

REVIEWS

The Kingdom of the Heavens

“The Times of the Gentiles,” by John F. Walvoord in *Countdown to Armageddon*. Charles Ryrice, consulting editor, and Joe Jordan and Tom Davis, general editors. Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1999.

John F. Walvoord has contributed two articles to *Countdown to Armageddon*, a compendium of articles on eschatological themes written to assuage the current interest in prophecy brought about by the imminence of the coming millennium. One of these, “The Times of the Gentiles,” describes the era in Jewish history when, after centuries of disobedience, their nation and people were given over to Gentile powers. This subject is of great importance in any treatment of eschatology because it delineates the general outline of prophetic history from the conquest of Judah and Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar to the reign of Antichrist and the bringing in of the millennial kingdom. The article summarizes the prophetic history of the image in Daniel 2 and concludes by stating that the times of the Gentiles, which began in the sixth century B.C., will “continue until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ to the earth” (50).

The purpose of “The Times of the Gentiles,” as in all the articles in *Countdown to Armageddon*, is not only to advance a dispensational view of Scripture, but also to stem encroachments of nonliteral interpretations of dispensational issues, notably the kingdom of God. The article reviews the chief facts of the “times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24) and strongly contends for an objective, political kingdom of God in the millennium, in rebuttal to those who would relegate the reign of Christ to a purely spiritual province. This view is an underlying supposition in all of the articles in *Countdown to Armageddon* (47-48). Herein lies the problem. In order to refute nonliteral interpretations of the kingdom, the reign of Christ is reduced purely to a matter of physical, objective rule. Unfortunately, this deprives the kingdom of God of its most significant characteristic—the living Christ Himself. Rather than coming just as an outward, physical ruler of a temporal kingdom, Christ, as the seed of the kingdom life, has been sown into His believers and is developing into a realm of life in which He rules in the most essential and organic sense.

The Kingdom and the Church

Daniel 2 can be described as a controlling chapter on

prophecy in the Bible. The image seen there portrays the aggregate of human government from Genesis 10 to Revelation 19. It shows, from God’s perspective, human history as being composed of four empires: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. It then reveals that Christ, as a stone cut without hands, will strike these empires so that they become “like chaff from the summer threshing floors,” signifying their destruction (Dan. 2:34-35). The stone, as a prophecy of the coming kingdom of Christ, then becomes a great mountain that “filled the whole earth” (v. 35). The article is faithful to the somewhat transparent nature of the revelation found in this chapter and is also faithful to the light received by the Brethren teachers of the last century who recovered the truth of the kingdom in the millennium. They taught strongly and convincingly that Christ would return to set up a kingdom on earth where God’s authority would be exercised. This was a considerable advancement in the understanding of God’s Word. As to the kingdom, they also taught that Christ, in His first appearing, had come to establish the kingdom but was rejected in Matthew 12. The Brethren, therefore, concluded that the kingdom has been “suspended” until His reappearing, with the church remaining on the earth as a witness until the kingdom is established at His second coming. To maintain this interpretation, the church and the kingdom were regarded as separate and unique entities because if the church and the kingdom are one, a suspended kingdom could not exist. John Nelson Darby, the leading proponent of this system, is emphatic on this point: “The kingdom is not the Church, and never will be” (Vol. 14 104). Elsewhere he says, “It is a very serious mistake to confound the kingdom of heaven and the church. They are distinguished here and never confounded anywhere” (Vol. 24 160-161). He also says that “Paul taught the kingdom, and he taught the gospel, and he taught the church; but he never taught them as the same thing” (Vol. 12 372).

Darby’s posture was fully incorporated into the Scofield Reference Bible, which has served as standard reference for dispensationalists since the early twentieth century. In commenting on the kingdom mysteries of Matthew 13, Scofield reiterates Darby’s position: “Christ, having given Himself for the pearl, is now preparing it for presentation to Himself....The kingdom is not the Church” (1017).

The view of a “suspension” of the kingdom until the end of the church age is an underlying theme in all of the articles in *Countdown to Armageddon*. As such, the book attempts to erect a bulwark against nonliteral interpreters

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who assert, in protest to the pessimistic predictions of dispensational eschatology, that the kingdom was established in a spiritual sense at the Lord's first appearing. Although nonliteral interpretations err in denying a manifestation of the millennial kingdom, a close examination of the New Testament reveals that it also is a mistake to completely postpone the kingdom of the heavens until after the church age. At the beginning of the book of Revelation, John describes himself as a fellow partaker of the "kingdom...in Jesus" on the island of Patmos (1:9). Paul told the Christians in Rome that "the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). He also told the Corinthian believers that "the kingdom of God is not in speech but in power" (1 Cor. 4:20). Finally, John, in his Gospel, indicates clearly that to be regenerated is to "enter into the kingdom of God" (3:5). These verses show that the kingdom of God must be a reality in the church age, yet the scene in Daniel 2 seems to indicate that the rule of the kingdom of God will not transpire until after the latter days of the image. It is important that these seemingly contradictory views be reconciled. Such a reconciliation depends upon an understanding of history, both of man and God.

The History of Israel

The Old Testament is an account of God's creation and the history of the nation of Israel. Included in this history is the history of all of mankind. Deuteronomy 32:8 shows that the nations of the earth were established according to the number of the children of Israel, indicating that, in God's sovereign arrangement, Israel is the fulcrum upon which all human history rests. Israel, in turn, is the seminal kingdom of God. Positioned at the intersection of three continents, it represented God to all mankind and was the possessor of His glory. The responsibilities incumbent upon it were great, and its failure was as great. Because of this failure, the times of the Gentiles were established. The sovereignty of the world was given over to a succession of Gentile empires, which have devoured Israel throughout history. These empires will culminate in the "prince who will come" (Dan. 9:26). This one, in his final attempt to exterminate Israel, will fight directly against God, who will appear at the end of the tribulation to rescue Israel. At this juncture, the end of "the times of the Gentiles" and the beginning of the temporal kingdom of God, the nation of Israel will be re-established as preeminent on the earth

with Jesus, the heavenly King, ruling over the nations from Jerusalem.

The genius of the Brethren was to see that the history of Israel encompasses all mankind. They saw that history would not end with extraneous world events, but with the re-establishment of the nation of Israel as preeminent among the nations. Antichrist, the tribulation, the visions of the horns, etc., found in the book of Revelation, are all attendant to this. The Brethren teachers and by extension *Countdown to Armageddon*, however, miss the intrinsic nature of the kingdom of the heavens. Within the history of man, even within the history of the nation of Israel, is another, hidden history—the history of God.

God's History within Man's History

In speaking of history Witness Lee says,

We should not think that man has a history but that God does not have a history. In this universe there are two histories: the history of man, the human history, and the history of God, the divine history. We may liken the history of man to the shell of a walnut and the history of God to the kernel within the shell. In the Minor Prophets the "shell" is clearly defined, and the "kernel" is revealed in some detail. (99)

The Old Testament is a history of God with man. The New Testament is a history of God in man and, more intrinsically, of God experienced by man. In the line of history, the books of the Minor Prophets serve as a bridge between the objective revelation of the kingdom in Daniel and the subjective experience of God that constitutes the reality of the kingdom of the heavens. Micah 5:2 says,

(But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, / So little to be among the thousands of Judah, / From you there will come forth to Me / He who is to be Ruler in Israel; / And His goings forth are from ancient times, / From the days of eternity.)

Christ's first and second appearances are the "goings forth" in Micah 5:2. The twelve books of the Minor Prophets constitute a chorus of voices that speak of one thing from different angles: the chastisement of Israel and the subsequent punishment of the nations who perform that chastisement, which brings in the manifestation of Christ. This factor can be seen in numerous verses which speak of Christ in His eternal origin and human birth in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), in His first coming as the messenger of God (Mal. 3:1-3), in His union with Israel as the Son of God, loved by God and called out of Egypt by God (Hosea 11:1), in His death and resurrection for the salvation of God to sinners (Jonah 1:17; 2:10), in His being the Desire of all the nations (Hag. 2:7), in Elijah's being sent before Him to prepare the way for His coming back (Mal.

4:5-6; 3:1), in His being sent by God the second time with His overcomers (Joel 3:11), in His arising as the Sun of righteousness with healing in His wings (Mal. 4:2), in His going forth as the dawn and coming as the rain, as the latter rain which waters the earth (Hosea 6:3), in His second coming as the Angel of the covenant, whom Israel desires (Mal. 3:1), in His coming as the mighty One with His overcomers to defeat Antichrist and his army (Joel 3:11), in His judgment of the nations (vv. 2, 12, 14), in His dwelling in the holy mountain of Zion within Jerusalem to reign among Israel (vv. 16-17, 21), in His reigning in Zion as David their King, as Ruler in Israel, in the millennium (Micah 5:2; Hosea 3:5; Zeph. 3:15), and in His shepherding of Israel, becoming great, and being their peace (Micah 5:4-5).

The hidden history of God is also seen in Joel 1. Daniel 2 is a basic chapter on prophecy in the Bible, but it is a prophecy on the surface. The four locusts in the book of Joel—a prophecy of the same empires that comprise Daniel 2 and 7—convey a much more hidden, concealed, and mysterious revelation. Joel shows that the four empires of Daniel are locusts that not only devour from without, as seen in Daniel 7, but also consume Israel from within (1:4). God used this consuming factor for His purpose. While the Roman Empire, the final stage of the locusts, was chastising the nation of Israel, God was doing something silently and mysteriously. The region around the Mediterranean Sea—the center of human habitation—was kept in a peaceful order. Roman roads dominated the known world, and a common language, Greek, was spoken by all the peoples. At that point God came to be incarnated by being born of a virgin in a small city, Bethlehem, and lived for thirty-three and a half years on the earth as a man. After this, He went to the cross and died the death of a criminal under the Roman form of punishment. After three days He resurrected and after spending forty days with His disciples, He ascended and ten days later was poured out as the Spirit (2:28) to make His disciples the same as He is in life and nature. The gospel was then spread through the facilities provided by these empires.

Although Israel is still suffering under the consuming locust, we are still receiving the benefit of this chastisement. Witness Lee states,

In the midst of such a situation, God has done something marvelous. First, He came to be incarnated as a man, and He lived on earth to set up a model of how to have the divine life expressed in humanity, of how to have the divine attributes expressed in the human virtues. Then He died a particular death for our sins, and He entered into resurrection and ascended. Then He was poured out as the Spirit in His descension to be one with us to produce a corporate Christ, that is, the Body of Christ.

The ultimate product of the “goings forth” of Christ is the church. Through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ, who ascended to the heavens and then descended as the Spirit, the church has been produced.

All these things are mysterious. No one can see them. But these are the things that accomplished God’s economy. The chastising of Israel and the judgment on the nations are the “shell”; they are not the “kernel.” The kernel is the mysterious things in the age of mystery, which began with Christ’s incarnation and will end with Christ’s second appearing. These are the governing principles that we should hold when we read the Old Testament, especially the Prophets. (119)

The ultimate product of the “goings forth” of Christ is the church. Through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ, who ascended to the heavens and then descended as the Spirit, the church has been produced as the corporate expression of the Triune God. As such, the church is an integral part of the divine history, the intrinsic history within human history. “This is the proper eschatology. This is the best, the clearest, and the most inclusive eschatology” (*Minor Prophets* 91). It is unfortunate that this dual understanding of history is ignored by many dispensationalists.

The Kingdom of the Heavens

In his book *Thy Kingdom Come*, John Walvoord states,

Although the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are similar, there seems to be some distinction. The kingdom of heaven refers to that which is obviously in its outer character a kingdom from above and seems to include all who profess to be subjects of the King. The kingdom of God is more specific and does not seem to any but true believers who are born again. (30)

This concept is carried forward in “The Times of the Gentiles” and pervades all the articles in *Countdown to Armageddon*. It does not, however, adequately describe the relationship of the kingdom of the heavens to the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is God’s general reign from eternity past to eternity future. It is composed of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, the church in the New Testament, and the coming millennial kingdom, including the heavenly manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens and the earthly kingdom of the Messiah. *The kingdom of the heavens*, a term used exclusively in Matthew’s Gospel, is a particular section within the kingdom of God. When John the Baptist began his ministry, he stated that the kingdom of the heavens had “drawn near” (Matt. 3:2), indicating

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that it had never existed before. It was a new thing in God's economy: The continuation of the hidden history of God, not God with man, as in the Old Testament, but God in man, as a ruling and reigning realm.

In Matthew 12 the rejection of Jesus, the heavenly King, by the Jews culminated in their accusation that He carried out His ministry "by Beelzebul." Chapter thirteen then begins, "On that day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea" (v. 1). This event, symbolized by Jesus leaving "the house," signaled a break with the nation of Israel. But, rather than "suspending" the kingdom of the heavens, the Lord "sat beside the sea," indicating that His ministry had turned from the Jews, signified by the house, to the Gentiles, signified by the sea. He then stepped into a boat, signifying the church, and spoke the parables of the mysteries of the kingdom.

The new dispensation and economy that began in Matthew 13 was the continuation of the hidden history of God in the divine, human person of the Lord Jesus. The Lord told the Pharisees in Luke 17:21, "Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you," indicating that He Himself was the kingdom. In the parable of the sower, God is mysteriously sown into man as a seed, which is just Himself as the living word of life (Matt. 13:19). This seed is the very Triune God sown into humanity. The nature of the kingdom seed is described in Matthew 5. It is a hidden life that is poor in spirit, mourns for the present situation, is meek toward persecution, hungers and thirsts for righteousness, and is merciful and pure in heart. According to Mark 4:27-28 this seed sprouts, lengthens, bears fruit and becomes ripe, bringing forth a harvest. This harvest is found in the millennial kingdom, in its heavenly aspect, as a realm in which God rules within man in the most intrinsic sense.

The Reality, Appearance, and Manifestation of the Kingdom of the Heavens

In the Gospel of Matthew, three aspects of the kingdom of the heavens are revealed—the reality, the appearance, and the manifestation. These are the keys to a proper interpretation of the kingdom of the heavens. The reality of the kingdom of the heavens is the person of the heavenly King experienced by the believer as the intrinsic ruling and reigning of God in life. The appearance of the kingdom of the heavens is its outward appearance in this age. Both the

reality and appearance of the kingdom of the heavens are with the church today. They are the person of the King, signified by the pearl of great worth, which is in contrast to the negative appearance of the kingdom, signified by the tares, great tree, and leaven seen in Matthew 13. The manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens is the practical coming of the kingdom in power at the end of this age and is the fulfillment of the prophecy of the mountain that fills "the whole earth" in Daniel 2:35. The manifestation of the heavenly part of the coming millennial kingdom is the kingdom of the Father in Matthew 13:43. The earthly part is the Messianic kingdom, which is the kingdom of the Son of Man in verse 41, as the rebuilt tabernacle of David (Acts 15:16).

In the parables of the treasure and the pearl of great value (Matt. 13:44-46), the relationship between the kingdom and the church in the times of the Gentiles is seen. The sowing of the seed in Matthew 13 produces the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great value (vv. 44-46). The treasure is the precious inward ruling of the life of the heavenly King, hidden in the God-created earth, for which God "sells all." The pearl of great value, the product of the subjective experience of Christ by believers in this age, is the life of God expressed in the proper church life as righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17). Both the pearl and the treasure exist in the church age as the reality of the kingdom of the heavens. This harmonious understanding is non-existent in "The Times of the Gentiles," as well as the entirety of *Countdown to Armageddon*.

Conclusion

The remote, political entity envisioned by the dispensational stalwarts of *Countdown to Armageddon* as the actuality of the millennial kingdom should be reconsidered. The intrinsic revelation of God's holy Word shows that God has journeyed through human history and sowed Himself as the kingdom seed into His believers, to be the vital center of the kingdom of the heavens. This seed grows to be not only the reality of the kingdom of the heavens in this age, but its manifestation in the next. As such, He is using every means to advance His economy to its appointed conclusion when, as the heavenly King, He will take His place on the throne of David to rule the nations from Jerusalem for a millennium.

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The Book of Revelation: A Disclosure of the Beast or a Revelation of Jesus Christ?

"Apocalypse Now," by J. Nelson Kraybill. *Christianity Today*. (October 1999): 31-40.

In "Apocalypse Now," J. Nelson Kraybill, President of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, endeavors to present a central message of the book of Revelation and its relevance to modern-day believers. Largely relying on history books and ancient Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature, the article takes the historical circumstances of John as a critical hermeneutical guide. In so doing, "Apocalypse Now" identifies the beast in Revelation 13 as the Roman Empire, points to various commercial and political forces as the modern manifestations of the beast, and sounds a call for the believers to be sanctified from them. Despite its genuine attempt to reconstruct the historical setting of the author and to call the believers to holiness, "Apocalypse Now" presents a superficial and inaccurate understanding of Revelation, advances claims that contradict the text of Revelation, and implicitly suggests an erroneous view of God. These deficiencies stem largely from the article's reliance on extracanonical sources rather than the Bible as a primary interpretive guide and ultimately from its focus on the identification of the beast rather than the "the revelation of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:1).

At the outset, the article reveals how Kraybill's understanding of Revelation originated. Kraybill "got ambushed" by Revelation, "the Jurassic Park of biblical interpretation," when he taught his first course on Revelation (31). In his class, in which the "fearsome Beast of Revelation 13 seemed to snarl out from the pages" of the Bible, he endeavored to explore "the Beast's first-century habitat" by researching "through a jungle of history books and ancient texts" (31). Based on the "footprints" he found, he concluded that "John's Beast" is the Roman Empire (32). Kraybill then asked his students, referring to Revelation 13:4, "Who is like the Beast today?" (32). This question is based on his belief that "much of Revelation describes the first century" and that the beast which appeared as the Roman Empire in the first century "will appear in some other guise today" (32).

"Apocalypse Now" presents a superficial and inaccurate understanding of Revelation, advances claims that contradict the text of Revelation, and implicitly suggests an erroneous view of God.

The article proceeds to show seven guiding principles for understanding Revelation and applying its message:

1. Revelation made sense to its first audience and was not a giant puzzle that would only be solved two thousand years later.
2. Revelation is part of a larger library of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature, and it makes little sense without some understanding of that type of writing.
3. The central thrust of Revelation is a call to faithfulness in the beguiling context of pagan Roman society.
4. The emperor cult was the flash point that alienated John from Rome and alarmed him about the church.
5. The emperor cult so penetrated political and economic institutions in John's day that it was difficult for conscientious Christians to find a secure place in society.
6. Worship of God is Revelation's answer to a pagan society held together by idolatrous allegiance.
7. The New Jerusalem is already breaking into our world. (33, 35-37, 39-40)

Lamenting many socio-economic trends prevalent in our society, "Apocalypse Now" eventually exhorts the reader to be holy by discerning the fallen parts of today's governments from their constructive aspects and assumingly avoiding the fallen parts.

The article raises some points that merit affirmation. First, Kraybill correctly recognizes that Revelation is a book of signs—symbols with spiritual significance (1:1). In its introduction, "Apocalypse Now" emphatically argues:

John is giving us theology in pictures;...Instead of using logical argument and deductive reasoning like Paul the apostle, John uses pictures and narrative to convey his inspired message. Think symbol. Think metaphor....Don't get trapped with wooden literalism—unless you really expect to get to heaven and find that Jesus is a sheep....Real spiritual and political entities make their appearance as a Lamb, a woman clothed with the sun, a dragon, a beast, a whore, Babylon, and the New Jerusalem. (32-33)

Recognizing the symbolic nature of Revelation leads Kraybill to commendably posit that the New Jerusalem, the consummate sign in Revelation, is not "the place where believers go when they die" (40). Instead, he suggests that it is "a heavenly community becoming tangible on earth among people who call Jesus Lord" (40). Kraybill admirably critiques faddish Christian literature that capitalizes on people's fascination with the future

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events recorded in Revelation: “Christian bookstores today are full of novels and pulp theology that use Revelation like a deck of tarot cards to forecast the future” (33). Such fascination, he argues, often leads to narrow reading of prophecy in an attempt to identify their “fulfillment” in current events. As an example, he cites those who naively think that they are spiritually safe because they have resolved to not have a computer chip installed on their foreheads (36), thinking that such a “chip” is the fulfillment of the mark of the beast.

Furthermore, Kraybill rightly recognizes the correspondence between Daniel 7:1-8 and Revelation 13:1-10. Hence, he rightfully concludes that the four beasts in Daniel 7 are kingdoms and that the beast in Revelation 13 bears all the characteristics of the beasts revealed in Daniel 7 and symbolizes the Roman Empire. Kraybill also correctly notes that the number of the beast mentioned in Revelation 13:18 and interpreted according to the Hebrew numerical value makes reference not only to the Roman Empire but also to Caesar Nero. Furthermore, these four beasts, which correspond to four parts of a great human image in Daniel 2, represent the totality of human government, signifying that in God’s sight every human government is a beast.

Yet in spite of such strengths, the article suffers from fatal flaws which spring from one fundamental failure: using extracanonical sources rather than the Scriptures as the main interpretive guide. Although the penultimate sentence of “Apocalypse Now” underscores the need for the believers to have “deep roots in Scripture” (40), the article strikes its roots far more deeply in history books and ancient texts other than the Scriptures. The article contends that reading Revelation without understanding similar “visionary, trip-to-heaven symbolic literature” of the day is analogous to reading “a telephone book as though it’s a novel” (35). Considering Revelation as a part of the Jewish and Christian “apocalyptic genre,” the article posits that without some understanding of this genre, Revelation “makes little sense” (35). Such a claim neglects a cardinal principle of balanced Christian biblical hermeneutics: interpreting Scripture by Scripture (2 Pet. 1:20). When this principle is not held, one runs the perilous risk of falling into unscriptural interpretations guided by human opinion. This is not to suggest that one should neglect the historical background of books in the Bible; rather, while respecting its auxiliary function, one should not allow the background

to dominate or confine his interpretation of the Bible. “Apocalypse Now” demonstrates how such a mistaken hermeneutic can produce an erroneous understanding of Revelation.

The article presents claims that clearly contradict the text of Revelation. Speaking of “three cycles of seven judgments in Revelation”—seven seals, trumpets, and bowls, the article says, “It is *not clear* whether John thought all these horrors *had to happen*” (35, emphasis added). In contrast to the article’s uncertainty concerning the coming of the calamities, Revelation explicitly and emphatically declares that the events recorded in the book will and “*must quickly take place*” (1:1, 19; 4:1; 22:6, emphasis added). In the same passage, “Apocalypse Now” also argues, “It is *possible* that his vision gives a ghastly preview of where the world will end *if mortals do not repent* (see 9:20-21; 16:9, 11)” (35, emphasis added). By this claim the article tacitly acknowledges the possibility that all mortals might repent. Yet this possibility is precluded by the clear words of Revelation—in the very verses cited by the article: despite the plagues that afflicted them, the men “did not repent” (9:20-21; 16:9, 11).

A greater shortcoming resides in the same paragraph:

The plagues of Egypt gave Pharaoh some reality therapy, with the hope that he would repent. The plagues of Revelation—which sometimes mimic those of Exodus—might have the same purpose. God is not a sadist, and perhaps John hoped the world would repent before all the horrors of Revelation became reality. (35)

While not directly accusing God of being a sadist, this passage can lead the reader in only one of two directions: (1) If God judges men with the calamities recorded in Revelation, He is a sadist, or (2) He will not judge men with the calamities, because He is not a sadist. Confusing human sadism based on man’s unrighteousness with divine judgment based on God’s righteousness, the article, at this point, gravely misrepresents God in His person and work. The first inference denies God’s holiness and righteousness, and the latter inference denies God’s right to enact His “righteous judgments” (Rev. 15:4). The Scriptures reveal that God is not only loving, merciful, and forbearing, but also righteous, holy, and glorious. While God is love and manifested His love by giving His only begotten Son to the world (1 John 4:16; John 3:16), He will uphold His righteousness, the foundation of His throne (Psa. 89:14), by executing divine judgment upon sinful, unrepentant men. In the Bible fire symbolizes judgment (Gen. 19:24; 1 Cor. 3:13; Heb. 6:8; 10:27). As a holy God, He is a “consuming fire” (12:29), burning all that does not correspond to His holy nature. Hence, His throne is “flames of fire,” out from which issues forth a stream of fire, indicating God’s judgment in His holiness and righteousness

(Dan. 7:9-10). In particular, Revelation reveals the seven Spirits of God burning before the throne as the seven lamps of fire (1:4; 4:5) and Christ the Son of Man with eyes like a flame of fire and feet like shining bronze fired in a furnace, both of whom consume all that is contrary to God's holiness, righteousness, and glory (1:13-15). Eventually, when the "seven bowls of the fury of God" are being poured out, one angel says to God, "You are righteous, who is and who was, the Holy One, because You have judged these things"; and the altar also declares, "Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments" (16:1, 5, 7).

Moreover, although "Apocalypse Now" correctly identifies the beast in Revelation 13 as the Roman Empire and Caesar Nero, it confuses multifarious manifestations of beastly characteristics exhibited in human governments with the singular, consummate prophetic fulfillment of the beast. After locating the beast in the first century, the article points to various social, commercial, and political forces—such as the "American empire," the Marxist government in Somalia, and "economic supply and demand" (32, 38, 39)—as the modern-day manifestations of the ancient "Beast." In so doing, "Apocalypse Now" misses the unique identity of the coming beast—the Antichrist with his revitalized Roman Empire—as the ultimate fulfillment of the prophecy in Revelation 13. Hence, readers who embrace the notion of the beast suggested by the article would most likely fail to recognize the final beast emerging at the end of this age, the coming Antichrist with his restored Roman Empire.

Such a shortcoming is predicated upon the article's erroneous view that the majority of the events recorded in Revelation occurred in John's time. By assuming that the primary influence on John's writing was his historical setting, "Apocalypse Now" holds that "much of Revelation describes the first century" except for "the grand finale of Jesus' return, Satan's demise and New Jerusalem splendor" (32). Largely taking "a preterist view (emphasizing how Revelation may be describing circumstances of the first century)," the article seems to posit that for the most part Revelation is a historical narrative with possible symbolic significance for the future (32). Yet close inspection of the text of Revelation shows that Revelation is principally a book of prophetic signs (1:3; 22:7) and that most of the visions in the book refer to things to come. Revelation 1:19 elucidates the structure of the book, dividing it into three sections: "the things which you have seen" (past), "the things which are" (present), and "the things which are about to take place after these things" (future). Chapter one shows what John had already seen, and chapters two and three then unveil what was taking place in seven churches in Asia, the things that were occurring in John's time. Chapters four through twenty-two are a record of mostly future events, and Revelation 4:1 clearly signals this

The New Jerusalem is an organic constitution of the processed and consummated Triune God wrought into, united with, and expressed through His regenerated, transformed, and glorified tripartite believers.

turn from present to future: "Come up here, and I will show you the things that must take place after these things." Yet the article mistakenly argues that most of the events recorded in Revelation took place in John's own time, heavily drawing upon the verses appearing after chapter four—the section detailing future events. This error obviates any need to identify the singular and final fulfillment of the future beast, Antichrist.

Another notable deficiency in the article is its inadequate presentation of the New Jerusalem. Although the article rightly recognizes that the New Jerusalem is not a "place," it refers to the New Jerusalem as a "restored creation" (40). Here it must be noted that what the term "restored creation" denotes differs from what the New Testament means by a "new creation." A *restored creation* mainly refers to unregenerate persons who are restored to an original, sinless state of created man prior to man's fall. In contrast, the *new creation* is a corporate sonship composed of God's sons brought forth through Christ's redemption, the Spirit's regeneration, and the sons' organic union with the Triune God (Gal. 3:26; 4:5, 7; 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17); it is a group of redeemed and regenerated men into whose inward parts God's life and nature have been wrought as their constituents (Col. 3:10-11). While a restored creation will live outside the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:24), the new creation in its ultimate consummation will be the New Jerusalem, the totality of God's redeemed, regenerated, and renewed sons, whose inner being has been wholly constituted with God to unfold the unfading divine attributes and ever-present freshness of the Triune God for eternity (vv. 2, 5-7, 11). The New Jerusalem is not merely a group of people brought back to the pristine state of man in creation; it is an organic constitution of the processed and consummated Triune God wrought into, united with, and expressed through His regenerated, transformed, and glorified tripartite believers (vv. 10, 18-21).

Moreover, the article's shallow treatment of the New Jerusalem is also evident in its claim that "the new community taking shape among followers of Jesus will have fabulous wealth, symbolized by an array of jewels on the foundation (21:18-21). But in contrast to ancient or modern society, wealth is shared by all" (40). These two sentences may mislead the reader with the notion that the followers of Jesus will share the material wealth that was inequitably distributed in ancient and modern society. In contrast to

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this inference, the New Testament reveals that the only wealth the believers as the New Jerusalem will enjoy is the Triune God Himself in Christ who has been built into their being as their very intrinsic structure: the Father with His divine nature, signified by the golden base (21:18); the Son in His redeeming and life-releasing death and life-imparting resurrection, signified by the pearl gates (v. 21); and the Spirit in His transforming work, signified by the wall with foundations (vv. 18-20). Despite its repeated admonition against human greed, the article ironically suggests that the eventual reward of following Jesus is a portion of the material wealth allotted to His people—not the Triune God in Christ with His unsearchable riches (Eph. 3:8) wrought into them as their unique inheritance (Rev. 21:7).

Ultimately, the greatest shortcoming of “Apocalypse Now” is its misplaced emphasis on Antichrist rather than Christ as the intrinsic focus of Revelation. The article's interpretation of Revelation rests upon and revolves around the identification of the beast. The article begins with a search for the identity of the ancient beast and proceeds to portray various modern-day manifestations of the beast. Further, it explains the first-century believers' predicament in terms of the beast's attempt to secure worship through the emperor cult, and defines “Revelation's answer” to this problem as worship of God, which provided “an antidote and alternative” to the “ceremonies of the emperor cult” (39). The article views events through a single, narrow vantage point of the beast's identity and thus blocks out other critical perspectives. This approach inexorably leads the article to the conclusion that “the central thrust of Revelation is a call to faithfulness in the beguiling context of pagan Roman society” (36). As the disclosure of the beast is brought to the fore, the revelation of Jesus Christ is marginalized.

Yet the Scriptures testify that the entire Scripture is the revelation of the all-inclusive Christ (Matt. 1:1; Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39). Indeed, “the centrality and supremacy of Christ is the key and pivot to all the Scriptures” (Austin-Sparks 8). In keeping with this testimony, the opening words of Revelation declare that Revelation is the “revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1). Revelation was not written mainly to satisfy people's curiosity as to the identity of the beast; rather, it was written primarily to present the unique and ultimate revelation of the all-inclusive Christ, unveiling Him in at least twenty-six marvelous items. The crucial

aspects of Christ revealed in Revelation but neglected by the article include the Ruler of the kings of the earth (1:5), the worthy and enthroned Lion-Lamb (5:5-7), the Husband (21:2), and another Angel (7:2; 8:3; 10:1; 18:1). Christ as the center of God's administration according to God's eternal economy is the master key to understanding Revelation. The chief source of the degradation of the church is not the emperor cult, but the church's loss of the first love for her Bridegroom, Christ (2:4). In Revelation, God's answer to the degradation of the church is not to provide “images of choreographed worship” of God (39), but to intensify Himself sevenfold to become the seven Spirits of God, the sevenfold intensified pneumatic Christ. The seven Spirits of God burning before the throne carry out the divine administration on the earth (1:4); the seven Spirits as the seven lamps of fire purify the believers and consume all that stands against the will of God (4:5); and the seven Spirits as the seven eyes of the Lamb transfuse the building element of Christ into the believers for their transformation (5:6). In Revelation, of tantamount importance to the revelation of Jesus Christ is the testimony of Jesus, which John calls “the spirit”—reality, substance, and characteristic—“of the prophecy” (19:10). The testimony of Jesus is the testifying church as the corporate expression of the Triune God in Christ, presented through signs such as the golden lampstands (1:20), the firstfruits (14:4), the bride (19:7-9), and the New Jerusalem (21:2). In this light, Revelation is not merely a “biblical guide for how we deal with government and society” (40), but the unveiling of the consummation of the divine economy. The central thought of Revelation is that the all-inclusive Christ administers the universe as the worthy Lion-Lamb sitting on God's throne and, as the sevenfold intensified Spirit, carries out His organic salvation in the believers to produce them as the overcomers who conquer the degradation of the church, build up the Body of Christ, and consummate the New Jerusalem, the ultimate testimony of Jesus (2:7; 3:12).

“Apocalypse Now” is a genuine endeavor to call the believers to sanctify themselves from the baneful influences of the present evil age. Yet because it is founded upon the sinking sand of human opinion drawn from extracanonical sources rather than the divine light in the Word of God (Matt. 7:24-27) and is tainted by a bias toward Mennonitism, the article misplaces its focus on the beast instead of Christ and thus falls short of its stated aim to present Revelation's central message and its application to the reader.

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Works Cited

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