

# **THE NEW COVENANT NEWS**



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# THE PROPHETIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION

by Russell Collins

## Prologue

- 1 The seven churches addressed in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 were not the only congregations in existence when the Revelation was given. By the end of the first century there were many more.
- 2 The historical record shows beyond reasonable doubt that the particular characteristics of each of the seven churches, as described, are concordant with seven distinct, successive epochs of the history of the Christian Church in the order that they are recorded.
- 3 The reproofs, rebukes, warnings, dangers and the evils pointed out, as well as the special words of comfort offered in each section, have a very wide and general application.
- 4 This clear and orderly correspondence with Church history from the time the Revelation was written at the end of the first century AD, establishes the prophetic character of the messages. This prophetic character has been recognised by many Bible students and people who have written about the Revelation.
- 5 The symbol of the Lord Jesus in the midst of the seven lampstands symbolises his care for his Church; his whole Church, not merely seven of the early congregations.
- 6 The number seven is a well-known symbol of completeness, seven being the largest single number divisible by only itself and one. Seven is similarly used elsewhere in the Revelation to give a complete symbolic representation, as in the seven trumpets (chapters 8 and 9), the seven seals (chapter 6) and the seven vials or bowls (chapter 16).

## THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Each letter consists of seven parts.

- 1 An address: "*Unto the angel (or messenger) of the church of ..... write ....* "
- 2 Mention of one (or more) of the symbols representing the attributes of Christ the Revelator; a different one for each church.
- 3 An assertion of Christ's complete knowledge of the circumstances, duties and activities of each church addressed by him.
- 4 A description of the state of each church, and such statements of praise and promise, or censure and admonition, as the situation in each church required.

- 5 A reference or allusion by Jesus to his return and the significance it will have for the members of each church.
- 6 A universal command to hear, that is, understand, what is said to all the churches.
- 7 A special promise to the ultimate victors or overcomers.

### **The Letter to Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7)**

Ephesus means 'first, desirable'. This first letter was a message to the early Christian Church, and covers the period from Pentecost to about the end of the first century AD. The congregation at Ephesus was commended for its labour and patience, but was reproved because it had "*relaxed*" its "*first love*" (Diaglott reading). The first love of all true believers is the Lord Jesus Christ.

This church was exhorted to repent, and was commended for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans. The Nicolaitans were people who desired power and rulership, and who sought to dominate others in the congregation for profit and personal advantage. In this pursuit of power and dominance we see the early seeds of church hierarchy being sown, in which a professional and salaried priesthood developed, with power over people's minds and lives, and with persuasive influence and indeed power over secular rulers.

The Lord Jesus' promise to the overcomers "*to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God*" would mean that the overcomers will inherit all that God has promised in his Kingdom. Eating of the tree of life would symbolise the blessings obtainable in the Kingdom without the consequences of a curse. Promises such as these would be meant to strengthen and sustain the early believers who were fiercely persecuted by the Jews, then by the Romans, commencing about 64 AD, and intensified by the Emperor Domitian from 81 AD onwards.

### **The Letter to Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11)**

Smyrna means 'bitter, as myrrh'. Myrrh, however, is somewhat pleasant to taste, despite its bitter properties. This congregation was commended for its faith and courage in tribulation and poverty, and its recognition of them "*which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan*". Such would be false professors of Christianity, hypocrites, and those who followed Satan, but who gave the appearance of belonging to the "*Israel of God*" (Galatians 6:16).

Suffering and imprisonment of church members were foretold, as were "*ten days*" of "*tribulation*". Those ten prophetic days would be the ten years of intense persecution carried out by pagan Rome from 303 to 313 AD, which would mark the end of this prophetic period when the Edict of Milan was

proclaimed by the authority of the Emperor Constantine. The "*crown of life*" would surely be joint heir-ship and everlasting life with Jesus (James 1:12 and Revelation 2:10).

### **The Letter to Pergamos (Revelation 2:12-17)**

The name Pergamos signifies that which is high and fortified; that is, that which is established in a high and fortified position.

This congregation was commended for holding fast to the name of the Lord Jesus and continuing in faithfulness to him. The martyr Antipas was symbolic of faithful believers who opposed lordship within Christian congregations and opposed also the combining of church leadership with civil power and authority.

The "*doctrine of Balaam*" would symbolise the teachings of professing Christians to the effect that church and state should be united, and that sacred Christian duties and responsibilities should be combined with worldly aspirations, gatherings, feasts and pleasures.

The doctrine of the Nicolaitans was evident in this congregation, and they were exhorted to repent. The time period of this church is the period leading up to the establishment of the Papacy from 313 to 539 AD, in which year, by the decree of the Emperor Justinian, the Bishop of Rome was made superior to all other bishops in the Christian Church, and the Papacy was set up. The promise "*to eat of the hidden manna*" would symbolise eternal life and incorruptibility in the Lord Jesus; the "*white stone*" would be a symbol of Christ's personal love and friendship, while the "*new name*" would be the name of the bridegroom, Jesus Christ, sharing His power and authority in close relationship with him, just as a bride takes the name of her husband.

In this period of the Christian era, Rome was sacked by the Visigoths under their king, Alaric, and the Western Roman Empire fell in 476 AD to Odoacer, a Germanic warrior who became the first barbarian king of Italy. But the Eastern Empire remained, and eventually the Papal power assumed rulership over the West, or western part, in league with the Emperor Charlemagne (742-814 AD). The West became known as the Holy Roman Empire.

### **The Letter to Thyatira (Revelation 2:18-29)**

Thyatira means 'sacrifice of labour or work'. This congregation was commended for its love, service, faith and patience.

In "*Jezebel*" we see the symbolic use of the Old Testament wife of Ahab who took idols and idolatrous priests into Israel and caused the nation to sin. The sin of fornication is representative of the union of church and state, as also is adultery.

This is the period of Papal domination, which extended in this prophecy from the establishment of the Papacy in 539 AD until the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517 AD.

The "*space to repent of her fornication*" would be the time allowed by the Lord for the teachings of the Protestant Reformation to take effect. The casting into a bed would be the suffering experienced by the established Church, as the suffering of one who is bed-ridden with an illness.

The "*children*" to be killed "*with death*" is a figure of significant events and developments that took place both within and separate from the Christian religion as it existed at that period in history.

During this long period, a number of highly significant events and developments took place, affecting the Christian religion from within and without. Mohammed was born in 569 AD, and succeeded in establishing Mohammedanism in the years 609 to 612 AD. Mohammedanism became a religion of the sword as Mohammedans, also called Saracens, conquered lands and peoples, taking Jerusalem in 637, Antioch in 638, and the country of Spain in 714. In 762 the Caliphate in Bagdad was established, the word 'Caliph' meaning 'successor'.

Around 1000 AD the Turkish people became Mohammedans and began their conquests, the earliest being those of the Seljukian Turks. The period of the Middle Ages began about this time. The Ottoman Turks established their empire in 1258, and captured Constantinople in 1453, giving impetus to the Renaissance, or revival of learning.

In this period the Moguls or Tartars, under Genghis Khan, began their sweeping conquests in 1206. A second wave of conquests, under Tamerlane, began in 1333.

These developments and conquests greatly affected the maintenance and extension of Papal domination. They are represented under vivid and striking symbols in the ninth chapter of Revelation.

Against this backdrop of historical events, the Papacy took strong measures to maintain its authority and control of people's beliefs and minds. The Papal Inquisition was established in 1231, followed by the Spanish Inquisition in 1478. These developments are outlined in Revelation chapter six under the symbolism of the rider on the "*pale*" (literally 'green') horse, which is pictured under the fourth of seven symbolic seals.

But a very influential discovery also occurred in this period, and it seems reasonable to think that it was providential. It was the invention of printing in 1440, and the technique of putting the written word into book form,

a development that was of immeasurable benefit to Bible translators and the spread of the Protestant Reformation in the years that followed.

The period symbolised by Thyatira came to an end with the great movement from within the Papal system which we know as the Protestant Reformation. The movement had been stirring beneath the surface of Papal doctrine and practice, but was given a dramatic boost in 1517 by Martin Luther, who promoted the understanding of justification by faith.

The "*morning star*" would be the resurrection promise of the Lord Jesus to raise all believers from the dead.

### **The Letter to Sardis (Revelation 3:1-6)**

Sardis has a mixed meaning, including 'that which remains, something new or renewed, and prince of joy'.

The 'things which remain' would be the benefits remaining after centuries of Papal dominion. The benefits would not be many, because Protestant denominations continued to hold many serious Papal errors. Nevertheless Luther's protest sparked an extensive new movement of reform in Christendom, the movement receiving further impetus by the break with Rome under Henry VIII of England and the establishment of the Church of England in 1535. The movement was mentioned as a "*deadly wound*" to the Papacy in Revelation 13:3.

The congregation at Sardis was exhorted to "*hold fast, and repent*" and "*watch*", because the Lord Jesus said, "*I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee*". This suggests the impending return of the Lord Jesus and the commencement of his presence (parousia). The Apostle Paul had already said to the Thessalonians that "*the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night*" (1Thessalonians 5:2).

The time period involved is suggested to be from 1517 AD until the end of the prophetic 1,260 years in 1799, when the Pope was humiliated by Napoleon and subsequently taken prisoner and carried off to France. Included in this period of history is the very significant event of the French Revolution, symbolised under the sixth seal of Revelation 6, and the first plague of Revelation 16. The "*white raiment*" of the overcomers would be the purity of imputed righteousness.

### **The Letter to Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7-13)**

Brotherly love is the meaning of Philadelphia. The "*open door*" could well be the revival of spirituality and morality after lethargy had crept in following the zeal and activities of the reformers.

The Lord Jesus spoke of His love for this church, and commended its members for keeping his Word, not denying his Name, and keeping "*the word of my (his) patience*".

To this congregation the Lord Jesus said, "*I will come quickly*". This seems to suggest the great revival of interest during the nineteenth century in the second advent and its timing and manner of occurrence.

Very early in the nineteenth century, the Bible Societies were founded and began their activities. A marvellous array of scriptural truths, unknown to Christendom as a whole for centuries, came to light in the nineteenth century. The main ones are:

- The Plan of the Ages;
- The Three Worlds;
- The Ransom (Redeeming Price);
- The Kingdom;
- The New Covenant;
- The Truth about Death and the Second Death;
- Joint Heir-ship;
- The Second Advent.

In 1871 the last vestige of temporal power was taken from the Papacy. The Pope and his entourage are now confined to the enclave of Vatican City. In spite of this deprivation of former power and territory, the Papacy continued to speak "*very great words*" with the proclamation of the doctrine of Papal infallibility, and later in 1950 with the proclamation of the doctrine of the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary into Heaven (Daniel 7:8,11,20; 11:36).

The period of time involved in the prophetic period of Philadelphia is suggested as occurring from 1799 AD until early last century, perhaps 1920 or thereabouts, after the destruction and devastation of the First World War.

"*The temple of my God*" would surely symbolise the true worship of God through Jesus Christ, while "*the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem*" would stand for God's righteous Kingdom under the terms of the New Covenant.

The "*new name*" would again be the name of the bridegroom, Jesus Christ, sharing His power and authority with the joint heirs in close relationship with him.

### **The Letter to Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22)**

The chief characteristic of this period is luke-warmness; having a mid-way position, being neither for nor against; that is uncertainty and procrastination. This prophetic period applies to last century and extends to the present time.

It is true that many churches today do not emphasise spiritual values, qualities, and attributes. The emphasis is on social activities, clubs, sporting organisations, and taking an active interest in politics.

Many churches also support and uphold such errors as the theory of evolution, the trinity, immortal soul, same-sex marriage, higher criticism and modernism, and consign the scriptures to the realm of myth and legend, thus denying their divine inspiration and authority.

Being "*rich, and increased with goods*" signifies having worldly approval and material benefits; while being "*wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked*" signifies being destitute of spirituality.

"*Gold tried in the fire*" represents true faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to his commands. The "*white raiment*" signifies imputed righteousness, while anointing the eyes with "*eye-salve*" would signify the means to gain spiritual insight and understanding of the scriptures.

This is the period in which the Lord Jesus stands at the door and knocks. If any hear his voice, and open the door, that is, if any come to Jesus in humility and repentance, he will encourage and establish a very close individual personal relationship, represented by coming in and dining with the believing one (John 14:23; Revelation 3:20).

The final promise to this church is the goal of all believers, "*To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne*" (Revelation 3:21).

The wonderful promise to believers includes "*power over the nations*" to "*rule them with a rod of iron*" and break them to pieces as a potter's vessel (Revelation 2:26,27). The power so given will not be to oppress and subjugate, but to enlighten and bless. Eventually the distinction of nations and nationalism will be no more, and will be replaced by a world-wide family united in the praise properly due to God through his King, Jesus Christ, who made it all possible by his death which paid a redeeming price with his blood shed to ratify the New Covenant and for the remission of sins forever.

## **Epilogue**

Hymn number 151 in the 'Hymns of Dawn' states in its chorus, 'Within this century's swinging portal, Breaks the new dawn - the thousand years'. The century referred to by the writer is the twentieth century. The new dawn, the thousand-year reign of the Lord Jesus Christ, has not yet been established. Some believers felt sure that God's Kingdom would be established on earth during the twentieth century, but that did not happen.



God has not told us when his Kingdom will be set up on earth, although some indication of time is given in the prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation.

[A full study of the prophecies and symbolism of the Revelation has been set out in the book, 'The Few and the Many' by the author of this paper, and is available, free of charge, by contacting the New Covenant Fellowship via the web page.]



## BE PREPARED

by Bob Simpson

This paper is about being prepared and ready for our Lord's return.

Some considerable time ago, when I was in the Scouts, we had a motto, 'Be Prepared.' We were encouraged to be ready in mind and body to serve our king and country, and also to be ready for any other eventuality that may come along.

As I recall, we did many things that were varied and useful, and some are still useful to me today - but now is not the time to be ready to tie knots, as we did then, but to be prepared and ready to serve our creator, Yahweh, and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today we live in a fast-moving and changing world. We have seen changes made to our laws that are contrary to the commandments of our Lord. We are not making straight our roads as we should be, but are drifting further away from our creator, drifting further and further from our "*Lord and Saviour*."

My thoughts here today are mainly to remind us of the things we know, and to re-affirm them so that we may not be caught off guard and be drifting away. We need to be prepared and ready in mind and body for that great day of our Lord's return.

In the scriptures, we are exhorted to be ready for our Lord's return, for we know not the day nor the hour. It may be at a time we think not likely. "*Be ye therefore ready also: for the Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not.*" (Luke 12:40; KJV).

And Peter told us that "*... the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives.*" (2 Peter 3:10,11; NIV).

We are told to live our lives set apart from this world, from the influences of pride, greed, vanity, ambition and so on, and to set our minds on things above.

In 1 John 2:15 the apostle said, *"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man loves the world, the love of the father is not in him."*

### **We are to be Holy**

We are to seek after holiness, which is a divine command and which we cannot afford to neglect. The Hebrew and Greek words for 'holiness' convey the idea of purity or religious cleanness, of being set apart from defilement.

We are to make every effort to live in peace with all men and be holy, for without holiness no one will see the Lord.

### **Faith**

It is important to have faith, for *"... without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him"* (Hebrews 11:6; NIV).

Paul told the Ephesians, *"By this undeserved kindness you have been saved through faith, and this is not of your own doing, rather it is God's gift. It is not a result of works, so that no one should have grounds for boasting. We are God's handiwork and were created in union with Christ Jesus for good works, which God determined in advance for us to walk in them"* (Ephesians 2:8-10; NWT).

Faith is based on accurate knowledge. It is logical to have faith in God. We must study God's word, the Bible. In this regard the Bereans of the first century were a good example for us. Though steeped in both Jewish and Greek religious traditions, some of them were open-minded and readily gave ear to the Apostle Paul's message. They received the word with the greatest eagerness of mind, carefully examining the scriptures daily, and many of them became believers (Acts 17:11-12).

### **Righteousness**

Doing the will of God must be in the forefront of our minds, for it is not easy to put off the distractions of this world. We are living in a world that encourages unrighteous thoughts - pride, greed, ambition and so on. These are the work of Satan the devil, and the whole world is under the control of the wicked one (1 John 5:19; 2 Corinthians 4:4).

Pursuing righteousness is a challenge because all of us are imperfect and have a strong tendency towards unrighteousness (Genesis 8:21; Romans 7:21-22).

Actual righteousness is impossible to attain in this life due to our fallen condition, but God will overlook our unrighteousness if we believe into him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead (Romans 4:19-24).

Paul linked the pursuit of righteousness with *“fight the good fight of faith”* (1 Timothy 6:12).

Paul also highlighted the importance of Bible study in the pursuit of righteousness when he wrote, *“All scripture is inspired of God and beneficial for teaching, for reproof, for setting things straight, for disciplining in righteousness, that the man of God may be fully competent, completely equipped for every good work”* (2 Timothy 3:16) NWT).

### **Self-will**

Peter warned us to be careful not to be self-willed, and to be watchful against beginnings of those little bitternesses that spring up: animosity, rivalry and anything else harmful to others. But be ready for every good work, speak injuriously of no one, nor be quarrelsome, but be reasonable, displaying all mildness toward all men.

Peter wrote, *“Therefore beloved ones, since you are awaiting these things, do your utmost to be found finally by him spotless and unblemished and in peace. .... You therefore, beloved ones, having this advanced knowledge, be on your guard that you may not be led away with them by the error of the lawless people and fall from your own steadfastness, but go on growing in the undeserved kindness and knowledge of our lord and saviour Jesus Christ. Amen”* (2 Peter 3:14,17,18; NWT).

### **Suffix**

There are many verses that can be found in the scriptures for holiness and faithfulness. Here are some that may help us, to keep things straight (all quoted from the NIV).

**Proverbs 9:10** *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”*

**1 Corinthians 3:16** *“Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?”*

**1 Peter 1:15-16** *“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’”*

**2 Corinthians 7:1** *“Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”*

**Galatians 6:7** *“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.”*

**Proverbs 21:21** *"He who pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity and honour."*

**1 Timothy 6:11** *"But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness."*

**Proverbs 21:2** *"All a man's ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs the heart."*

**Matthew 6:33** *"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*

**Philippians 4:8** *"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things."*



## **Notes from a Group Study of the Epistle to the HEBREWS**

(Continued from NCN No. 149)

It was also suggested that Jesus' *"glory"* (Hebrews 1:3) was that he was made in the express image of the character of God, not His substance, although he was a spirit being like God before coming to earth. The Lord's character was a shining forth or demonstration of the wonders of God's love, embodied in the gospel message that Jesus brought to mankind. His character was the only expression of the glory of God, and although we are also made in God's image, we are imperfect. This idea is supported by Christ's answer to Philip when he said *"... he that hath seen me hath seen the Father ..."* (John 14:9). This can refer only to his character because no man can see God at any time.

Rotherham's version, *"... the radiated brightness of his glory, and the exact representation of his very being ..."* supports the comment that Jesus exemplifies God's character.

An image can also be a copy, either engraved or stamped. The copy is exactly like the original, but the original remains and is unaltered by the copying. While Jesus was granted divine power at his resurrection, God's power was undiminished.

**Hebrews 1:3** *"... and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins ..."*

Salvation, which is the main topic of Hebrews, and purging, or purifying us from our sins, was accomplished by Jesus' sacrifice. He rescued us from the consequence of sin, everlasting death, by symbolically washing away our

sins with his blood. Thus his shed blood appears to be as an antitype of the blood sprinkled on the mercy seat in the holiest place in the Israelitish tabernacle on the day of atonement.

The Diaglott has ‘... sustaining and making manifest ...’ in the place of ‘upholding’, while Strong’s dictionary has ‘... to carry or bring forth ...’, the meaning of each reference being that Jesus reveals to us the knowledge of God.

Colossians 1:17 has “... *by him (Jesus) all things are held together ...*”, referring to “... *thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers ...*” which are not physical things. The allusion in Hebrews is to Jesus’ work of upholding God’s plan of salvation by purging our sins.

The “*word of his power*” may be the spoken word, since God empowered Jesus to speak (John 14:24), or Jesus himself, since he is the Word (logos; John 1: 1 and 14), and all power was given to him upon his resurrection (Matthew 28:18).

The upholding is done also by the word of his power spoken by the Judges and Prophets of the Old Testament times, as well as his example set during his ministry and by the ministry of the gospel itself established in the New Covenant.

God’s dispensation with mankind was changed from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant when it was sealed by Jesus’ sacrifice.

***“... sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.”***

To be set on the right hand of any powerful person is to be given a position of high honour and power. Stephen saw “... *the heavens opened, and the son of man standing on the right hand of God*” (Acts 7 56). This conferring of God’s power to Jesus is confirmed in verse 4 of the passage of our study, and also in Hebrews 10:12.

The privilege attached to this position was known by James and John who asked Jesus, through their mother, for the positions on the right hand and left hand of the Lord in his kingdom. But he said that the positions were not his to give (Matthew 20:20-23).

Exodus 15:6 and Psalm 110:1 show that the phrase “*at the right hand*”, although symbolic, indicates a position of power; and Colossians 1:16 and 18 show that Jesus was given the pre-eminence in all things from the beginning. He was raised with greater power as he was resurrected as a life-giving spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45).

However, since the nations of the world today are ruled by earthly governments, Jesus is not yet exercising his power to its full extent, waiting until all his enemies are made to be as his footstool (verse 13).

#### **1:4 “*Being made so much better than the angels ...*”**

Jesus was created as a spirit being; “...*the first born of every creature*” (Colossians 1:15). He was created as the “*word*” (logos, John 1:1). He was begotten of the Holy Spirit and born to Mary as a male child (Matthew 1: 18 and 20), but how he was made better than the angels is not explained here. It was suggested that Jesus was not an angel, because he was made better than they, although no other verse was given to support the idea that he was not an angel.

It was noted that Jesus was created, the angels were created, Adam and Eve were created while their descendants are begotten. Jesus was transformed from a spirit being and was born (begotten) as a human being.

#### **“... *as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.*”**

Jesus' superiority over all other created beings is shown by his relationship with God, that of being God's son. 2 Samuel 7:12-14 refers to the seed of David being called God's son, and Psalm 2:7 indicates that the seed, Jesus Christ, took on the title of son when he was begotten and was born as a man-child.

The Father-Son relationship was acknowledged by God at Jesus' baptism, ‘*This is my beloved son ...*’ (Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11 and Luke 3:22).

Jesus' superiority over the angels may have been related to His “*more excellent name*”, the use of the word “*name*” here indicating status or position. He was created as the Word, while Mary was told to name him 'Jesus'. Revelation 3:12 suggests that he will receive a new name, and in Isaiah 9:6 he is given the titles of “*Wonderful, Counsellor, ..... and Prince of Peace.*” He is also our high priest and the King of kings. All these names and titles show how he is greater than the angels in position and reputation. The distinction has been increased because he has been raised incorruptible, as God always has been (1 Corinthians 15:52 and 1 John 3:2).

Jesus' name, that is his status and reputation, was inherited as an affirmation that he is the Son of God.

#### **Hebrews 1: 5 to 14**

In these verses the writer sets out many facts that all the Jews should have known, primarily that Jesus was the Messiah, and that all of them must now turn to him for salvation. The words are mostly quotations from the Old

Testament and have their fulfilment in Jesus. Each item contrasts the inadequate provision under the Law Covenant with the efficacious provision under the New Covenant arrangement.

In verse 5 it is pointed out that it was Jesus, not the angels, whom God addressed as his Son. Thus, only Jesus, not the angels, could address God as Father in a familial sense. The question *“For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee?”* does not necessarily have the answer 'None'. The answer could be 'To the archangel Michael', if Jesus was the archangel Michael in his pre-earthly existence.

In verse 6 the angels were to worship God's begotten Son because of his superior status.

In verses 7 and 8 the status of the angels was as God's messengers, whereas Jesus was at first a messenger on earth, bringing the gospel to mankind, but after his resurrection he was given the sceptre of kingship. The sceptre is a symbol, and in this application is a sceptre of righteousness, justice and power. Jesus was also given the Holy Spirit, the oil of gladness (verse 9), without measure (John 3:34). That was a special anointing for Jesus only, and together with the sceptre, the authority of kingship, it established his superiority over the angels.

Also in verse 9 the word *“fellows”* in the KJV is rendered *“companions”* in the NIV. Jesus' companions before he came to earth were the angels. When he received the oil of gladness, that is, when he was baptised, his companions were also baptised but did not receive the holy spirit. During the gospel age his companions may be those he is choosing to be his little flock, those who *“... have an unction (anointing) from the Holy One ...”* (1 John 1:20).

From verse 10 it was suggested that it was not the physical earth and heavens that Jesus established, since verse 11 indicates that there are heavens and earth that will perish. But Ecclesiastes 1:4 states that the earth will abide forever, thus it must be the symbolic earth and heavens that will perish. Only the foundation of earthly society was destroyed in the flood, so that the present earthly arrangements are different from those which pertained before the flood.

Verse 12 indicates that another great change will occur in the future, shown in the analogy of a worn-out garment that will be renewed rather than repaired. Again there is a contrast between the perishable nature of the created earth and the unchangeable God of Psalm 102:25-27. God will change the physical earth also, in the reconstitution of all things (Acts 3:21) and the desert will blossom as the rose (Isaiah 35:1).



# ISRAEL AGAINST THE AMORITES

## or

# DID THE SUN STAND STILL?

by Merv Buckmaster

### Introduction

The early history of the Jewish age includes the record of the terrible business of their occupation of Canaan which necessitated the removal of the people who lived there, as God had commanded them to do. For more than four hundred years in Egypt, the descendants of Jacob had increased in number to become the nation of the Israelites.

The people who were the descendants of the other members of Noah's family had populated the fertile areas of the land now called Palestine. Since God had promised, through Abraham, part of the land to the Israelites, the original inhabitants had to be removed from it. The Hebrew adults who had been liberated from Egypt were not allowed to enter Canaan because of their disobedience in the wilderness, and that prohibition included Moses. Thus the authority that God had given to Moses to lead the Israelites had to be passed on to another in order that the nation could be led under God's direction into the land that had been promised to them. The man whom God chose to lead the nation was Joshua.

*"Then the LORD said to Moses, 'The time has come when you must die. Summon Joshua and come into the Tabernacle where I can give him his instructions.' Then Moses charged Joshua, son of Nun, to be strong and courageous, and said to him, 'You must bring the people of Israel into the land the LORD promised them, for the LORD says, 'I will be with you.' " (Deuteronomy 31:14,23; TLB).*

### Joshua

God chose Joshua because of his character, which was defined when he declared that he and his house would serve the LORD (Joshua 24:15), and which may be discerned from the record of events, as shown by the following notes taken from the early chapters of the book of Joshua. Before Joshua was made leader of the Israelites Moses had laid his hands on him, and he *"was full of the spirit of wisdom ... so the people of Israel obeyed him"* (Deuteronomy 34:9).

When preparing to cross the Jordan into Palestine, Joshua gave detailed instructions to the two spies whom he sent across the river to Jericho where they met Rahab. They made a pact with her, and that pact was kept honourably by Joshua when the city of Jericho was taken. Joshua followed exactly the strange orders that God had given him to enable the city of Jericho to be weakened and then conquered.



Then he was ashamed by the disobedience of Achan, who kept some of the spoils from the battle of Jericho against God's command, an action which brought defeat when the Israelites first attacked Ai. Joshua then followed God's orders to set an ambush for the soldiers who defended Ai when the LORD commanded an attack on that city, and the city and its people were overwhelmed.

Some time later Joshua was deceived by ambassadors from the city of Gibeon, who lied and claimed that they lived a great distance from Canaan, and so the Israelites made a peace treaty with them. When the lie was discovered, Joshua upheld the peace treaty but defeated the people, not by destroying them but by making them slaves to the Israelites.

There soon followed the battle against the five kings of the Amorites, who became allies amongst themselves for the purpose of destroying Gibeon, which had made the peace treaty with Israel. Joshua won this battle against the Amorites because "... *the LORD was fighting for Israel*" (Joshua 10:14; KJV). In the translation of the Hebrew record of this battle there has arisen the strange story of the sun and moon standing still. because, as translated, it appears that is what Joshua asked for.

Here is the account of the battle from the Living Bible.

*"So Joshua and the Israeli (sic) army left Gilgal and went to rescue Gibeon. 'Don't be afraid of them', the LORD said to Joshua, 'for they are already defeated. I have given them to you to destroy. Not a single one of them will be able to stand against you.' Joshua travelled all night from Gilgal and took the enemy army by surprise. Then the LORD threw them into a panic so that the army of Israel slaughtered great numbers of them at Gibeon and chased the others all the way to Beth-horon and Azekah and Makkedah, killing them all the way. And as the enemy was racing down the hill to Beth-horon, the LORD destroyed them with a great hailstorm that continued all the way to Azekah; in fact, more men died from the hail than by the swords of the Israelis. As the men of Israel were pursuing and harassing the foe, Joshua prayed aloud, 'Let the sun stand still over Gibeon, and let the moon stand in its place over the valley of Aijalon.' And the sun and the moon didn't move until the Israeli army had finished the destruction of its enemies. So the sun stopped in the heavens and stayed there for almost twenty-four hours. There had never been such a day before, and there has never been another since, when the LORD stopped the sun and the moon; all because of the prayer of one man."*

The accounts in many other versions are very similar, and it seems to be not only a very strange event, but a very unlikely and unsatisfactory situation. It is at variance with other scriptures that the Creator would interfere with his orderly arrangement and bring some of it to a temporary halt in response to

the prayer of a man. Although it must be accepted that as the Creator he has the power to do so, God had set the stars and planets in motion at creation, and "*With him there is no variableness nor shadow of turning*", James told us (James 1:17). As far as I know there is nothing in scripture to show that God has changed his mind at any time.

There have been several ideas put forward to explain the translation, found in most English versions, that the sun (and moon) stood still.

### **Purported Explanations**

Firstly, from, Thru the Bible Commentary by J. Vernon McGee: 'In Joshua chapter 10 Israel conquers five kings of the Amorites. This chapter contains the account of the long day of Joshua. 'Did Joshua make the sun stand still?' is a question which is asked by skeptic and saint alike. Following are some explanations of the long day of Joshua which have been proposed:

1. It is the practice of some to avoid giving any interpretation. They ignore it entirely as if it were not worthy of comment.
2. Some treat the language as poetic. This is to adopt a non-literal interpretation which dismisses the miraculous from the incident entirely, despite the biblical account that it was a miracle.
3. Some call this a miracle of refraction.
4. Some adopt the position that God stopped the entire solar system. They make Joshua's day 23 hours and 20 minutes. The other 40 minutes is found in 2 Kings 20:8-11, where the sun went ten degrees backward for a sign to Hezekiah that his life would be extended.
5. Some adopt the position that God blacked out the sun rather than allowing it to continue its shining. The Berkeley Version translates it, "O Sun, wait in Gibeon". In the ASV the marginal reading is, "Sun, be silent."
6. The best explanation, it seems, is a combination of numbers 4 and 5. Joshua needed more light and less heat. God covered the sun with a storm of hailstones. God slowed down the earth. "*Upon Gibeon*" indicates that the sun was directly over - bisecting Gibeon (as it is at noonday) - and the moon was going down "*in the valley of Ajalon.*"

Secondly, from the internet: 'We know from Daniel 9:27 and from various other passages, mostly in Revelation, that the public ministry of Jesus lasted three and a half years. Since he was crucified at the spring equinox, he must have begun to preach at the fall equinox. Since he began to preach when he was thirty years old, he must have been born at the fall equinox. Since the world was created 4000 years before he was born, the world was created on September 22, 4000 BC. Therefore this day must have been a Sunday. But calculating back using a calendar, we find that this date was a Monday. Therefore there are 24 hours. missing Since 40 minutes of this are

accounted for by the story about Hezekiah in 2 Kings 20 and Isaiah 38, we see that the 'about a day' mentioned in Joshua 10:13 must account for the remaining 23 hours and 20 minutes.'

There are many other notes on the internet alluding to the 'missing day', usually justifying the source of the missing day to be derived from a computation done on the super-computer of the North American Space Administration. No confirmation of this alleged source has been established, so that most commentators reasonably describe it as a hoax.

### **An analysis, adapted from a paper by L.E. Buckmaster (circa 1970)**

The episode of Joshua's 'sun standing still' has been a passage from the Old Testament which has received much attention, and yet the explanation is very simple. The translation from Hebrew to English of Joshua's prayer deserves closer attention.

*"O sun stand still over Gibeon."*

Our English word 'sun' has more than one meaning. We speak of 'sitting in the sun', which does not mean in the orb around which the planets revolve, but in the sunshine; and probably we use the word 'sun' for 'sunshine' more often than for the orb itself.

The Hebrew tongue, though a language of relatively few words, has two words for 'sun': 'chammah' and 'shemesh'. The word in Joshua 10 is 'shemesh, which means the 'servant of the sun' that is, 'sunshine', or the 'sun's rays'. There are also two words in Hebrew for 'moon': 'lavonoh' and 'yareach'; and the word in Joshua 10 is 'yareach', which means the 'scent of the moon', that is the 'moonlight'.

In Deuteronomy 33:14 we read, *"For the precious fruits brought forth by the sun";* 'shemesh, not the body of the sun, millions of miles distant, but the light and influence sent forth by that body; *"And for the precious things put forth by the moon",* 'yareach'; not the orb, but its shining.

Now, what concerned Joshua, and what is described in Joshua 10:12,13, was not the two bodies called sun and moon, it was simply sunlight or, more probably, direct sunshine, and moonlight.

Our English word 'stand' also has several shades of meaning, and one of them is 'to remain'. Also, another English word, 'still' sometimes means 'silent'. This allows the translation of 'sun stand still' to be corrected to 'sun remain silent'. These are the English words given in Joshua 10:12-14, as the equivalents of the Hebrew words of that passage in Joshua, and they may be understood in a sense agreeing with the Hebrew. But in most translations they generally are taken in a sense which contradicts the words of Joshua,

and actually conveys a meaning which is the opposite of that of the inspired record. To 'remain silent' is far different from to 'stand still'.

Now to return to the chapter, Joshua 10, and read the history.

Joshua and all the mighty men of valour "*went up from Gilgal all night*" (Joshua 10:9), to the relief of Gibeon, which was besieged by the army of the five kings of the Amorites, or hillside men, the Gibeonites having beguiled Israel into making a league with them. Then what happened?

*"And the Lord discomfited them"* (threw them into confusion; NIV). Mark this, and do not give the credit to Joshua, because it reads, 'Yahweh doth crush them before Israel' (Young). *"Yahweh rageth at them* (or uses violence upon them) *before* (literally to the face of) *Israel, and slew them with great slaughter"* (verse 10).

Then follows the account of the storm.

As the Amorites fled, "*the LORD cast down great stones from heaven unto Azekah, and they died: there were more which died with hailstones than they whom the children of Israel slew with the sword*" (verse 11). The words rendered 'stones' and 'hailstones' signifies 'stones of congelation', that is great stones of frozen water. Thus the artillery of heaven was turned upon the Amorite host.

The formation and discharge of such hail implies a thunderstorm of great power; of dense, dark cloud, and much electrical disturbance. Powerful and frightening thunder and lightning would be part of the storm. The Amorites, having known of the dividing of the Jordan for the crossing of the Israelites, and of the falling of the walls of Jericho, thus perceived that the God of Israel was fighting against them, and they fled in terror at the blackness of the heavens above them, and from the slaughtering hail. When it is borne in mind that the Canaanites (Amorites) worshipped the sun and the moon, it follows that there was a more powerful effect of the storm upon them in this incident.

Had God's cloud passed away, and the sun shone out brightly, they would have been likely to think that their god Baal, who was associated with the sun, had vanquished Yahweh in the heavens and would assist them to vanquish his people; and their leaders would not have failed to attempt to rally them by appealing to them to see how the sun-god had scattered God's cloud and silenced his artillery. What does Joshua then wish for? Is it that the darkness may pass away, the sun shine forth brightly, for an extended period of time, ending the terror of the panic-stricken fugitives, and perchance giving them the opportunity to rally and make a stand and fight?

No such thing! He desired the darkness and terror to continue. What Joshua asked for was not a bright day nor a long day, but for a continuation of the stormy darkness and the gloom which had terrified the Amorites. *"Then spake Joshua to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, 'Shemesh, be-Gibeon dum' "* (verse 12). That word 'dum' is the identical word which we spell 'dumb'. The Hebrew word means 'be silent'. We apply it the same way, and define it to not giving forth sound. The Hebrew language, with its much fewer words, applies it to things analogous to silence. Here it is used for not giving forth light. We use the same word with this application, but we spell it 'dim'. The Hebrew 'dum' is the original of both our words 'dumb' and 'dim'.

Observe that this is not speculating on what Joshua meant; this is giving the very words of Joshua; and what he said was, 'Sunlight in Gibeon be dim'. He called not for extended light but for darkness. The fighting spirit of the Amorite host was broken by God's power before Joshua called for a continuation of the gloom to sustain their panic, and enable him and his army of Israelites to continue with the destruction of the cowed and fleeing Amorites.

*"...be-Gibeon"*. The Hebrew preposition 'be' is the first word of the Bible; *"In the beginning"*. It has some latitude of meaning: viz. 'in, at, to, by' and so on, but it does not mean 'over' or on the meridian of Gibeon as it would be at noonday. Another preposition would have to be used to express that. This prepositional prefix is just our English prefix 'be', used as examples, 'before' in the front; 'behind' in the rear; 'below' underneath, 'beside' adjacent to and so on. We can thus easily see what it means. Since the position of the orb of the sun in the sky is on the meridian of Gibeon at noon there, every day in the year, that position is not, and cannot be, denoted by Joshua's words.

'... -yareach be-emeg, Ajalon' - *"And thou, moonlight in the valley of Ajalon"*. Here is the 'be'; that is 'in' again. Before the storm the moon had been shining in that valley, but the hailstorm filled it with darkness.

*"And the sun stood still"*; literally, 'And dim is the sun'. Not the orb pausing in its apparent course, but the sun remained silent, dumb, dim; *'and the moon stayed* (amad, stood, continued dim, as it was) *until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies"* (Verse 13).

*"So the sun stood still* (amad, stayed as it was) *in the midst of heaven, and hasted not* (literally, 'pressed not' - the sunshine did not press through the pall of cloud) *to go down* ('bo' - literally meaning either 'to go', or 'to come', or 'come in', or 'to arrive'. There is no word in this passage for down) *about* (literally, as) *a whole day."*

So the sunshine stayed dim as it was, and did not press through the cloud for a whole day. The sunshine, usually so strong in Syria, did not pierce through the clouds all that day, but the day was the normal appointed length of time. A longer day would not have benefitted the Israelites because they were already tired after the overnight march from Gilgal.

There is no word or even a suggestion here, or elsewhere, of the day being lengthened. The battle began at Gibeon, and by the bombardment of hail the Amorites' army was soon routed. Up to Upper Beth-Horon they fled, the hail continuing upon them, and driving them over the crest of the land down to Lower Beth-Horon, and on, in a disorganised and distracted, huddling mass, down to the bottom of the descent into the valley of Ajalon; that is, those of them who could get so far.

The remnant of them was in a trap, and if the darkness might last for the remainder of the day and into the coming night, and no shining of the sun or moon give them heart to rally and fight their way out, Joshua thought he could finish his task. *"So Joshua and the Israeli army continued the slaughter and wiped out the five armies except for a tiny remnant that managed to reach their fortified cities."* (Joshua 10:20; TLB)

## **Conclusions**

This is the reasoned understanding of the battle between the Israelites and the Amorites, and it is in harmony with other miracles recorded for us in God's word. The English translations have been distorted by some strange misunderstanding to say that the central body of the solar system ceased its motion. But the apparent motion of the sun across the sky is due to the spinning of the earth. And an instantaneous and forcible stoppage to the rotation of the earth would have given a catastrophic shock to everything upon it. And such a stoppage is neither supposable nor reconcilable with the dynamics of the solar system, nor with the biblical narrative, nor with the nature of the Creator.

Another suggestion has been that God moved the earth to the opposite side of its orbit, and that adjustment would require the earth to take up the opposite rotation to continue the proper seasons. Mythical accounts from far east civilisations of reversed seasons and/or the sun rising in the west in the distant but indeterminant past, coupled with so-called computer checking, have been used to contrive to give some credence to this idea. God's word does not. God's word is neither myth nor legend.

And yet another supposition has been that God moved the sun around the earth like a geo-stationary satellite. Such ideas bring disapproval upon their origins in the minds of men, that they could be so disrespectful of the Creator, mis-applying Luke's statement that *"... with God nothing shall be impossible"* (Luke 1:37; KJV).

The truth is, there was no 'long day'. The sun did not stand still in the time of Joshua, and all the computer figuring as to when it was, or when it was not, is an exercise in futility. To connive with pagan mythology compounds that futility.

There was indeed a day when the Amorite kings were defeated; *"And there was no day like that before it or after it"*. Not for its supposed length, but for the occasion *"That the LORD hearkened unto the voice of a man, for the LORD fought for Israel"*.

## Appendix

The discussion above by L.E. Buckmaster seems to be based upon a very similar paper, written by E.C. Henniges and published in 'The New Covenant Advocate' of volume 1, number 4, dated July 1909. Henniges added a comment that 'The versions may be twisted to say that the central body of the solar system (the sun) ceased its motion ... implying that it moved into a geo-stationary orbit around the earth and thus appeared to stay still in the sky. This idea is also untenable with orderliness of the solar system, and just as disrespectful to the power and wisdom of the creator, as is the idea that the earth stopped spinning.'

Furthermore, a very succinct response to the same question which is the heading of this paper was given by Charles Taze Russell in the book, 'What Pastor Russell Said', that was published a few years after 1916. That response is as follows:

'A critical examination of this passage (Joshua chapter 10) in the Hebrew language in which the Old Testament was written, discloses the fact that Joshua did not request the Lord to cause the sun and moon to stand still. His request was that the sunlight and the moonlight might be restrained, or prevented from shining through the dark clouds of the storm mentioned in verse 11, in which great hailstones had been formed, and doubtless were accompanied by thunder and lightning, all of which would strike terror into the hearts of the Amorites. Had the dark clouds rolled away and the sun shone forth, the enemies of Israel, who were sun worshippers, would have plucked up courage and resisted the onslaughts of Joshua and his army. So the sunlight and the moonlight remained dim (Hebrew 'dum') about a whole day, *"until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies"*. The scientists are right and in harmony with the Scriptures, for the earth did not cease to revolve upon its axis, but continued to pursue the even tenor of its way. The Bible, rightly interpreted and understood, is consistent with reason and the facts.'

While the misunderstanding of this episode in the history of the Israelites is a significant case of being lost in translation, it is also a significant case of being further lost in interpretation. It may be noted that Charles Russell made the observation that the scientific understanding of planetary dynamics is in harmony with the scriptures.

The manner in which the mis-translation of this passage in the book of Joshua has been perpetuated through successive versions of scripture up to the present day (including the TLB and the CEV), deserves the suspicion that it is, according to Jesus' warning, part of the activities of *"false prophets ... that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect"* (Matthew 24:24).

It is as well to remember that when Joshua was challenged in his allegiance he chose to serve the LORD (Joshua 24:15), and that he is referred to, by implication, as one of the faithful in Hebrews chapter eleven, verse thirty. The only long day of any significance mentioned in the Bible is the thousand year day of the Lord (Revelation 20:4).



## NEWS AND NOTES

### Vale Helen Miller

We were all saddened by the sudden death of our beloved sister in Christ, Helen Miller, loving and much loved wife of Ian, mother of Edward, and daughter of Anastasios and Zoe Tsakonas. Helen had an abiding faith in, and love for, our Lord Jesus Christ, and she experienced great joy as she looked forward to the promised, future resurrection of all mankind. Helen wanted everyone to know and share the wonderful prospect of God's coming Kingdom, and the firm promises made certain for us through the death and resurrection of our Saviour, Jesus, who spoke these pivotal words long ago;

*"Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life.  
The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;  
and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.'"* (John 11:25,26).

*"Trust in the LORD and do good;  
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture."* (Psalm 37:3).

## THE NEW COVENANT NEWS

The New Covenant News is compiled by an editor responsible to the New Covenant Fellowship. The thoughts expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of all of the members of the group, and readers are requested to heed the words:  
***"Prove all things"*** (1 Thessalonians 5:21).



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