scripture.

Yes, it’s a bad thing indeed, when Christians are held in the spell of a wrong view of the future. Yet that is exactly what has happened to many people today. They are pessimistic about the future. They think it will be very dark — because the great antichrist is coming. The truth is that the future for God’s people is not dark, for — as John the Apostle clearly states — “*the darkness is past, and the true light is already shining*” (2:8). This is not a kind of ‘whistling in the dark.’ Biblical Christians do not believe in any Utopia in history. No, but they do believe in the victory of the cause of Christ. That is why they realize their need of the whole armor of God in or to fight the good fight of faith in overcoming the spirit of antichrist. The time of alarm is now, not ‘someday.’ The perils are all around us, not somewhere else. The need to take the whole armor of God is ours, not just those who come later (Ephesians 6:11-18). But the encouraging thing is that the future is bright. Christ has ascended to glory. He sits, right now, at the right hand of God — he is in the process of “coming” (ἐρχόμενον) right now on the clouds of heaven in His kingdom.

We don’t know when Jesus will manifest himself to us in the visible glory of the parousia (παρουσία). There will be no signs to tell us when it is about to happen. He simply tells us that he

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requires us to be awake — and at work — so that when he does come he will find us as ‘faithful servants.’ What the Church needs today is to go back and carefully study the words of Christ and the Apostles. And nowhere is this more needed than it is with respect to the doctrine of the future. If this brief study will encourage that it will need no other justification.

Questions for Further Study and Discussion:

1. What is the popular view concerning the Antichrist?
2. To what does the phrase “you have heard” refer in Matthew Chapter 5?
3. Can you state the three basic errors that John refutes in his Antichrist statements?
4. From the texts printed in the first paragraph on page 33 underline the words that show that John did not believe in one big antichrist in the future.
5. What is the main teaching that the spirit of the antichrist seeks to destroy in the church?
6. How does a false doctrine of antichrist harm in the church?
7. Is there any evidence of the attack of antichrist in your community?

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THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN.

Introduction

John wrote to seven churches located in well-known cities of Asia Minor (Anatolia).²⁹ He expressly stated that this revelation is of “*things which must shortly come to pass.*” This is emphasized again, at the close (Rev. 22:12,20), when he says: “*Behold, I come quickly;*” “*Yea, I come quickly.*” The Apostle, moreover, was admonished not to seal “*the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near at hand*” (22:10). Surely, if words have meaning the events contemplated in this book were impending in the near future when this book was written. It is our conviction that this is an intentional indication that what John wrote is in harmony with the repeated declaration of Jesus: “*This generation will by no means pass away until all these things are fulfilled*” (Mt. 23:36, 24:34).

The Book of Revelation, in other words, is not a revelation of things that were in the distant future when John wrote, but rather things that were soon to happen (and from our standpoint things which have long since happened, except for the parousia). All of the other eye-witness accounts of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, that we call ‘gospels’ have rather full accounts of the eschatological discourse of Jesus. It must, therefore, have been recognized as of great importance. Why, then, did the Apostle John leave it out of his account? It is our conviction that he did so — not because he differed in opinion about its importance — but because it was the will of God to display the content of that teaching in a special way to John in these visions that John tells us about in this book. In other words, *the Book of Revelation is John’s restatement of the very same material that Jesus originally gave as recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke.*

²⁹ The seven churches were located in what we know today as Turkey.

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As we have already demonstrated³⁰ our Lord's own eschatological discourse can only be rightly understood by comparing scripture with scripture. The same is true (perhaps even more so) when it comes to these visions that were granted to John. We can only hope to understand these visions, therefore, if we keep in mind such things as the following:

1. Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah are especially made use of.
2. The number 7 is notably prominent — 7 spirits, 7 churches, 7 seals, 7 trumpets, 7 seals, 7 eyes, 7 horns, 7 plagues. Numbers 3, 4, 10 and 12 are also used in a significant way. Where these are used we should at least hesitate to insist on taking them as literally intended.
3. O.T. usage should constantly guide our interpretation.

Finally, concerning the value or use of the things revealed in these visions. At first thought it may seem disappointing that we do not have in these visions a preview of the entire history of the church and the world from the time of John's writing until our Lord's second coming. But there is no more reason to be disappointed *here*, than in our Lord's own teaching. He did not give an account of what was going to happen *after* the destruction of the Temple, nor did he list any signs that would come just prior to his second coming. To the contrary — as we have already indicated — he said there would be no signs!³¹

To some this may seem to take away from the usefulness of this book. But that is to misunderstand the very nature of Scripture. There was a time (in the apostolic age) when God sent inspired messages to existing churches with infallible divine truth concerning their particular needs. But this does not happen today because the Canon of Scripture is closed. Does this take away

³⁰ See especially pages 40-52.

³¹ This was the point of his reference to the thief in the night, and the lightning that suddenly shines in the night sky, and the world-wide flood that came without warning. (Cf. 1 Thess. 5:1-3)

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from the value of those letters *for us*? Of course not. They contain teaching that had specific reference to an existing church in a particular time in history. But, in the infinite wisdom of God, these letters are also intended for us because they contain principles that apply to our situation. Well, the same holds true for the portions of the New Testament that contain eschatological material.

As we have pointed out at an earlier point in this study, the Reformers saw in the rise of the Papacy what seemed to them to be the very Man of Sin and Antichrist spoken of by two of the Apostles.³² This conviction even made its way into the original formulation of the Westminster Confession Chapter 25:6. It said: *“There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof: but is that Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself, in the church, against Christ and all that is called God.”* We see this as an example of the common error of assuming a ‘double fulfillment.’ But there is no need for that, as the revision of this article shows. Here is the way this section of the confession now reads in the revised version adopted by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and by the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). *“There is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof.”* The difference is that here a proper application is made of *principles* taught in the bible passages having to do with the man of sin, and the antichrist, without claiming that the pope is *a second fulfillment*. No, *the* fulfillment intended took place in *that* generation culminating in the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the father *and* the leaving desolate the unbelieving Jews who had rejected him.

The simple, but very important, point is that the Scriptures (including those dealing with “*these things*” that Jesus promised for that generation) have many valid **applications**, just as all of the other New Testament writings do. But they only had **one fulfillment**. For as Jesus said: *“This generation shall by no means*

³² Paul in 2 Thess. and John in 1 & 2 John.

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pass away until all these things take place” (Mt. 24:34). While “*of that day and hour no one knows*”—no, not even John—for as Jesus said *after* he rose from the dead: “*It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has put in his own authority*” (Acts 1:7). We therefore know that the book Revelation is not a disclosure of information by which we can calculate the times or seasons of post-ascension history in *any* way, shape or form. No, but as John keeps reminding us,³³ it restates in powerful images what was to happen in that generation.

Questions:

1. What statements in Revelation 1-3 show that it is *not* intended as a disclosure of events taking place in our time in history?
2. What is the difference in principle between the original and revised version of the Westminster Confession Ch. 25:6?
3. Was anything lost by this change?
4. Was anything gained by this change?
5. What is the great benefit of *not* knowing the times or seasons?

PART I

Chapter 1

Immediately after the opening statements, the salutation and the doxology of vv. 4-6, the theme of Revelation is announced: “*Behold he is coming [ἔρχεται] with the clouds, and every eye shall see him, and they who pierced him, and all the tribes of the land shall wail over him*” (1:7) [Author’s translation].

It should be particularly noted that these words are virtually the same as our Lord’s own statement (Matt. 24:30): “*Then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the*

³³ Rev. 1:1 “The Revelation...God gave...(of) things that must take place with swiftness [ταχέι]” - 21:7 & 21:20 “I am coming [ερχομαι] swiftly [ταχυ]

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tribes of the land shall mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” The common English translation — “*all kindreds of the earth*” — appears to have misled not only many lay readers, but even learned commentators. No Hellenist of our Lord’s day would have understood *πασαι αι φυλαι της γης* to mean all nations of the habitable globe. This phrase is traceable to the Septuagint translation of Zechariah 12:12, where all the families of the land of Judah are represented as mourning.

The words “*they who pierced him*” are from Zech. 12:10, and should here be understood not so much as referring to the soldiers who nailed Jesus to the cross, and pierced his side, as of the Jews, upon whom Peter charged the crime (Acts 2:23, 36; 5:30), and who had cried, “*His blood be upon us and upon our children*” (Mt. 27:25). To these Jews Jesus himself said: “*Hereafter you shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven*” (Matt. 26:64).

Having announced his great theme, the writer proceeds to record his vision of the Α [Alpha] and Ω [Omega], the first and the last—an expression taken from Isaiah 12:4; 44:6; 48:12. The description of the Son of man is mainly stated in the terms by which Daniel described the Ancient of days (Dan. 7:9) and the Son of man (10:5,6). It also appropriates expressions from other prophets (Isaiah 11:4; 49:2; Ezekiel 1:26, 28; 43:2).

The seven golden candlesticks remind us of Zechariah’s one golden candlestick with its seven lamps (Zech. 4:2). The meaning of the symbols is given by the Lord himself, and the whole forms an impressive introduction to the seven epistles.

Chapters 2 & 3

These 7 epistles are full of allusions showing that there was much persecution of the faithful when John was on the Island of Patmos, and that a crisis was at hand. The warnings, counsels, and encouragements given to these Churches correspond in substance to those that our Lord gave to his disciples in Matthew 24.

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He warned them of false prophets. He told them they would have tribulation. He warned that some would be put to death, and that the love of many would wax cold. But he also encouraged them by promising that all who endured to the end would be saved.³⁴

Each of the other gospels (Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21) contain a record of the great Eschatological Discourse of Jesus. So the question inevitably arises: Why didn't the Apostle John also tell us what he heard Jesus say on that momentous occasion? Our conclusion is that it was not omitted from his gospel account because he thought it unimportant! To the contrary, we believe John thought it so important that he wrote an entire book to express it more vividly. God enabled him to 'see' it all over again in a series of visions on the Island of Patmos.

In the material that follows we will see, again and again, how the material presented to John in these visions parallels what we've already seen in the first three gospels.³⁵

Chapter 4

The prophecy of the seven seals is opened by a glorious vision of the throne of God (chap. 4), and with symbols taken from the corresponding visions of Isaiah 6:1-4, and Ezekiel 1:4-28.

The seer is snatched up to heaven and sees a vision pointing to the judgment the Lord will execute for the benefit of His Church.

v. 1 - the command to go up = to be in the Spirit

- the fact that he is invited into the heavenly realm = it is not easy to attain understanding of heavenly things - one must be

³⁴ In our remoteness from that time we can hardly feel the force of these epistles as those to whom they were first addressed.

³⁵ In the material that follows we will use the equal sign = to indicate that something in John's vision which means what follows.

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detached as it were from earthly cares & fleshly desires, and be given up to heavenly things

- “the things which must be done after these things” = not what always is, but the future as it follows what’s described in Ch. 2 & 3

v. 2 - almost like 1:10 to show that another vision here begins here

- we have here a representation of — not the usual heavenly state — but an assembly of counsel and judgment, in which a momentous decision is made regarding the ungodly
- we’re led to this view by Ch. 5 which shows that everything turns on the opening of the book with 7 seals, which has respect to the punishment of the world for its enmity to God

v. 3 - Here is displayed God’s infinite glory, his grace toward the Church, his punitive righteousness toward the ungodly, all fitted to inspire with courage the fainting souls of believers

- the jasper = holiness (cf. Ch. 21:11 & 22:5)
- the sardis = anger (red/fire, cf. Ezek. 1:4,27, and Rev. 8:2)
- the rainbow around the throne = the judgment would be an act of grace for the Church (Gen. 9:8-16)
- 24 elders are seated within the circle of the rainbow showing that the Church is the object of God’s grace and protection
- the rainbow is not just the symbol of grace, but of grace returning after wrath

v. 4 - the 24 elders are a complete circle representing the whole Church (as is plain from 5:8-10 (and cf. 5:6,11; 7:11; 11:16; Mt. 19:28 and Rev. 3:21).

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- the totality of the saints of the O.T. & N.T. are here represented by their chiefs & their leaders
 - there is only one Israel and it is perpetuated in the Christian Church
 - the thrones here are thrones of judgment, and the idea is that these elect people join in the judgment with God
 - white = the outshining of glory (Cf. Mt. 17:2, Lk. 9:29 etc.) here it means that the righteous will shine forth in the splendor of their virtues
- v. 5 - the lightning, voices and thunders are re-intimations of the judgment about to begin
- never are thunders = praises but rather a standing figure of anger/judgment
 - these things are both *frightful* and yet *agreeable* • frightful with respect to the enemies of God • agreeable with respect to his elect
- v. 6 - the sea denotes vastness, and thus against the flood of human wickedness stands the infinite ocean of divine wrath.
- the meaning of the vision is: (1) the purity of glass = “*just and true are your ways, O King of the nations*” (2) and the clear and brilliant glitter of the crystal = “*great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty*”
 - this great sea of pure glass as crystal represents God’s infinity, absolute glory, and perfect justice (the Church cannot look into this sea often enough — what is needed is to stop fixing our eyes on the flood of evil in the world, and to fix our eyes on this).

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- the four living creatures are composite representations = they symbolize the whole of creation as subsumed under man's headship (this shows that they are *not* angels).

v. 7 - there is an old Jewish Saying that there are four that take the first place in this world (1) *man* among all the creatures - (2) the *eagle* among birds - (3) the *ox* among cattle - and (4) the *lion* among wild beasts

- Ezekiel 1:5 says "*and this is their appearance: they have the form of a man*" so all three are man-like except for the face, and one is entirely man-like. In Revelation 4:8 & 19:4 these "fall down" *with* the elders to worship the Lamb; incongruous if some were quadrupeds

v. 8 - the Cherubim, here, have not four wings, as in Ezekiel, but six like the seraphim of Isaiah 6. (Cf. Gen. 3:24; Ex. 25:18f; I Ki. 6:24; Ezek. 10:20,21)

- "the chief virtues are thereby indicated - reverence, humility, and obedience"
- the words "have no rest day and night" = Psalm 19:3

v. 9 - "And when the beasts shall give...etc" = repeated activity

- they throw down their crowns = it was, in a way, heavy and burdensome for them to wear their crowns in the presence of God, so lively was their feeling of their own littleness and unworthiness.
- this is peculiar to all, who truly reign with Christ; conscious of their own unworthiness, they venerate with deepest reverence the majesty of God and of Christ and wish to arrogate no glory and honor to themselves.
- this celebration of God's praise from the works of creation is intended to awaken the Church's confidence in the the final victory of the righteous over the wicked.

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- the doctrine of creation is cited here as a pledge for the completion of the Kingdom of God.
- anyone holding fast the doctrine of creation he will be secure from doubting the completion of God's Kingdom program.

Chapter 5

Then appeared in the right hand of him who sat on the throne "*a scroll*" sealed with seven seals (5:1). The Lion of the tribe of Judah — the Root of David — is the only one who can open this book. He is revealed as "*a Lamb standing as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes.*" His position is "*in the midst of the throne*" (v. 6) [Note: In chap. 22:1, it is called "*the throne of God and of the Lamb.*" The throne belongs to the Lamb as well as to God. [cf. 3:21].

- The eyes and horns are symbols of wisdom and power.
- The slain lamb symbol expresses the mystery of redemption.
- The position in the throne suggests heavenly authority
- All extol the Christ as the great Revealer of divine mysteries.

v. 1 - The book records the sentence of God against the enemies of the church.

- it represents the decrees³⁶ of God which are secret until they unfold in history (Deut. 29:29 - cf. Dan. 12:8,9; Isa. 29:11)
- it is not a literal book•this is evident (later) from the fact that the contents are made known as each seal is removed.

v. 2,3 - To know these decrees is only possible to one who is in such unity with God as to share his divine nature (Cf. Mt. 11:27).

³⁶ "What are the decrees of God? The decrees of God are, his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass." (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q/A 6).

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v. 4 - it seemed as if matters were coming to a dismal end for the Kingdom of God: the present despaired of and the future dark!

- John's weeping implies weakness of faith. It can only be understood [*"I wept much"*] by those who have seen great calamities in the church and have entered with fullest sympathy into her sufferings.

“Without tears the Revelation was not written, neither can it, without tears, be understood.” Bengel

v. 5 - by the overcoming here can only be meant the overcoming of the difficulties which stood in the way of opening the book.

- Opening the book = victory over sin and Satan through the Lord's death and the shedding of blood. The opening of the book is therefore a reward for having finished the work of redemption.
- in Christ the race of David lives anew and the tribe of Judah achieves its destiny or goal.

v. 6 - What the elder had announced to John is now in fact and reality exhibited to him!

- the Lamb was between God and the circle of elders because he is mediator between them.
- the Lamb was not dead now, but John could see that it had once been slain
- horns = symbols of victorious power, and 7 = the perfection of strength
- the 7 spirits/eyes = indicates that the Holy Spirit of *God the Father* is also the Holy Spirit of *God the Son*
- the Holy Spirit is here seen in the multiplicity of his operations

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v. 7 - The secrets of the future can never be concealed from one who has the seven-fold Spirit of God.

v. 8,9 - Note that the four living creatures and 24 elders fall down together before the Lamb having golden vials with the prayers of the saints

- the elders represent the whole church of the Old and the New Covenant
- the four living creatures represent the redeemed creation as it finds its headship in man
- the subject of the new song is the new reality brought in by the opening of the book
- the kindreds, tongues and peoples remind us of Genesis 10:5, 20, 31, 32 and mark the territory of the conquest of Christ as co-extensive with the human race

v. 10,11 - The angels are around the throne, the beasts and elders, and so they are not so near to God as man is! They are servants, we are sons.

v. 12 - The angels take a deep interest in our redemption (1 Peter 1:12)

- the eulogy here contains 7 items and is similar to the 10-fold eulogy of 1 Chronicles 29:11,12. This shows us that Jesus is rightly given the praise and honor that belongs to God alone.

v. 13 - Here all of creation, in distinction from the angels, joins in praising God and the Lord Jesus (Cf. Psalm 148)

- lifeless things praise God by their very existence
- the wicked too must render praise to God and His Christ by being subject to his punishment!

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v. 14 - The personified (symbolized) living creatures of the earth, under man's headship, say 'Amen' to all this.

- they affirm it to be good
- and then the part of the creation which constitutes the church worships God (= symbolized by worship of the 24 elders)

Chapters 6

v. 1 - "*And I saw when the Lamb. . .*" = I was looking when the Lamb did this

- the first four seals apparently have a close resemblance and connection
 - note too, that each is introduced by the cry 'come' from one of the living beings
 - why? because they are representatives of the land on which the judgments disclosed will be inflicted
 - these are terrible for the unbelieving, but comforting to the Church
 - the first four seals correspond to the symbols of Zech. 6:2-3, and denote determinations of conquest, bloodshed, famine, and aggravated slaughter or mortality
- v. 2 - note: there's something special about the 1st announcement

- some Greek manuscripts have *καὶ ἰδε* [*and behold*] (here only) "*come and see*" - all say, "*and I saw, and behold!*" (a sign of something noteworthy)
- To understand the white horse rider as a symbol of Christ *per se*, as many do, and the other riders as symbols of war, famine, etc., involves the interpretation in confusion of imagery. If the first rider denotes a person, so should the others; but,

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according to analogy of corresponding prophecies, we have here a fourfold symbol of impending judgment.

- It may be, however, that the first rider represents the Church going forth to conquer as empowered by Christ (Cf. Acts 1:1 and Mt. 28:18-20, Rom. 8:37 & 16:20, etc.)
- This corresponds with our Lord's prediction of empire-wide gospel preaching (Mt. 24:14), wars and rumors of wars, falling by the edge of the sword, famines, pestilences, terrors, days of vengeance, and unheard of horrors.

It is confirmed by:

1) the similarity with 19:11,12 (here the beginning, there the end of the battle.

2) the similarity with Zech. 1:7-17 where the chief horseman is identified as the Lord.

3) the crown [στέφανος] is the crown of royal dignity (cf. Ps. 45 & Rev. 19:16)

4) the other horses only have significance as 'another' after what He does

- "*conquering and to conquer*" = for victory and nothing but victory the object of the victory is the world as hostile to Christ
- the book is primarily for the Church's consolation. It's courage is revived when it keeps the vision of this heavenly King before its eyes, as he is even now going forth to battle and to victory

v. 3 & 4 - here is the threat of blood, conflict and discord

- one of the chief means whereby Christ subdues the antichristian world, breaking its might, confidence, and arrogance

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- to see war and terror overspread the world is to see the hand of Christ and dawn of victory.

v. 5,6 - black = the color of mourning / the balances = scarcity

- it is not a complete famine: some things are spared [as in 7th plague] wheat, rye were spared — flax, barley were not (Ex. 9:31,32)]
- bad crops and scarcity = one of the scourges in the hand of Christ, by which he chastises unbelief and enmity against him and the Church (it continues through this era and it issues in his complete victory)

v. 7,8 - the pale horse is an image of death

- it intensifies the disclosures of horse #2 & #3
- yet it only affects 1/4 of the human race = it's not universal destruction it's not the end of the human race — it's a measured chastisement (as in a great world war, for instance)
- all these limited judgments are directed to one endt — chastening and breaking the pride of enemies of the church, restraining their persecution, and converting those who are to be converted
- all that follows is really an aspect of his victory (a deepening disclosure of the means)
- there is no reason to take these chronologically

v. 9 - The fifth seal is a martyr-scene

- the blood of souls crying out from under the altar — slain for the Word of God (6:9-10). This = Jesus' announcement that his followers would be put to death (Mt. 24:9; Lk 21:16).
- The white robes and the comfort given to the martyrs answer to Jesus' pledge that in their patience they should secure their

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souls = “*whoever shall lose his life for my sake and the Gospel’s shall save it*” (Mark 8:35).

- here the impending provisional judgments are more frightful catastrophes which bring that final judgment into view
- so much so that they must suggest the ominous certainty of a coming final judgment
- Hengstenberg says these souls are not to be thought of as the literal disembodied souls in the intermediate state (as true as that idea is) but as ‘the animal souls’ or blood of the martyrs, crying out as it were, in the sense of Gen. 9:5!
- when John received this vision many had already been killed and the thought of a need for vengeance was strong — ‘*How long, O Lord*’ would be the idea
- the white garment = symbolic of heavenly glory which suffices until the time when the Kingdom of glory is consummated on earth
- but first they must wait until their full number is filled up (cf. Mt. 23:35,36) — if the completion was precipitately hurried, the precious opportunity would be denied those who come after us of saying, with Paul, ‘*I have finished my course. . .*’
- But these souls will only wait for “a little time” (v. 11), even as Jesus said all the martyr-blood shed from the time of Abel would be visited in vengeance upon that generation, even on Jerusalem the murderess of the prophets (Matt. 23:34-38).
- And then, to show how quickly the retribution comes — like the “*immediately after the tribulation*” of Matt. 24:29 — the 6th seal is opened to show the terrors of the end (vv. 12-17).

v. 12-17 - the sixth seal

(1) first the calamity is described (in vv. 12-14). This description is completed in the number 7, divided by 4 and 3 •

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- (a) the earthquake,
- (b) sun becoming black, moon as blood, and the stars falling,
- (c) the heavens disappearing,
- (d) the mountains and the islands moving out of their place.

Note the striking parallel between what is stated *here*, and *Jesus' prophetic discourse*:

THE SIXTH SEAL

THE OLIVET PROPHECY

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. "And behold, there was a great earthquake" | "And there shall be earthquakes in various places" (Mt. 24:7). |
| 2. "And the sun became black as sackcloth of hair..." | "Immediately after...tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened" (24:29) |
| 3. "And the moon became as blood" | "And the moon will not give its light" |
| 4. "And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth..." | "And the stars shall fall from heaven" |
| 5. "And the heavens departed as a when it is rolled together" | "And the powers of the heaven scroll will be shaken" (Mt. 24:29) |
| 6. "And the kings, etc., hid themselves...and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us...etc." | "Then they shall begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us: and to the hills, cover us'" (Lk. 23:30). |
- Can there be any doubt that John is predicting the same thing that our Lord was predicting?

(2) Then (in vv. 15-17) the impression this makes on the inhabitants of the land is described.

- that things in vv. 12-14 are figurative proved from vv. 15-17 (in which we find our selves in the existing state of things)
- of the things that characterize the final hour - resurrection - the tribunal of Christ (Mt. 25) - no word is said

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- that this to be understood figuratively of the time of “great tribulation” is clear from what follows = men are still alive after the catastrophe - Christ’s coming (παρουσια) is still future

Now to the details

v. 12 - earthquakes are natural events intended as symbols of the destroying omnipotence of God, and the precursors of approaching ruin (Cf Ps. 46:56 Hag. 2:6,22)

- the shaking of earth and heaven denotes the great changes in the state of the nations, brought about by God’s omnipotent power
- this is not a literal darkening of the sun, moon, and stars but rather an indication of the state of mind of those who see the coming of God’s wrath upon them in this way - [Cf. Is. 5:30, Jer. 4:23, 15:9, Ezek. 32:7,8 Amos 8:9,10.]
- since there is a frequent use of this symbolic language in the O.T. it would be against the analogy of Scripture to take it in any other way here

v. 13 - stars are such a natural image of the greatness and splendour of worldly rulers that the employment of them in this sense is found in almost all nations, and pervades Scripture (Cf. Nu. 24:7, Is. 34: 4,5, 24:21, 14:12, Dan. 8:10)

- those who have been leaders in conflict with the Kingdom of God, in persecuting the Church, will first experience his avenging hand
- abuse of power will lead to the absolute loss of power and in seeing this our eyes should see how the stars are falling from heaven by the hand of Jesus

v. 14 - thus the heaven of v. 14 is the heaven of princes

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- the rolling up = the annihilation of the whole civil and ecclesiastical system of the nation under consideration
- as vv. 12-14 describe what was done toward them, so vv. 15-17 describe how they were thereby affected
- Julian's exclamation 'O Galilean, Thou hast conquered' was a fulfillment of our prophecy - so was the famous remark of Napoleon on the island to which he was banished to die

Chapter 7

The painful concern which would surely arise even in the faithful on account of the judgments is here met by a double consolation

(1) God holds — over them — his protecting hand while war and terrors spread over the Roman empire (vv. 1-8)

(2) then there's opened up a view of celestial glory which becons after short tribulation.

v. 1 - the winds have not yet moved = the judgments have not yet begun to take effect

- winds are symbolic of divine judgments effected (See Ezek. 1:4, Jer. 22:22, 49:36; Dan. 11:4)
- divine judgments were to break on all sides but were held in restraint by the four angels until the saints were protected
- the sea = the sea of men or nations (The writer was reminded of this on V-Day in Chicago, at the end of World War II. The 'sea' of faces moved with events like the waves of the sea).
- the trees = kings, strong ones (cf. 8:7, 9:4 and Isa. 10:18,19, Dan. 4, Ezek. 31:3 etc)
- hurting of the trees brings injury to those under its branches

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v. 2 - Hengstenberg thinks the angel here = Jesus as in the O.T. and Rev. 10:1, & 18:1. This interpretation is favored by (1) the authority he exercises over the other angels; (2) the fact that he comes from the place of the rising of the sun (Cf. Lk. 1-78, Mal. 3:20); and (3) by the fact that he possesses the seal of God.

- Before the impending judgment falls the elect are sealed, and there appear two companies, (1) the elect of the twelve tribes (the Jewish-Christian Church), and (2) an innumerable company out of all nations and tongues (the Gentile Church) who washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (ch. 7).
- This is = Jesus' words: "*He shall send forth his angels with a great trumpet-sound, and they shall gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other*" (Mt. 24:31).
- the act of sealing would also show this to be Christ (2 Tim. 2:19; Ex. 12:23 and Ezek. 9:3-6)
 - + things are sealed either to (a) make them inaccessible, or (b) to confirm them — here the sense of confirmation is more suitable.
 - + it marks the elect of God as safe from the ominous these threatenings (9:4; 14:1; 22:4; also 13:16,17; 14:9; 16:2; 19:20 & 20:4)

v. 4 - 144,000 = this is not a statistical but a theological (symbolic) number.

- The great multitude that no man can number can best be set forth in this way: 12 is the signature of the Church (12 tribes, and the 12 apostles.); 1,000 is the number of fulness.
 - + The tribe of Dan is not named = this is not to be taken as literally/physically the Jewish nation
 - + It does remind us that the tribes of Israel were the nucleus of the NT Church, but not in terms of fleshly genealogy.

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- + but why is Dan missing? Because the Danites introduced false worship (Judges 8) = so: those of Israel but not “true Israel” are excluded (cf. Rom. 2:28,29).

v. 5-8 - Note too, that Ephraim is omitted, while Joseph is listed. Why? Because the Ephraimite Micah (Judges 18) first instituted the false worship which later passed on to the Danites.

- again note that Judah (who was 4th) is here first. Why? Because Jesus was from the tribe of Judah.
- observe, again, that Levi is demoted. Why? Because all are now prophets, priests and kings
- + there is, in other words, a basis in the original tribal set up: but there has also been a series of modifications
- + the principle is that in Christ differences of birth and external privilege are abolished. (Cf. Gal. 3:29)

vv. 9-17 - heavenly glory is now presented as an added consolation

v. 9 - the vast multitude is not of the NT only. (Cf. Gen 13:16, 15:5, Nu. 13:10)

- the symbolism here is from the feast of Tabernacles. Cf. Lev. 23:40 and Deut. 16:14,15.
- as people once expressed their salvation joy when Jesus rode through the streets of earthly Jerusalem, so now do the elect do so in the heavenly Zion (prophesied in Zech. 14:16)

v. 10 - they are constrained to praise God greatly for his love and goodness and Christ for his atonement for them

v. 11,12 - if the angels sing at the birth of Christ, how much more now?

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- If there's rejoicing at the conversion of one sinner how much more now at the great (final) Feast of Tabernacles

v. 13 - there was probably an unexpressed desire in John to know this. So the elder meets his desire this way — at times we need a question, before we can understand our own deepest need!

v. 14 - by 'great tribulation' we understand the divine judgments that bring with them troubles also for God's elect

- the oppression of the church by the world powers = the starting point and central concern of this book. We see the church here as shattered and broken
- but here everything still wears much of a general character: the final catastrophe is only very weakly described by the profound silence of the lately so noisy world
- all bears the impress of a prelude to a general plan, which is afterward to be followed up by further development, going more thoroughly into the history of the world-power whose persecutions formed the immediate occasion of the writing of the book.

The opening of the sixth seal brought John to the very verge of doom, and we might naturally suppose that the seventh would usher in the ultimate consummation. But it issues in the vision of the seven trumpets, which traverses part of the same field again, with an awesome portrayal of the signs, wonders, and terrors as indicated by the symbols of the sixth seal [this is similar to going over the same prophetic ground in the visions of Daniel].

Chapter 8

We understand these trumpet woes to be symbolic representations of the fearful sights and great signs from heaven of which Jesus spoke.

- *“the abomination of desolation, Jerusalem compassed with armies,”* and *“signs in the sun and moon and stars; and*

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upon the land distress of nations in perplexity for the roaring of the sea and the billows; men fainting for fear and for expectation of the things coming on the world” (Lk. 21:25,26).

[“...we view the contents of these visions as a general poetical representation of the great revolutions of nature connected with the appearing of the Lord...in which O.T. images, taken particularly from the narrative of the Egyptian plagues, lie at the foundation, and particulars should not be especially urged”].

- Thus, the first four trumpet woes fall, respectively, on the land, the sea, the rivers and fountains of water, and the lights of heaven. The imagery is appropriated from the account of the plagues of Egypt, and from other parts of the O.T. Note: these plagues do not ruin everything but, like Ezekiel’s symbols (Ezek. 5:2), each destroys a third.
- Here we have another series of catastrophes, which bear the signature of the half and incomplete
- only when we come to 7th trumpet do we find ourselves at the same point that we were when the 7th seal was opened
- so the catastrophes here can only be parallel to the others
- this group, like the former, retains a rather general character
- trumpets in the bible are used (1) to summon God’s people to assemble; (2) to announce destruction to God’s enemies (Jericho) and (3) to announce the Jubilee year (Lev. 25:13).
- so the sound is exciting/joyful for Church, but frightful for the unbelieving.

v. 2 - to stand before God = to “behold the face of the Father in heaven” Mt. 18:10

- some angels are higher than others (Cf. Col. 1:16, 2:10 etc.)

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v. 3 - in the first persecutions Christians prayed with great earnestness

- the altar is only symbolic = the altar of incense (Lev. 16:12)
- the prayer = Joel 2:17 or Ps. 9:19
- the fact that it stands before the Lord = the veil is now removed

v. 4,5 - the connection between these prayers and the fiery indignation about to overtake the adversaries is indicated by thunderings etc. = pre-intimations of approaching revolutions on earth.

v. 6 - the angels do not inflict the punishment they only announce it (except that in the 6th there is a direct angelic agency, but even here the announcing angel is not involved directly).

v. 7 - concentrated in a great and fiery hail-storm John sees the desolations of war, which bursts forth

- the prototype was the 7th plague of Egypt
- to say “mingled with blood” = that they are emblems of war in its desolating and consuming power
- as it has respect to the whole land, this shows that all parts of the land of Israel were affected
- the object of judgment is the whole land but only a third is destroyed = this is *not* the final judgment
- the trees = the high and mighty

v. 8 - the expression “like a great mountain” = not a literal mountain. In O.T. mountains were symbolic of kingdoms

- in Zechariah 4:7 the great mountain before Zerubbabel was the Persian Kingdom. It set itself against the temple (in Rev. 17:9 there are 7)

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- the meaning therefore is that the apostate world will be punished by war and conquest
 - it is not exclusively the Roman Empire that is seen in 17:15 where it is said to be “*peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues*”
 - and the sea = mankind
- v. 10,11 - the star falls from heaven (i.e. heaven causes it to fall)
- denotes the sudden unexpected nature of the occurrence
 - the sea = masses of people - the rivers & waters an image of affluence, prosperity, success -
 - the star contrasts with the wood cast into the bitter waters by Moses (for his people God makes the bitter waters sweet; for the unbelieving world, he makes the sweet water bitter)
 - the fire = wrath and plunder
- v. 12 - the shining lights of heaven = the true God’s favor shining on men just as the darkening symbolizes his anger and the withdrawal of his blessings.
- God’s smiting is the cause, the darkening is the effect
- v. 13 - The last three trumpets are announced as signals of still more severe woes (8:13).
- the typical English translation of v. 13 gives the impression that these woes are pronounced upon the whole world. But, as Milton Terry said: “*The common English Version ‘of the earth’ appears to have misled not only many common readers, but even learned commentators. No Hellenist of our Lord’s day would have understood ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς as equivalent to all nations of the inhabited globe. The phrase is traceable to Zech. 12:12, where all the families of the land*

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[LXX τῆς γῆς] of Judah are represented as mourning.” And J. Stuart Russell says: “The rendering of γῆς by earth instead of land, and of αἰών by world instead of age, have been most fruitful sources of mistake and confusion in the interpretation of the New Testament.”

CHAPTER 9

Tormenting locusts — from the abyss — are introduced by the fifth trumpet

- They assume the form of a mighty army after the manner of Joel’s description (Joel 2:1-11), and are permitted to torment those who have not the seal of God upon them.
 - They denote the unclean spirits of demons, which were permitted to come forth in those days of vengeance and possess and torment the men who had given themselves over to all wickedness.
- v. 1 - the star = a ruler, or one who has (or, had) a high position
- The star fallen from heaven, to whom is given the key of the pit of the abyss can scarcely denote any other than the Satan whom Jesus saw falling like lightning from heaven (Luke 10:18), and the names Abaddon and Apollyon are but symbolic names of Satan, the prince or chief of the demons]. It should be noticed also that in chap. 17:2 the fallen Babylon is described as having *“become a habitation of demons and a hold of every unclean spirit, and a hold of every unclean and hateful thing.”*
 - The fact that it falls from heaven means that there is a supernatural background — What the Lord says of his Kingdom, that it is not of this world, is true in a certain sense of all believers. All come down from heaven upon earth

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- God places these in a fitting position where they have opportunity of spreading through a wide circle the hellish spirit!
- Was it not some fact like this before the mind of Jesus when he spoke of that unclean spirit that took seven others, more wicked than himself, and returned to occupy the house from which he had been cast out? “*So shall it be,*” said he, “*with this wicked generation*” (Matt. 12:43-45).

v. 2 - the smoke = the hellish spirit that covers the earth

- the darkening of sun and firmament = the sad and distressing times which come on the earth in consequence of this spread of error

v. 3 - the body (the material aspect) had a previous existence: but from hell comes the quickening spirit

- often invading hosts are compared to locusts in the Scripture (Cf. Jud. 6:5 Jer. 46:23, 51:27).
- symbolically this shows warlike devastations
- destructive of trees and plants = effect on great persons and those under them

v. 4 - the fact that it hurts only some while others are protected shows that it is not literal (i.e. believers are all exempted spiritually. They would not be literally)

v. 5 - the effect of this ‘woe’ will be very great

- The purpose of these demons is to promote sin and its pleasures and evil passions so that reprobate men follow them to the full, only to be tortured in the end by these same demons on the rack of pessimism and despair!
- This doesn’t mean that suicide is literally impossible: but that there will be a general, cultural, death-wish and yet life will continue.

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- [Describing the impiety of the Jewish leaders that Jesus condemned], Josephus remarks: *“No age ever bred a generation more fruitful in wickedness than this was from the beginning of the world...I suppose that had the Romans made any longer delay in coming against these villains the city would either have been swallowed up by the ground opening upon them, or been overwhelmed by water, or else been destroyed by such thunder as the country of Sodom perished by; for it had brought forth a generation of men much more atheistical than were those that suffered such punishments; for by their madness it was that all the people came to be destroyed [Whiston’s Josephus; Wars, bk. 5, chap’s 10:6, and 13:6.]”*

v. 7-11 gives a description of the symbolic locusts

- The key we find in Abaddon and Apollyon, meaning destruction or destroyer (synonymous words).
- So this is really a picture of that which sets itself in opposition to Christ. It is power. It is force. It is lawlessness (men with hair as of women (cf. 1 Cor. 11:14,15). The barbarian Parthians wore long hair. It was a symbol in ancient times of people whose lust was uncontrolled.
- Again we see this person as purely symbolic — like the Russian Bear — a figure for the world system as it arrays itself against Christ (under many leaders) - *“we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, etc.”*
- So we see this smoke as the influence of Satanic darkness in error, delusion, evil compulsions etc., as these came on the Jews in the last days when the Jewish nation expired.

v. 12 - the 6th trumpet now sounds and we have the second woe

- Four angels bound at the Euphrates river are loosed to execute God’s vengeance

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- They spread over the land with an vast number of horsemen
 - One third of the people (ανθρωποι = mankind) are destroyed, but there is still no repentance. So they must expect the final woe
- v. 13 - the voice comes from the altar — it is the place where the prayers of the saints are offered
- They desire the loosing of the 4 angels - it is in response to their prayers that it happens
 - They were bound by God's decree (i.e. unable to move until he allowed) — these warlike hosts can do nothing, but what they are commissioned to do by God
- v. 14 - here, again, we quote Rev. J. Stuart Russell
- *“It is in these crucial instances, which defy the dexterity of the most cunning hand to pick the lock, that we prove the power of our master key. Let us fix first upon that which seems most literal in the vision, ‘the great river Euphrates.’ That, at least, can scarcely be symbolical. There are said to be four angels bound, not in the river, but at, or on, the river [επι τω ποταμω]. The loosing of these four angels sets free a vast horde of armed horsemen, with the strange and unnatural characteristics described in the vision. What is the real and actual that we may gather out of this highly wrought imagery? How is it that these horsemen come from the region of the Euphrates? How is it that four angels are bound on that river? Now it will be remembered that the locust invasion came from the abyss of hell; this invading army comes from the Euphrates. This fact serves to unriddle the mystery. The invading army that followed Titus to the siege and capture of Jerusalem was actually drawn in great measure from the region of the Euphrates. That river formed the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire, and we know as a matter of fact that it was kept by four legions, which were regularly stationed there. These four legions we conceive to*

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be symbolized by the four angels bound at, or on, the river. The 'loosing of the angels' is equivalent to the mobilising of the legions, and we cannot but think the symbol as poetical, as it is historically truthful. But, it will be said, Roman legions did not consist of cavalry. True; but we know that along with the legionaries from the Euphrates there came to the Jewish war auxiliary forces drawn from the very same region. Antiochus of Commagene, who, as Tacitus tells us, was the richest of all the kings who submitted to the authority of Rome, sent a contingent to the war. His dominions were on the Euphrates. Sohemus, also, another powerful king, whose territories were in the same region, sent a force to cooperate with the Roman army under Titus. Now the troops of these Oriental kings were, like their Parthian neighbors, mostly cavalry; and it is altogether consistent with the nature of allegorical or symbolical representation that in such a book as the Apocalypse these fierce foreign hordes of barbarian horsemen should assume the appearance presented in the vision."

v. 15 - the preparation = God's set and decreed time

- the word translated "mankind" is the Greek term *ανθρωποι* from which we get our term anthropology. It does not mean men/man in the masculine sense, but people of both genders. Here it does not refer to the whole of mankind, but the people of Judea.

v. 16 - the number is enormous (200,000,000) which symbolizes a vast number with seemingly invincible power.

v. 17 - everything is symbolic of ferocity and destruction

- When the results of godless, humanistic government and the degeneration of life by Satanic delusion bring no repentance, then the Lord sends a terrible judgment by other nations.
- It would be like the Barbarian invasions of Rome etc.

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- In other words, this world-power is seen as a thing of which Satan is the moving Spirit — yet God controls and uses it
- It is a judgment of God upon the unrepentant land, and neither calamities brought by the one, nor judgments brought by the other, produce the requisite repentance
- and so we go on to the second part of the book which reveals the destiny of the Church (Cf. Lk. 12:32).

Chapter 10

At this point, when we might naturally expect the seventh trumpet to sound there is a pause, and behold, “another mighty angel” comes down from the heaven, “*clothed with a cloud, and rainbow was on his head; his face like the sun, and his feet like pillars of fire*” (10:1).

- The attributes of this angel, and their correspondence with the description of the Son of man in chap. 1:13-16, point him out as no other than the Lord himself.³⁷
- This is “*the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory,*” which Jesus himself foretold as destined to come to pass in that generation (Matt. 24:30-34). His glorious appearance seems like a prelude to the sound of the last trumpet, but the delay is not to defer the catastrophe, but to furnish an opportunity for the voice of the seventh angel to say the mystery of God is to be finished (vv. 6 and 7).

³⁷ It is in accord with apocalyptic usage that the Son of man should appear in this book under various forms. First the glorious *Christophany*, then as a *Lamb* with 7 horns and 7 eyes (v, 6), then as the mighty, rainbow-encircled *Angel* of this passage (10:1), then as *Michael* (12:7), and as *the Son of man on a cloud* (14:14), then as *the rider on the white horse* (19:11), and finally as the *Judge* on a great white throne (20:11). Thus the Apocalypse fittingly reveals him in manifold aspects of his character and glory. So, also, the arch-enemy, or antichrist, appears under various forms of manifestation, as *Abaddon*, or *Apollyon*, the *angel of the abyss* (9:11), the *great red dragon* (12:3), the *beast* out of the land (13:11), the *scarlet-colored beast* on which the harlot is sitting (17:3).

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In the next section (10:1-11:13) we have a kind of interlude prior to this.

- First, by symbolic action — then by an express word — a strong angel announces that when the trumpet of the 7th angel sounds, full and perfect realization of all of the promises made to the Church will be accomplished (vv. 2-7)
- Then he gives to the prophet a little book of painful contents, to enable him, and the church, to endure with a courageous spirit.
- He swallows the little book, and is thereby put in a capacity for uttering the prophecy which follows
- The Church (alas) had become subjected to the power of the world, not only externally, but partly also internally. The elect, however, remain steadfast. And the Church is purged by God's judgment

v.1 - this strong angel must be Christ: because these attributes are not given to creatures (*"I will not give my glory to another"* Isa. 42:8)

- planting feet on the sea (= the rest of mankind) and the land (= Israel) indicates his approaching possession of both
- the fire images the consuming character of God
- the pillars = the omnipotence

v. 2-7 what is stated here is designed to counter the doubt and disquiet which the partly distressing contents of the little book elicit

- That the big book was sealed = no one but Christ can explain God's plan for the world and the Church's victory over it
- So the little book is now opened = the subject treated in it is something that is self-evident (Luke 12:32)

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v. 3 - that the loud voice had a hostile sound is made clear by its comparison with the roar of a lion (Joel 3:16 “*The Lord will roar out of Zion*”)

- The first beast rising out of the sea = the ungodly world power (which was then concentrated in the Roman Empire)
- the second beast rising out of the land = the ungodly regional power (which was preeminently an apostate Judaism)

v. 4 - intelligible speech is attributed to the thunders — otherwise it would have been impossible to write what they spoke

- The meaning is seen in Daniel 8:26 and 12:4 and 9 — there it was permanent, here it is only temporarily kept secret
- The reason is that the basis for understanding is still wanting
- Hence the injunction not to seal = fulfillment would soon illuminate the meaning

vv. 5-7 - the oath forms a commentary on the meaning of the planting of the foot on earth and sea -

- He who made heaven and earth will not be satisfied with less than complete victory and dominion over the land (of Israel) and the sea (the Gentile world)
- the object of the oath is that no more delay will be allowed
- The mystery is the realization of the dominion of Christ (all of this was revealed to John for consolation. Only then was content of the little book, with its pain-causing contents, revealed to the Apostle).

v. 8 - from Ezek. 2:8f we see the analogy.

- From this we expect that (1) the little book will be mournful in nature, (2) will have to do with the fate of the world, (3) it

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also has to do with the church because of what God does in judging the world.

v. 9 - [cf. Jer. 15:16] Even the most bitter divine truths have (for a spiritually minded man) a joyful and refreshing side

- Sweetness is attributed to the mouth because this is the organ of God's spokesman, the prophet
- But in spite of this privileged task of great honor the prophet (John), as a member of the Church, suffers with it!
- What is said here of John in a sense applies to all, and especially teachers of the Church = we too must eat and swallow not only the bible texts that we like, but all that it teaches — even if it causes us pain.

v. 11 - The one who has eaten must prophesy just as the one who has not eaten can not prophesy!

- the command to prophesy corresponds to the activity which is described in 11:1-13.
- It falls into two divisions: (1) vv. 1-2 gives the promise that the faith of the elect will not fail, and (2) vv. 3-13 certifies uninterrupted continuance of the office of witnessing

Chapter 11

The measurement of the temple, altar, and worshipers (11:1), and the treading under foot of the holy city 42 months (= three and a half years = time, times, and a half a time) = that the whole will be given over to desolation.

- This, again, corresponds with our Lord's words (Lk. 21:24): *"Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled."* From the analogy of the language of Daniel, the *"times of the Gentiles"* (καίροι; cf. Lk. 21:24, with the LXX and Theodotion of Dan. 7:25; 11:7)

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are the “*time, times, and half time*” during which the destructive siege was to continue. During this same time sequence the two witnesses prophesy within the doomed city. (Dan. 12:1, 5-7).

- but who (or what) are we to understand these two witnesses to be?

One commentator says: “The allusion to Zechariah 4 may suggest that these were two notable persons who alone remained in the city after the other Christians had fled. These thus became the sole representatives there of the Christian Church.”

The author of *The Parousia* gives several plausible reasons for supposing that they were James and Peter who abode in Jerusalem to the last. [See the *The Parousia*, pp. 430-444].

- My own view is that we should not take this reference to be a literal reference to two individuals. My reasons are:

(1) This is against the consistent non-literal symbolism that characterizes this book.

(2) v. 8 speaks of “*their dead body [το πτωμα] in the street of the great city which, spiritually, is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.*”

If John intended to identify two literal men he would hardly refer to the two of them as having only one body. However, if he intended us to understand some collective sense such as Jewish and Gentile believers as constituting one body, he could indeed personify them in this way. This we believe to be the correct understanding. It is an historic fact that in Jerusalem both were the subject to persecution and even martyrdom (Cf. Acts 7-8).

- With this revelation, which stands as an episode between the sixth and seventh trumpets, we’re more fully prepared to feel

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the tremendous significance of the last trumpet. In the lingering hour of the sixth trumpet — an awesome pause before the final blast — *“There was a great earthquake, and the a tenth part of the city fell.”*

[Russell says: We could cite from Josephus an almost literal fulfillment of these words. (Wars, bk. 4, ch. 4:6 & ch. 5:1.)]

v. 1- the Church appears under the symbol of the temple

- The temple proper = the truly spiritual.
- The outer court = those who are superficially affected.
- The significance of the measuring is determined by the opposite, the throwing out — where the measuring line ceases there the abandoning begins.
- The overflowing of the Church by the world brings it to pass that from many, who have not, shall be taken away even that which they (seem to) have.
- Let any one read, for example, what Eusebius has written at the beginning of his eighth Book on the Diocletian persecution! A serious degeneracy in the Christian Church preceded it — many were shaken by it — many more made shipwreck — yet true believers remained steadfast, and the Church was built up...”
- this is the first (and main) point: the Church will continually abide

v. 3-13 - the second is that even in times of most profound darkness etc., the witnessing office and possession of the gifts of the spirit will be perpetuated in her

- For all who feel themselves to be weak, there is much consolation in this *“I will give to my two witnesses”*
- But at the same time it points to the heavy responsibility

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- + The two witnesses (two olive trees) = ideal personification representing the church's work of witnessing (concretely realized in a multitude of faithful Christians)
- + Why two? - because of the law of Moses (cf. Ex. 7:15-25 as Moses and Elijah with Jesus (Matt. 17:3 etc.) These are designated as olive-trees and as lamps because light and source of light are concentrated in them, and it's by their faithful witness that the Temple of God (the true Church) is preserved. "*You [plural] are the light of the world...*"

vv. 5,6 - what Moses and Elijah had done separately, is here said to be done by these two witnesses unitedly

- As Christ is both Lamb and Lion - so the faithful witness of the true Church is a two aspects (like a two-edged sword)
- Whatever therefore strikes against him (and his witnesses) in a hostile manner, shall be destroyed by him in vengeance, as by a consuming fire

v. 7 - they will only be overcome when they have finished their testimony, when God has no further need for their service, and when their death can produce more fruit than their life. And, on their overthrow and death, glorification follows!

- They die only to be glorified. (If this was rightly considered how it would banish fear — and foolish concessions!)
 - The beast here denotes the heathen's ungodly state — hence the pain, mockery, death etc., as they share Christ's reproach
- v. 8 - the great city = Jerusalem. But the honorable name is not used here because it's reserved for something better. (We do not have here the literal Jerusalem but the degenerate church as contrasted with the purified new Jerusalem. As the Lord was literally crucified in the city of Jerusalem so spiritually he was crucified afresh in the corrupt church (Cf. Heb. 6:4-8).

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- The degenerate church has a share in the guilt of killing the witnesses, as formerly it had part in the death of our Lord)
- The three and a half days are an imitation of the history of Jesus, whom his faithful servants must follow — as this also indicates the transitoriness of the world's victory
- God's true Church has no weapon of offense but the Word
- The power of it is such as to torment the ungodly — this will always be in evidence if we are faithful!

v. 11,12) - The form in which the triumph of the two witnesses is described, after apparent defeat, is (again) taken from our Lord's history

- Ascent to heaven followed crucifixion — in a sense this is recapitulated in the lives of believers.
- We see this concretely in the recurring victory of truth (men who were reviled in their day (Athanasius, Calvin, Machen) but honored now, even in the world — while those who were honored then are now despised.

v. 13 - It is the great privilege of the church that while she may be chastened she is not given over to death

- However frightful these time may be, the result is that her true members always give glory to God.
- Yet there are heavy judgments (not only on the world, but on the visible Church also — and it is this that brings the spirit of repentance (Hengstenberg argues against a literal temple etc. on grounds that Jew and Gentile are nowhere separated in this book)
- One olive tree = the true Israel from which the false seed is excluded and into which believers from among the heathen are adopted (Ro. 11:17 etc.).

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- The position of the two witnesses becomes incomprehensible unless vv. 1-2 are referred to the Christian Church, because they are equally hated by the world-power and by the degenerate holy city “*which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was --crucified.*”

v. 14,15 - If the prayers of the saints result in the appearance of the angels with the 7 trumpets it can be no other than these saints who here triumph and give thanks, when the work of these 7 angels is complete

- “The Kingdoms of this world”, which had long been in enemy hands, are at last been finally recovered: it is possessed by the Lord and his anointed

vv.16-18 - The saints thank the Lord that he has come

- This isn't his providential government (which has always existed) but a new revelation of his glory through the church.
- Note the emphasis on small = encouraging the weak and the unworthy

v. 19 - the temple is only opened after the veil is removed

- “*lightnings, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and great hail*” = symbols of judgment on the ungodly counterpart below
- The imagery has allusion to the trumpet signaled fall of Jericho. So, “*quickly*” (11:14) the last trumpet sounds, and great voices in the heaven say “*The kingdom of the world is become our Lord's and his Christ's, and he shall reign unto the ages of the ages*” (v. 15). The old age or era has passed, the new one has begun, and the heavenly host shout a paean of triumph. The blood of the souls that cried from under the altar (6:10) is now avenged, and those prophets and saints receive their reward (11:18).

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- The old temple disappears and the new (and final) temple of God in heaven is appears, revealing the long-lost ark of the covenant (v. 19), which is henceforth accessible to all — to Jew and Gentile alike — all who are washed in the blood of the Lamb.

PART II

The second part of Revelation (Chapters 12-22) is not to be taken as a chronological sequel to the first. It traverses the same ground again. The two parts have a relation to each other somewhat like the dream of the great image, followed by the visions of the various beasts in the Book of Daniel. They cover the same field of vision, but view things under different aspects.

- The first section of Part II exhibits the terrible vengeance of the Lamb upon his enemies, as if contemplating everything from the idea of the king “*who sent forth his armies and destroyed those murderers, and burned their city*” (Matt. 22:7).
- The second section presents a vivid outline of the struggle as the Church passes her first crisis, and rises through persecution and danger to triumph and glory. In other words, we see the same great catastrophe that appeared in part I, but under different symbols and with a different perspective.

Chapter 12

v. 1 - By the woman we understand the apostolic Church

- The man-child (v. 5) represents her children — the faithful believers of the Gospel. The imagery is taken from Isaiah 66:7,8. These are the children of “*the Jerusalem which is above,*” and which Paul calls “*our mother*” (Gal. 4:26).

The statement that this child was to rule all nations with a rod of iron, and be caught up to the throne of God, has led many to suppose that this is a literal reference our Lord Jesus Christ himself. But the language of the promise to the church

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of Thyatira (ch.. 2:26,27), and the vision of the martyrs who live and reign with Christ for a thousand years (ch. 20:4-6), show that Christ's faithful martyrs whose blood was the seed of the Church, are associated with him in the authority and administration of his Messianic rule.

v. 3 - The dragon is the old serpent, the devil. His standing ready to devour the child as soon as born is an image taken from Pharaoh's attitude toward the infant Israelites (Exod. 1:16).

- Michael (meaning "who is like God?") and his angels (or messengers) are symbolic names of Christ and his apostles.
- The war in heaven was fought in the same element as that in which the woman appeared, and the casting out of demons by Christ and his apostles was the reality to which these symbols point (Cf. Luke 10:18; John 12:31).
- The soul-conflicts of Christians are similar. [Paul fully recognized the spiritual and demoniacal character of the Christian's struggle when he wrote: "*Our wrestling is not against blood and flesh, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places*" (Eph 6:12). Such conflict = war in heaven].

v. 13ff - The flight of the woman into the wilderness = the scattering of the Church by reason of persecution (Cf. Acts 8:1)

- The flight of the church in Judea that Jesus authorized when his disciple's were to see the signs of the end (Mt. 24:16; Lk 21:21).

Chapter 13

v. 1 - Being cast down from heavenly places, the dragon stood on the sea shore, and he next reveals his power by means of a wild beast, seen as coming up out of the sea (13:1).

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v. 2 - This beast combines features of a leopard, a bear, and a lion — the first three beasts of Daniel's vision (Dan. 8:4,6).

The dragon imparts to this beast all the malignity, the blasphemy, and persecuting violence that characterized Daniel's fourth beast at the appearance of the little horn (cf. Dan. 7:7,8). Here we note the particulars of the description:

1. The beast comes from the sea.
 2. He has 7 heads, and 10 horns and 10 crowns on his horns.
 3. He bears names of blasphemy upon his heads.
 4. He unites characteristics of beasts seen by Daniel (ch. 7).
 5. It is invested by the dragon with his delegated power.
 6. One of its heads is mortally wounded; but is healed.
 7. It receives the homage of the whole world.
 8. Divine honors are paid to it.
 9. It blasphemes God, and wars against the saints.
 10. The duration of his power is limited to 42 months (.).
 11. Its number is 'the number of a man,' declared to be 666.³⁸
 12. He was, and is not, and shall again come (cf. ch. 17:8).
 13. He ascends out of the abyss, and goes to perdition (ch. 17:8).
 14. He is a king: one of seven, and yet the eighth (ch. 17:11).
- This beast we understand to be the Roman Empire, as represented in Nero, under whom the Jewish war began, and by whom the woman's seed, the saints (Cf.. 12:17, and 13:7), were most bitterly persecuted.

His rising out of the sea = a foreign power from Jewish viewpoint

The 7 heads & 10 crowns = fulness of power and universal realm

³⁸ In ch. 17 other particulars complete the beast's description, but they don't make discovery of his identity easier.)

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Names of blasphemy = he/it claims divine prerogatives

One of the heads being wounded = violent end of one of Nero

- He was the very incarnation of wickedness and corresponds in every essential with “*the man of sin, the son of perdition,*” of whom Paul wrote to the 2 Thessalonians (2:3-10). He was said to be more like a wild beast than a man, who glutted his bloodthirsty propensities with the murder of his brother, his mother, and even his wife. He also set to the city of Rome on fire and then blamed the Christians for it. He made himself a slave of the most brutal passions, and arrogated to himself the claim of deity.

1. It is evident that the writer considered that he was giving sufficient data for the identification the person intended. He meant not to puzzle, but to enlighten, his readers.

2. It is equally evident that the explanation does not lie on the surface. It requires wisdom to understand his words: only one “who has understanding” is competent to discern the meaning.

3. It is plain that what he intends to convey to his readers is the name of the person identified with the beast. His name expresses a certain number (or, the letters forming his name, when added together, amount to a certain numerical value).

4. The name or number is that of a man (i.e. so not literally a beast, or evil spirit, or abstraction, but a person, a living man.

5. The number which expresses the name is, in Greek characters, $\chi \xi \varsigma$ or in numerical value $600 + 60 + 6$.

We have already, on other grounds, arrived at the conclusion that the beast is intended is the Roman Empire, which was then ruled by Nero. It is his name, therefore, that ought to fulfil — not indeed obviously nor without some research, yet — satisfactorily

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and conclusively, all the conditions of the symbolism. That emperor's name could be written in three ways, according as it was expressed in one or another of three languages: in Latin, *Nero Caesar*; in Greek, *Νερόων Καισαρ*; and in Hebrew, קסר נרוני and it is in the Hebrew that the mystery is solved.

נ = 50	ק = 100
ך = 200	ס = 60
ו = 6	ר = 200
ג = 50	

v. 11 - Along with this another beast was seen coming up out of the land having two horns like a lamb. It was only a satellite — alter ego and representative — of the first beast, and it exercises its authority.

- If our conclusions as to the identity of the first beast are correct, it ought not to be difficult to discover who or what was intended by the second beast. In many ways there is a strong resemblance between them: they are of the same nature — though one is supreme and the other subordinate; but there are also points of difference.
- We here list the various particular characteristics:
 1. The second beast rises up from the land (Greek: την γην).
 2. It only has 2 horns and they have a lamb-like appearance.
 3. It speaks, however, like a dragon.
 4. It is clothed with authority delegates from the first beast.
 5. It compels men to pay homage or worship the (first) beast.
 6. It pretends to exercise miraculous powers.
 7. It rules with tyrannical force and cruelty.

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8. It denies civil rights any refusing to submit to that beast.

In interpreting the meaning of this second beast the following seems clear:

- 1 - Its rising out of the land, while the first beast rises out of the sea, denotes that the second beast is a domestic or home authority ruling in Judea [the land], while the other is a foreign power
 - 2 - Its having two horns like a lamb, while the first beast has ten, means that its sphere of government is small, and its power limited, compared with the other.
 - 3 - That it speaks as a dragon or serpent, denotes his crafty and deceitful character.
 - 4 - Its being clothed with the authority of the first beast indicates that it is Rome's official representative & delegate in Judea.
 - 5 - So the conclusion is that this represents the sad fact that the government of the province of Judea was a puppet of Caesar.
- Judea was then ruled by procurators, and two procurators are specially noted for their tyranny and oppression, Albinus and Gessius Florus.³⁹

It is a well known fact that the Christians of this period were required to worship the image of the emperor or die, and the procurators were the emperor's agents to enforce this measure.

It is strange that learned critics will turn, with an air of contempt, away from an explanation of the "*image of the beast*"

³⁹ See Josephus, *Antiquities*, book 20, Chap. 9:1, and chap. 11:1. *Wars*, book 2, chaps. 14 and 15.

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so natural and simple as that given above, and find satisfaction in such fancies as that this image denotes the images of saints set up in papal churches (Faber); or the pope considered as the idol of the Roman Church (Newton, Daubuz); or the temporal power of the pope, and the patrimony granted by Pepin in A. D. 754 (Glasgow); or the papal kingdom or hierarchy which the priesthood established (Lord); or the empire of Charlemagne, regarded as the image of the old heathen Roman Empire (Bede); or the pope's decretals (Osiander); or the Inquisition (Vitranga); or the papal General Councils of Western Europe (Elliott).

- The second beast is appropriately called “the false prophet” (ch’s. 16:13; 20:20), for its great work was to turn men to blasphemous idolatry.

It should be remembered that the Jewish hierarchy was then in willing submission to Caesar (cf. Jn 19:12,15; Lk 23:2).

Chapter 14

This vision of Mount Zion is a glorious contrast to the preceding revelations. It reveals the heavenly side of this period of persecution and trial, and sets it forth in seven exhibitions:

- 1) First vision is of the Lamb on Mount Zion (heavenly Zion), and with him are the many thousands of his redeemed Israel who are manifest his glory (vv. 1-5). These are the woman's seed who were caught up to God's throne (12:5), but are now seen from another point of view.
- 2) Next follows the vision of flying angel bearing eternal good tidings to every nation (vv. 6,7).

This is done in spite of the dragon and his agents. While the dragon — wielding the forces of the empire — seeks to annihilate the Church, the true children of the heavenly Jerusalem are caught up to be with Christ in glory; *and* the Gospel is still preached in all the world, accompanied with warning

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and promise. Thus the saints are triumphant “*on account of the blood of the Lamb, and on account of the word of their testimony*” (ch. 12:11).

- 3) Then an angel, in anticipation, announces the fall of Babylon the great (v. 8), followed by another angel,
- 4) He warns men not worship the beast or his image (vv. 9-12).
- 5) Then a voice from heaven pronounces them blessed who die in the Lord from that time forth (v. 13); as if from that eventful epoch the dead in Christ should enter at once into a rest which the dead of the previous life could not know.
- 6) The sixth scene depicts the Son of man as wearing a golden crown, holding a sharp sickle in his hand (vv. 14-10).
- 7) With this soon appeared another angel having a sharp sickle, and the land was reaped, and the winepress, trodden outside the city, spread rivers of blood that seemed to deluge all the land. (This is but another picture of the same catastrophe, seen from another point of view).

Chapters 15 & 16

The vision of 7 vials (φιαλας, or bowls) full of the wrath of God called 7 last plagues (ch’s 15,16) — is but another symbolic view of what was previously indicated by 7 trumpet-woes (of ch’s 8-11), with which they minutely correspond.

Note the parallels:

The Trumpets	The Vials
1. Plagues poured on the land	Plagues poured on the land
2. Affects the sea, which becomes as blood	Affects the sea, which becomes as blood
3. Affects the rivers & fountains	Affects the rivers & fountains

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4. Affects sun, moon & stars	Affects the sun
5. The abyss (seat of beast) opened Men tormented	The abyss (seat of beast) opened Men tormented
6. Angels at Euphrates loosed to muster hordes of cavalry	Angels at Euphrates loosed to muster for battle of great day
7. Catastrophe, judgment, the K- dom proclaimed. Terrible phen- omenon - voices, thundering, & earthquake	Catastrophe, proclamation of the end. Awful natural phenomena voices, thundering, and an earthquake

These are parallel visions of God's judgments. They are like the double dream of Pharaoh. They show that these things are firmly established by God, and that he will shortly bring them to pass (Gen. 40:32).

Chapters 17 & 18

Many interpreters have held it to be almost self-evident that the Babylon of the Apocalypse is, and can be, no other than the city of Rome: empress of the world John's day, and since his time the seat and centre of the most corrupt form of Christianity and the most overshadowing spiritual despotism that the world has ever seen.

This is thought to be placed beyond question by the apparent identification of the harlot in the vision, as the "*city of the seven hills*" and "*that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth* (the Greek: $\tau\eta\nu\ \gamma\eta\nu$ should be translated "the land")."

It may seem presumptuous as well as hazardous to challenge such a long-standing view. Nevertheless, there are such weighty reasons to challenge this that we can't ignore them — here they are:

- 1) There's an a priori presumption of the strongest kind against Papal Rome being the Babylon of the Apocalypse. John was clearly dealing with then existing threats. To wander into all

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ages and countries to interpret these visions is forbidden by the express limitations laid down in the book itself.

- 2) On the other hand it is to be expected that great prominence would be given in the Apocalypse to the city of Jerusalem. If Revelation is a reproduction of our Lord's prophecy on the Mount of Olives, we would expect to find the same essential things in it, and it would be as unreasonable to look for Papal Rome in the Book of Revelation as it would be to look for it in our Lord's prophecy.
- 3) It deserves particular attention that in the Apocalypse there are two cities — and only two — brought prominently, and by name, into view by symbolic representation. Each is the antithesis of the other. The one is the embodiment of all that is good and holy, the other is the embodiment of all that is evil and accursed.

We believe these two contrasted cities are the new Jerusalem and Babylon the great.

- There's no room for doubt as to what is signified by the *New Jerusalem*: it is the city of God, the heavenly habitation, the inheritance of the saints in light.
- But what, then, is the proper antithesis to the New Jerusalem?
- Surely, it can be no other than the *Old Jerusalem*. In fact, this antithesis between the Old Jerusalem and the New is drawn out for us so distinctly by St. Paul in his Epistle to the Galatians. And this is the key to the interpretation of this symbol in the book of Revelation!
- The apostle contrasts the then existing Jerusalem with the Jerusalem which is to be: the Jerusalem that is in bondage with the Jerusalem which is free: the Jerusalem which is beneath with the Jerusalem which is above (Gal. 4:25,26).

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New Jerusalem	Old Jerusalem
Heavenly	Earthly
Has foundations	Non-continuing
Builder is God	Builder is man
Yet to come	Now is
Comes from above	Is from beneath
Free	In bondage
Holy	Wicked
Bride	Harlot

- 4) If it is objected that other symbolic names have already been given to old Jerusalem ('Sodom and Egypt' in 11:8) that is not a valid reason. All such names—Sodom, Egypt, Babylon—are alike suggestive of evil and of ungodliness, and proper designations of the wicked city whose doom was to be like theirs. (Note the many symbols used to denote Christ in this book).
- 5) It deserves notice that there is a title in the book of Revelation which is applied to one particular city par excellence. It the title "*that great city*" [In Greek: η πολις η μεγαλη]. If, then, "*the great city*" of 11:8 designates old Jerusalem, it follows that "*the great city*" of 14:8, styled also Babylon, and "*the great city*" of ch. 16:19, must also signify Jerusalem. By parity of reasoning, then, "the great city" [η πολις η μεγαλη] in ch. 18:18, and elsewhere, must also mean Jerusalem.
- 6) In the catastrophe of the 4th vision (that of the 7 mystic figures) the judgement of Israel is symbolized by the treading of the winepress. It also says "*the winepress was trodden outside the city*" (14:20). It follows that "*the city*" outside which the grapes are trodden is Jerusalem. The only city mentioned in this chapter is Babylon the great (v. 8). It must therefore represent Jerusalem. It is inconceivable that the vine of Judea should be trodden outside the city of Rome.
- 7) In 16:19 it says "*the great city*" was divided into three parts by the unprecedented earthquake mentioned in v. 18. What great city? Probably this is an allusion to a figure employed

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by the prophet Ezekiel in describing the siege of Jerusalem. (Ezek. 5:1-5.) The prophet is commanded to take the hairs of his head and beard, and, dividing them into three parts, to burn one part with fire, to cut another with a knife, and to scatter the third to the four winds, drawing out a sword after them; while only a few hairs were to be pre-served, and bound in the skirt of his garment. Then follows the emphatic declaration: "*Thus says the Lord God, This is Jerusalem.*" It is fitting that to a prophecy so full of symbols as Ezekiel we should look for light about the symbols in Revelation. And how vividly this tripartite division represents the fate of Jerusalem in the siege of Titus it is needless to say. It is hardly possible to imagine a more truthful description of the actual historical fact than that which is summed up in v. 12 of the same chapter: "*One third of you shall die by the pestilence, and be consumed with famine in your midst; and one-third shall fall by the sword all around you; and I will scatter another third to all the winds, and I will draw out a sword after them.*"

But whether this be an allusion to that vision or not, it makes no sense at all if applied to any other city. In what reasonable sense could Rome be said to be divided into three parts. Is it Rome that comes to special remembrance before God? Is it to Rome that the cup of wine of the fierceness of the wrath of God is given? This last figure ought to have suggested to commentators the true interpretation — a symbol appropriate to Jerusalem. "*Awake, awake, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his fury; you have drunk the dregs of the cup of trembling and have drained it out*" (Isa. 51:17).

- 8) But a still weightier argument — and I think it is decisive — against Rome being the Babylon of Revelation (at the same time proving the identity between Jerusalem and Babylon) is that which is derived from the name and character of the woman in the vision.
- The vision of Babylon the great (chapters 17,18) is a "*great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt where also*

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our Lord was crucified" (11:8). This woman or city is also styled a harlot, "*that great harlot...mother of harlots and abominations of the land.*" This is familiar and well known in the O. T. but not at all appropriate or applicable to Rome. Rome was a heathen city, and consequently incapable of that great and damning sin which was possible, and, alas, actual, for Jerusalem. Rome was not capable of violating the covenant of her God because she was never the married wife of Jehovah. This was the crowning guilt of Jerusalem alone among all the nations. As Isaiah put it: "*How is the faithful city become an harlot!*" (1:21)

- The vision of Babylon the great (chapters 17,18) is an apocalyptic picture of the apostate Church of the old covenant.
- It is that murderess of prophets against whom Jesus uttered the terrible words of Matt. 23:34-36. From the beginning of the Roman Empire Jerusalem sought and maintained a heathenish complicity with the Caesars, and the empire became, politically, her dependence and support.
- There was constant strife among ambitious rulers to obtain the so-called "kingdom of Judea." Jerusalem was the chief city of that province, and is, therefore, properly said to "reign over the kings (not of the earth, and not over emperors and monarchs of the world), but of *the land*" (8:18). Its the same land (γη), the tribes of which mourn over the coming of the Son of man (chap. 1:7).

["*The kings of the land,*" who, in Ps. 2:2, set themselves against Jehovah and his Christ, are declared by the Apostle Peter to be such kings as Herod and Pontius Pilate (Acts 4:27). These, he declares, "*were gathered together with Gentiles and peoples of Israel.*" Josephus says: "The city of Jerusalem is situated in the very middle (of the land), on which account some have called that city the navel of the country. Nor indeed is Judea destitute of such delights as come by the sea, since its maritime places extend as far as Ptolemais. It was parted into eleven portions, of which the royal city Jeru-

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salem was supreme, and presided over all the neighboring country as the head does over the body.” — *Wars of the Jews*, book 3, 3:5].

v. 12 - The language of the angelic interpreter, even when ostensibly explaining the mystery, is manifestly enigmatical. Just as when, in chap. 13:18, he that has understanding is called upon to “*count the number of the beast*,” so here the clue to the mystery of the seven heads and ten horns is itself another riddle. “*Here is the mind which has wisdom: The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits*” (17:9). This probably refers — enigmatically — to the manifold political supports or alliances, considered as so many seats of power or consolidated kingdoms, and called seven because of covenanted arrangements. But like the other instances of the use of the number 7, it can hardly refer to literal mountains! “The mountains,” says Glasgow, “are, like other terms, to be understood symbolically. If the woman is not literal, why should the mountains be so thought? And to call the woman a literal city, built on seven [literal] hills, is equally gratuitous, whether a Protestant says it of Rome or a Romanist of Constantinople.”

The fact that reference to the 7 mountains is followed by reference to 7 kings further indicates that these mountains represent political power structures, not literal geographical features.

The fact that the 7 mountains and kings is followed by reference to ten horns, which are also kings, surely indicates the shifting turmoil and changing political situation in the world at that time.

v. 12-18 - The Ten Horns of the Beast

These ‘ten kings’ have the following characteristics:

1. They are satellites or tributaries of the beast, i.e. subject to Rome.
2. They are confederate with the beast against Jerusalem.
3. They are hostile to Christianity.

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4. They also become hostile to the harlot and active in her destruction.
 5. When John was writing these kings were not yet in power.
 6. Their power was to be contemporaneous with that of the beast.
- We conclude that this symbol signifies the princes and chiefs who were allies of Rome and received commands from the Roman army during the Jewish war.

We know from Tacitus and Josephus that several neighboring nations followed Vespasian and Titus to the war.

Tacitus speaks of ‘the bitter animosity’ with which the Arab auxiliaries of Titus were filled against the Jews.

- Notice one other feature in the vision. The woman is represented as sitting upon ‘many waters,’ and in the 15th v. these waters are said to signify peoples, multitudes, nations and tongues.

We see this as a reference to the wide-spread dispersion of the Jews in the Roman Empire in the 1st Century. Jerusalem (representing the Jewish nation) might truly be said, in that sense, to sit upon many waters (See Acts 2:5).

Finally, we note the striking parallels between 2 Thessalonians 2 and Revelation 13 and 17!

The Man of Sin

“The man of sin...” v. 3

“The son of perdition...” v. 3

“The lawless one...” v. 8

The Wild Beast of Rev. 13,17

“on his heads names of blasphemy” 13:1
“Full of names of blasphemy” 17:3

“He shall go to perdition...” 17:11

“Power was given to him to do what he will” 13:5

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“Who opposes & exalts himself above all that is called God, or worshipped” v. 4	“There was given him a mouth speaking great things...and he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God” 13:5,6
“So that he as God sits in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God” v. 4	“And they worshipped the beast, saying, who is like the beast?...and all the land shall worship him” 13:4,8
“Whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and destroy with the brightness of his coming” v. 8	“These shall make war with the Lamb, & the Lamb shall overcome them” 17:14 (and compare 19:20)
“Whose coming is after the working of Satan, v. 9	“And the dragon gave him his power” 13:2
“With all power and signs and lying wonders” v. 9	“And he does great wonders so that he makes fire come down from heaven in the sight of men” 13:13
“And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish” v. 10	“deceives them that dwell in the land by means of those miracles...he had power to do in the sight of the beast” 13:14
“for this cause God will send them a strong delusion to believe the lie” v. 11	“If any man worship the beast and his image...the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God” 14:9,10

Is it not self-evident that the momentous calamity predicted by our Lord which included ‘the great tribulation’ — greater than anything before it, and greater than anything to occur after it, in history — was the focus of John’s vivid apocalyptic retelling of his Lord’s exchatological discourse? It is our conviction that the parallels are too numerous and too striking to warrant any other conclusion.

Chapters 18 & 19

The fall of Babylon the great (“that great city”) is portrayed in glowing colors in chap. 18:1-19:10, and the language and imagery are appropriated almost wholly from the Old Testament prophetic pictures of the fall of ancient Babylon and Tyre.

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- How strange it is that learned exegetes, who can see striking fulfillments of this prophecy in comparatively unimportant events of the politics and feuds of the modern world — and the papacy — are forgetful of such events as the following, which is only one of many similar pictures of woe given us by the Jewish historian.
- Describing the destruction of the temple Josephus says:
“While the holy house was on fire everything was plundered that came to hand, and ten thousand of those that were caught were slain; nor was there a commiseration of any age, or any reverence of gravity; but children and old men, and profane persons and priests, were all slain in the same manner; so that this war went round [to] all sorts of men, and brought them to destruction, and as well those that made supplication for their lives as those that defended themselves by fighting. The flame was also carried a long way, and made an echo together with the groans of those that were slain; and because this hill was high, and the works at the temple were very great, one would have thought the whole city had been on fire. Nor can one imagine anything either greater or more terrible than this noise; for there was at once a shout of the Roman legions, who were marching all together, and a sad clamor of the seditious, who were now surrounded with fire and sword. The people also that were left above were beaten back upon the enemy, and under a great consternation, and made sad moans at the calamity they were under; the multitude also that was in the city joined in this outcry with those that were upon the hill; and, besides, many of those that were worn away by the famine and their mouths almost closed, when they saw the fire of the holy house they exerted their utmost strength, and brake out into groans and outcries again: Perea did also return the echo, as well as the mountains round about [the city], and augmented the force of the entire noise. Yet was the misery itself more terrible than this disorder; for one would have thought that the hill itself, on which the temple stood, was seething hot, as full of fire on every part of it, that the blood was larger in quantity than the fire, and those that were slain more in number than those that slew them; for the ground

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did nowhere appear visible for the dead bodies that lay on it; but the soldiers went over heaps of these bodies as they ran upon such as fled from them.” (Wars of the Jews, Book 6. chap. 5:1.)

The vision is fourfold:

- (1) An angel proclaims the awful ruin (18:1-3). He repeats the words already used in ch. 14:8, but which were used of old by Isaiah (21:9) and Jeremiah (2:8) in foretelling the ruin of the Chaldean capital.
- (2) Then another heavenly voice is heard, like the words of Jesus in Mt. 24:16, and the prophetic word which long before had called God’s people to “*flee out of the midst of Babylon, and deliver every man his soul*” (Jer. 51:6; cf. 1:8; Isa 48:20; Zech. 2:6,7).
- (3) This call is followed by a woeful dirge over the sudden ruin of the great city (18:4-20). This oracle of doom should be closely compared with that of Isaiah and Jeremiah over ancient Babylon (Isa 13:19-22; Jer. 50,51), and that of Ezekiel over the fall of Tyre (Ezek. 26-28).
- (4) The violence of the catastrophe is next illustrated by the symbol-ism of a mighty angel hurling a millstone into the sea, and the consequent cessation of all her former activity and noise (Cf. 18:21-24).
- (5) After these things there is heard a cry of victory in the heavens — a notable contrast to the voice of the harpers and minstrels of the fallen Babylon, and all the servants of God are admonished to prepare for the marriage supper of the Lamb.
- (6) After the fall of “the Great Babylon” (Jerusalem/National Israel) there follows a sevenfold vision of the coming and kingdom of the Christ (ch’s 19:11-21:8). As in Matthew 24:29, “*immediately after the tribulation of those days*” the sign of the Son of man appears in heaven, so, immediately after the horrors of the woe-smitten city, the seer of Patmos

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beholds the heavens opened, and the glorious King of kings and Lord of lords comes forth to judge the nations and avenge his own elect.

This great apocalyptic picture contains:

- (1) The parousia of the Son of man in his glory (19:11-16).
- (2) The destruction of the beast and the false prophet with all their impious forces (verses 17-21). This overthrow is portrayed in noticeable harmony with that of the lawless one in 2 Thessalonians 2:8, “*whom the Lord Jesus shall consume [αυαλωσει] with the breath of his mouth, and destroy [καταργησαι] with the manifestation [επιφανεια] of his coming [παρουσια];*” and the beastly agents of Satan, like those of Daniel’s visions (Dan. 7:11), are given to the burning flame.
- (3) The destruction of the beasts to whom the dragon gave his power and authority (chap. 13:2,11,12) is appropriately followed by the binding and imprisonment of the old dragon himself (chap. 20:1-3). The symbols employed to set forth all these triumphs are surely not to be understood literally of a warfare carried on with carnal weapons (cf. 2 Cor. 10:4; Eph. 6:11-17), but they vividly express momentous facts forever to be associated with the consummation and crisis of that age, when Judaism fell, and Christianity opened upon the world.
- (4) From that period onward no well-authenticated instance of demoniacal possession can be shown. (“We conclude,” says the author of *The Parousia*, “that at the end of the [O.T.] age a marked and decisive check was given to the power of Satan; which check is symbolically represented in the Apocalypse by the chaining and imprisoning of the dragon in the abyss. It does not follow from this that error and evil were banished from the earth. It is enough to show that this was... ‘the decisive crisis between ancient and modern times,’ and that the introduction of Christianity ‘has changed and regenerated,

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not only government and science, but the whole system of human life.’” (*Parousia*, p. 618.)

- (5) With the shutting up of Satan the millennium begins, a long indefinite period, as the symbolical number most naturally suggests, but a period of ample fullness for the universal diffusion and triumph of the Gospel (vv. 4-6). “*The first resurrection*” we take to be the same as that spoken of by Jesus in John 5:25. For it is written, “*Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection, on such the second death has no authority,*” for of such Jesus said, “*neither can they die any more*” (Luke 20:96).
- (6) This last conflict, belonging to the future, is rapidly passed over by the seer, and its details are not made known (verses 7-10). This is no doubt because there has been no revelation as to the times and the seasons leading up to the parousia.
- (7) The last judgment is next portrayed (verses 11-15), and is one and the same with that depicted in Matt. 25:31-46 and which will take place when the Son of man delivers over the kingdom to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24). The time and sequence of these events are unknown (Matt. 24:36; Acts 1:7; 1 Thess. 5:1 etc.)
- (8) The last picture in this series is that of the new heavens and new land, and the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem (21:1-8). It corresponds with Matt. 25:34, where the king says to those on his right hand: “*Come, you blessed of my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*”

Here the glory of the righteous is put in striking contrast with the curse and doom of the wicked, when it is finally said that “*These shall go away into eternal punishment*” (Matt. 25:46). So here — after the glory of the redeemed is outlined — it is added, as the issue of God’s final judgment: “*But as for the fearful, and unbelieving, and abominable, and murderers, and fornicators, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, their part is in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone*”

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(Cf. ‘the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his angels,’ Matt. 25:41), *which is the second death.*”

- It should be noted how this last sevenfold apocalyptic vision (19:11-21:8) covers the entire field of biblical eschatology. The whole is rapidly sketched, for details would have transcended the purpose of “*the prophecy of this book*” which was to make known things which were *shortly* to come to pass (chap. 1:1-3). But like the last section of our Lord’s discourse (Matt. 25:31-46), which introduces things running far beyond the time-limits of that prophecy, and which were to commence “*when the Son of man should come in his glory;*” so this sevenfold vision begins with the parousia (19:11), and sketches in brief outline the mighty triumphs and eternal issues of the Messiah’s reign.

Chapter 20

We understand the millennium (of Revelation 20:1-10) to be in progress now. It began with the end of the Jewish theocracy in 70 A.D. The millenium (= 1000) is used symbolically. It denotes the idea of fulness. It is the period of our Lord’s Messianic reign as it was prophesied by Daniel, and as it described by the Apostle Paul (in 1 Corinthians 15:24-26). The kingdom of heaven — like the mustard seed⁴⁰ and the leaven⁴¹ — is passing through a process of gradual development that could possibly require many thousands of years.

- It is here, we assume, that some readers will begin to say that we have been wrong in saying there will be no signs to indicate the time of the parousia. Because right here — in v. 3 — we read that “*after that he must be released for a little while*” and in v. 7 that “*when [or after] the thousand years have expired*” Satan is going to be loosed and he will (again) “*deceive the nations*” (v. 8). But is this the correct reading? Or

⁴⁰ Matthew 13:31

⁴¹ Matthew 13:33

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is the ‘received text’ (called the Textus Receptus, or TR) that was used by the Reformers really the correct text⁴² in this instance? We believe it is. And when we follow the reading of *this* text we again find harmony with the teaching of Jesus. Because this text says: “*And in the midst of* (Greek μετὰ) *these things it is necessary to release him a little time*” (v. 3) “*And in the midst of* (Greek μετὰ) *the thousand years Satan will be released from his prison.*” In other words, according to the TR, Satan will not be loosed just once to do his evil work — shortly before the second coming of Christ but — but will be loosed from time to time, and place to place, to some extent, to do evil. Exactly what we would expect from the teaching of Paul, who said that “*in the last days perilous seasons will come*” (2 Tim. 3:1). But, just as Jesus promised, none of these seasons will equal, let alone surpass, “*the great tribulation*” (Matt. 24:21). No, the very gates of hell will not be able to withstand the expanding church of the Lord Jesus (Matt. 16:18).

- This understanding also remains true to the non-literal principle we have followed in the interpretation of this book. We are not to look for a specific historical period of 1,000 years in a literal sense, nor of Satan’s work as done in a final moment. No, it is “*with*” — “*along with*” — or “*in the midst of*” this non-literal millenium that a sovereign God has or-

⁴² It is a well known principle of textual criticism that a reading which at first sight seems more difficult may well be the correct reading. It is easy to see how the TR reading in this passage could have been ‘corrected’ by textual scribes who thought it made little sense. The TR of v. 3b reads: μετὰ ταῦτα δεῖ αὐτὸν λυθῆναι μικρὸν χρόνον and v. 7 reads: καὶ μετὰ τα χίλια ἔτη λυθήσεται ὁ Σατανᾶς ἐκ τῆς φυλακῆς αὐτοῦ. Thayer’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* defines μετὰ as: “a preposition, akin to μέσος (as German *mit* to *mitten*) and hence prop. *in the midst of*, *amid*, denoting association, union, accompaniment.” But even if the more commonly accepted text is preferred we see no reason to view a final loosening of the restraints on Satan to be taken as a second fulfillment of the “great tribulation” predicted by Jesus (Matthew 24:20). It is clear from 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3 that it would more likely be a time of seeming tranquility. So, with either reading, it is quite unnecessary to see in this a contradiction to our Lord’s clear and repeated statement that there are no predicted ‘signs’ by which people can know — even approximately — the time of his second coming (parousia).

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daigned seasons of heightened Satanic activity. Satan will keep on trying to destroy the church until the very last day, when — quite suddenly — his terrible end will come with Christ's parousia.

Chapters 21 & 22

There remains for our notice but one more apocalyptic picture, the vision of the New Jerusalem. As in chap. 16:19, under the seventh and last plague, the fall of the great Babylon (old Jerusalem) was briefly outlined, and then, in chap. 17-19:10, another and more detailed portraiture of that same "*mother of the harlots and of the abominations of the land*" was added, going over many of the same events again, so here — having given under the last series of visions a short but vivid picture of the heavenly Jerusalem (21:1-8) — the apostle, following his artistic style and habit of repetition, tells how one of those same seven angels (cf. 17:1-4, and 21:9-11) took him to a lofty mountain, and gave him a fuller vision of the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.

- This wife of the Lamb is the woman of chap. 7:1, but she is here revealed at a later stage of her history, after the dragon has been shut up in the abyss. After the land has been cleared of the dragon, the beast and false prophet, "*the seed of the woman*" — the "seed" here means the body of believers — who fled into the wilderness, and then were caught up to the throne of God, are viewed as "*coming down out of heaven from God,*"⁴³ and all things are made new.
- The language and symbols used are appropriated mainly from Isaiah 55:17-56:24, and the closing chapters of Ezekiel. The great thought is: old (Jerusalem) Babylon, the bloody harlot, has fallen, and New Jerusalem, the glorious Bride, appears.

As the closing chapters of Ezekiel have been variously understood so this vision of the New Jerusalem has been explained in different ways.

⁴³ Compare 1 Thessalonians 4:14

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- (1) According to premillennialism it indicates a future restoration of the Jews to Palestine, and the rebuilding of a literal temple on a magnificent scale, in the earthly city of Jerusalem.
- (2) According to others, the new heaven, new land, and new Jerusalem are but a symbolic recapitulation of the visions of chapter 20, for the purpose of fuller detail, and are to be understood as synchronizing with the period of the thousand years.
- (3) But most interpreters regard the prophecy as descriptive of the final heavenly state of the glorified saints of God.
- (4) Rejecting the first of the above named views (which represents the sensuous Ebionite conception of the Kingdom of Heaven, we may blend the two other interpretations (in an ahead/not yet concept of the Kingdom of God).
 - The words of Haggai 2:6,7, are acknowledged by some interpreters to be a Messianic prophecy: *“Yet once — it is a little while — and I will shake the heavens, and the land, and the sea, and the desert; and I will shake all the nations, and they shall come to the delight of all the nations, and I will fill this house with glory.”*
 - This prophecy is quoted and explained in Hebrews 12:26-28, as the removal of an earth and heaven which shall give place to an “immovable kingdom.” Is there any reason for believing this immovable kingdom to be other than that of which the Lord spoke in Matt. 16:28 — *“There are some standing here who shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom”*? The *“glory of that latter house”* of which Haggai 2:7,9 spoke, was attained when Christ entered and taught within its courts; but the destruction of the second temple, and the shaking of *“the heaven and the land”* which it represented, prepared the way for the better temple of *“his body, the fulness of him who fills all things in all”* (Eph. 1:23). Of this body Christ is the head, the husband, and Savior (Eph. 5:23), having loved her and having given himself for her,

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“that he might sanctify her, having purified her by the laver of water in the word, that he himself might present to himself in glorious beauty the Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing” (Eph. 5:26,27). This glorious Church is manifestly the same as the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, the holy city, New Jerusalem. It was necessary that the Old Testament form of the Church should be shaken and pass away, for its glory had departed; but out of it emerges *“the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven... and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect”* (Heb. 12:23).

- If we allow the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews to guide us to a right understanding of the New Jerusalem, we will observe that the communion and fellowship of true believers are viewed as heaven already begun on earth. It is probable that Hebrews was written after the Book of Revelation, because direct allusions to it seem apparent in the following passage: *“You are come* (the sense of the Greek word προσεληλυθατε is that you have already come) *unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.”* The Christian believer — when his life has become ‘hidden with Christ in God,’ — has already entered a fellowship and communion in the new Jerusalem which will never end. His name is already enrolled in heaven. He already dwells in God and God in him. All subsequent glorification in time and in eternity is simply a continuous and growing experience of blessings belonging to members of Christ’s Church and Kingdom.
- In this vision of the New Jerusalem we have the final New Testament revelation of the spiritual and heavenly blessedness and glory of which the Mosaic tabernacle was prophetic and material symbol. The *“dwelling of the testimony”* (הֵיכַל הַתְּעוּדָה, מוֹשֶׁבֶת, Exod. 38:21) and its various vessels and services were *“copies of the things in the heavens”* (Hebrews 9:23). Now Christ has entered into the holy places *“through the greater and more perfect tabernacle”* (9:11), thereby making it possible for all true believers to enter *“with boldness into the entrance way of the holiest”* (Heb. 10:19).

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- This entrance into the holy place, and fellowship, is realized only as *“we draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and the body washed with pure water”* (Heb. 10:22), and this spiritual access is now available those who believe in Jesus. The Alpha and the Omega, accordingly, says: *“Blessed are they who wash their robes, that they may have the authority over the tree of life, and by the gates may enter into the city”* (Rev. 22:14).
- This city is represented as having the form of a perfect cube (Rev. 21:16), and may therefore be regarded as the heavenly *“Holy of Holies,”* which we may now approach.
- This all accords with the voice from the throne, which said. *“Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will tabernacle with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them”* (Rev. 21:3). Herein we discern the true antitype of the ancient tabernacle and temple, and it is for this reason that this holy city needs no separate temple, and no light of a sun and moon, because the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb are its light and its temple (Rev. 21:22,23).
- Note also that there is no mention of Cherubim in this Holy of Holies! Why? Because these former symbols of redeemed humanity, in unity with the rest of the creation, are now supplanted by the innumerable company of Adam’s race, from whom the curse (καταθεμα Rev. 22:3) has been removed, and who take their places around the throne of God and the Lamb, act as his servants there, behold his face, and have his name upon their foreheads (Rev. 22:3,4).
- The New Jerusalem, then, is an apocalyptic portrait of the New Testament Church and Kingdom of God in its heavenly character. Its symbolism exhibits the heavenly nature of the communion and fellowship of God and his people, which is entered here by faith, but which opens into unspeakable fullness of glory through all eternity.

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- There is room for differences of opinion in the interpretation of the particular passages and symbols in all the apocalyptic Scriptures. But attention to their general harmonies — and a careful study of the scope and outline of each prophecy as a whole — will go far to save us from the hopeless confusion and contradiction into which many have fallen by neglecting this method.

Conclusion

We are now prepared to note the unity and harmony of the various New Testament prophetic passages.

1. There is no contradiction between the teaching of Jesus, the Epistles of Paul, and the book of Revelation written by John, concerning “*these things*” that were to take place in that generation, and of the final coming [παρουσια] of our Lord which was to follow. They all agree in teaching (i) that the end of the age of preparation was near at hand, when the various apostles wrote their appointed portion of the New Testament, (ii) that Christ would come (ερχομαι) progressively on the clouds of heaven, and that this progressive conquest of the world of lost sinners would commence before that generation should pass away, and (iii) and that there would be no signs to indicate the time of his second coming.
2. It is self-evident that the coming [ερχομαι] of Christ on the clouds of heaven *was* premillennial, for that marked the formal assumption of the dominion, the power and the judgment which he now exercises — and will continue to exercise — until he has put all enemies under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25).
3. The final, visible coming [παρουσια] or visitation will mark the end of the long process of his present coming [ερχομενον] on the clouds of heaven, when he will give over the kingdom to the Father, and God will be all in all. Between these two events — his ascension *to* heaven and his return *from* heaven — the Messianic age intervenes. Its beginning was like the

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little mustard-seed,⁴⁴ or like the stone cut out of the mountain without hands, but it grows, and rolls on, and will increase until it becomes like a great mountain (world-wide church) that fills the whole world.⁴⁵ It is possible that much of the Church's history and triumphs are still future, and that more centuries may yet elapse before it reaches its fullness of development. After all, God promised Abraham that in his seed⁴⁶ all nations of the earth would be blessed!

4. When the Lord Jesus Christ shall have put down all the other enemies he will finally abolish death for his people.⁴⁷ At that hour *“all who are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; those who did good unto a resurrection of life, and those who wrought evil unto a resurrection of damnation”* (John 5:28). The resurrection of those who do not belong to Christ is in order that they might experience the second — and final — death. But for those who belong to Jesus *“over such the second death has no power”* (Rev. 20:6).
5. Concerning the second coming [παρουσία] of Christ — when the redemption he purchased for his elect people has been applied to all of them, and he has delivered the kingdom to the Father — no specific warning signs will be given.⁴⁸ Jesus himself clearly stated that even *he* did not know *when* it would take place.⁴⁹ He also clearly stated that even his in-

⁴⁴ Matthew 13:31

⁴⁵ Daniel 2:35b, 44

⁴⁶ Genesis 22:18

⁴⁷ *“For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”* 1 Corinthians 15:25,26.

⁴⁸ As it was in the days before the flood when there was only the preaching of Noah to warn of the flood that was coming, so it will be until the very day of Christ's glorious second coming (cf. Mt. 24:37ff and 1 Thess. 5:1-10).

⁴⁹ Mark 13:32

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spired apostles were not to know.⁵⁰ It is obvious, therefore, that we are in serious trouble if we try in any way to calculate “*the times or the seasons*” [Acts 1:7] which will usher in the final consummation.

6. We conclude, then, with these wise words from the final section of the final chapter (33:5) of the Westminster Confession of Faith which is entitled *Of the Last Judgment*.

“As Christ would have us to be certainly persuaded that there shall be a day of judgment, both to deter all men from sin; and for the greater consolation of the godly in their adversity: so will he have that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come; and may be ever prepared to say, Come Lord Jesus, come quickly, Amen.”

⁵⁰ Acts 1:7