

## Unlocking the Book of Revelation: Soon & Apokalupsis - Part I

Jim Seghers

**“The *revelation* of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must *soon* take place” (Rev 1:1)**

Many Christians find that the Book of Revelation is the most difficult book in the New Testament to understand. More than one person has abandoned trying to make sense of its vivid imagery. Yet, the opening verse informs the reader that Jesus intends to reveal himself in the passages that follow. How does this declaration make sense in a book that is so puzzling it seems incomprehensible?

On the other hand, the figurative language of the book has led to some very fanciful interpretations. For example, the passage in Revelation 9:16: “*The number of troops of cavalry has twice ten thousand times ten thousand,*” was interpreted by Hal Lindsey as a prediction of an impending invasion of 200 million Red Chinese soldiers. Others have suggested that the number of the beast from the earth, 666 (Rev 13:18), identifies President Ronald (6) Wilson (6) Reagan (6) because he had six letters in each of his three names. It is doubtful that this interpretation came from a Republican!

Biblical fantasizing is a mouth-watering delight to Hollywood as it provides a springboard for apocalyptic movies designed to titillate moviegoers. So Arnold Schwarzenegger saves the end of the world by preventing a woman from being impregnated by the seed of the antichrist. Nor should we forget those intrepid heroes Bill Murray and Dan Akroyd who saved New York City from the peril of a five hundred-foot Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man. Being imaginative can be fun, but it is certainly not serious biblical exegesis.

Much of the difficulty in understanding the book of Revelation comes from disconnecting it from the rest of the Bible. This is understandable in one sense because we tend to think of and even identify the books of the Bible as separate works. After all, they were composed by different human authors spanning many centuries. However, the Bible is primarily a work of divine composition. Therefore the inspiration of the Holy Spirit provides a unifying context that organically connects each of the books of Sacred Scripture. From this perspective, the books that make up the Bible should be viewed as the chapters of an integrated work, must be interpreted in connection with one another. This is especially true of the book of Revelation, which constitutes the last chapter. Thus, if Revelation is read as a stand alone work it is incomprehensible.

Unfortunately, many readers of Revelation are not that familiar with the earlier chapters. They may not even have read them. This is a serious obstacle to understanding Revelation because it draws on numerous earlier biblical passages. Merrill C. Tenney, for example, identified 348 clear Old Testament references in the

Book of Revelation.<sup>1</sup> David Chilton argues that the Book of Revelation was intended to be read at Christian worship in tandem with the prophecy of Ezekiel.<sup>2</sup>

*Revelation and Ezekiel Parallels*<sup>3</sup>

1. The Throne-vision (Rev 4/Ez 1)
2. The Book (Rev 5/Ez 2-3)
3. The Four Plagues (Rev 6:1-8/Ez 5)
4. The Slain under the Altar (Rev 6:9-11/Ez 6)
5. The Wrath of God (Rev 6:12-17/Ez 7)
6. The Seal on the Saint's Foreheads (Rev 7/Ez 9)
7. The Coals from the Altar (Rev 8/Ez 10)
8. No More Delay (Rev 10:1-7/Ez 12)
9. The Eating of the Book (Rev 10:8-11/Ez 2)
10. The Measuring of the Temple (Rev 11:1-2/Ez 40-43)
11. Jerusalem and Sodom (Rev 11:8/Ez 16)
12. The Cup of Wrath (Rev 14/Ez 23)
13. The Vine of the Land (Rev 14:18-20/Ez 15)
14. The Great Harlot (Rev 17-18/Ez 16, 23)
15. The Lament over the City (Rev 18/Ez 27)
16. The Scavengers' Feast (Rev 19/Ez 39)
17. The First Resurrection (Rev 20:4-6/Ez 37)
18. The Battle with Gog and Magog (Rev 20:7-9/Ez 38-39)
19. The New Jerusalem (Rev 21/Ez 40-48)
20. The River of Life (Rev 22/Ez 47)

In a series of monthly NEWSLETTERS that begin today, I intended to offer interpretative keys that will open up this wonderful gift from the Holy Spirit. However, I will not be giving a commentary on the entire book. For those of you who wish to dive into a deeper understanding of Revelation I recommend the commentaries listed below.<sup>4</sup> Now let's turn to two key words found in the first verse of Revelation: "soon" and "revelation".

**"Soon"**

Note that the stated purpose of the book is to show things that "must *soon* take place." The Greek word that is translated as "soon" has the meaning of "speedily," or "quickly" (See: Lk 18:8; Acts 12:7; 22: 18; 25:4; Rom 16:20). The emphasis on "soon" is also

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<sup>1</sup> *Interpreting Revelation*, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> *The Days of Vengeance*, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *The Days of Vengeance*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Barber, *Coming Soon: Unlocking the Book of Revelation*. This is a very readable commentary presented in everyday language by a fine biblical scholar. The research is first rate. The commentary is relatively short, only 289 pages.

David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*. This fine Presbyterian scholar is no longer with us, but his commentary is worth reading. Unfortunately, it is no longer in print and copies are expensive.

Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible New Testament, "Revelation."* This pithy commentary is very well done. It makes understanding Revelation accessible to those who will not read a full-blown commentary.

evident in subsequent passages (Rev 1:3; 22:6-7, 10, 12, 20). This word choice makes no sense if the message is primarily about the end of the world – an event that has not yet occurred. Attempts to explain away this obvious difficulty by citing Peter, “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Pet 3:8), is unsatisfying.

In the Old Testament God’s coming often meant that he was coming in *judgment* (Is 19:1; 26:21; Jer 4:11-13). During the last week of his earthly life Jesus predicted the destruction of the Temple: “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down” (Mt 24:2). Later he added: “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place” (Mt 24:34). The Greek word translated as “generation” refers to a period of 40 years. Jesus died in 30 A.D. and he came in judgment on Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 A.D. when both were utterly destroyed.

Thus, the book of Revelation looks primarily to Jesus coming “soon” in judgment on Old Testament Jerusalem and its Temple. In describing the coming destruction Jerusalem is identified: “their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which is allegorically called Sodom and Egypt, *where their Lord was crucified*” (Rev 11:8). Subsequently, Jerusalem was called “Babylon” (Rev 14:8; 17 & 18). However, from the perspective of Revelation and Matthew 24 the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem also looks to the end of the world. Ancient Jews viewed the Temple as a microcosm of the universe so it was natural to view its destruction in connection with the world destruction.

What, then, is the meaning of the following passages? “The sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place” (Rev 6:12-14).

In these verses John employs stock biblical de-creation language that announces, “*Your time is up,*” as is evident in the citations below:

- *Sun* - turns black, i.e., gives no light (Ex 10:21-23; Job 9:7; Is 5:30; 24:23; Ez 32:7; Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15; Amos 8:9; Mic 3:6; Mt 24; 29; Mk 13; 24; Lk 21:25)
- *Moon* - is defiled, turns to blood (Job 25:5; Is 13:10; 24:23; Ez 32:7; Joel 2:10, 31; Mt 24; 29; Mk 13:24; Lk 21:25)
- *Stars* - falls to the earth (Job 9:7; Eccl 12:2; Is 13:10; 34:4; Ez 32:8; Dan 8:10; Joel 2:10; 3:15; Mt 24:29; Mk 13: 25; Lk 21:25)
- *Firmament* - the heaven vanished like a scroll (Is 34:4; 54:6; Ps 102:25-26;
- *Land* - Every mountain will be removed (Job 9:5-6; 14:18-19; 28:9-11; Is 41:5; 15-16; Ez 28:20; Nah 1:4-8; Zeph 2:11; Dan 9:16; Mt 17:21; 21:21; 24:20; Mk 11:23)

### **“Revelation”**

John’s use of the Greek word *apokalupsis*, “revelation,” exposes another layer of meaning in addition to that discussed above, namely, Jesus the Lord of history coming in

judgment. In the ancient Jewish wedding ceremony that lasted seven days, the *apokalupsis* was the climax of the festivity. The bride and groom arrayed as a queen and king would be carried aloft to the wedding chamber where, after the guests respectfully withdrew, the *apokalupsis* or “unveiling” occurred. The marriage was then consummated as the two “become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). John’s use of this marital imagery in the first verse of Revelation is profoundly significant.

From the biblical perspective God’s revelation is not viewed primarily as data, truths, facts, and doctrinal or prepositional statements as useful as this might be. God’s revelation is a Person, Jesus Christ, who enters into a covenantal relationship with us. The terms the Bible uses to depict the covenant are “family bond” and “marriage.” Therefore, God’s revelation draws us to “*know*” (Gen 4:1, 17, 25) Jesus in the covenantal-marital bond by which he forms a marital relationship with our souls. This is accomplished through worship, a central theme of Revelation that will be developed in a subsequent essay.