

# **BITTER HONEY: THE REVELATION**

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## INTRODUCTION - WHAT IS A VISION?

The bulk of this study was written in 1976. It was motivated by a concern about the lack of consistency among interpretations of the Revelation. There are almost as many interpretations of the Revelation as there are students of the book. The purpose of this study is not to provide a correct interpretation of the Revelation that could gain wide acceptance. The purpose of this study is also not to provide a commentary about the book. No attempt is made to survey the academic discussion about the Revelation even though that discussion has often been very helpful in understanding the symbolism of the book. The purpose of this study is very limited. It attempts to suggest Old Testament background material that could shed light on the meaning of the symbols used in the Revelation. It suggests an interpretation of the Revelation that grows from the rest of Scripture. The study is included on this web page in the hope that each reader may gain useful insights from this study which can be used as the Spirit directs in the construction of alternative interpretations of the vision. This study should be viewed as an idea book rather than a position to be defended against its rivals.

The Revelation has always been a highly controversial book. It and II Peter were the last books accepted into the canon of Scripture. That should not be surprising because John only wrote the book at the end of the first century AD. The church didn't know what to do with it, and early Christian authors made only very limited use of it. The biggest problem with the book is its symbolic character. What were the symbols describing? Were they describing general spiritual principles that could be understood in several different ways? Were they describing historical events? If they were depicting historical events, should those events be sought at the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in 70 AD, or should most of the events depicted in the book be sought at the end of history? Beyond that, to what extent should parallel religious imagery across the Near East be used to explain the book? Should it be seen as growing mainly from the Old Testament, or should it be seen mainly as a product of the Near Eastern culture? There is no clear and obvious answer to these questions, and that had led to an endless diversity of interpretations for the book.

This study is based on several highly controversial assumptions. The first assumption is that the central topic of the Revelation is history rather than broad symbolism. The second assumption is that it is a message from God to His church that it gives accurate information about the future whether or not that message is understood. The third assumption is that the Revelation is a dreamlike vision. It assumes that the Holy Spirit used material that was already in John's mind to craft this message for the churches. The fourth assumption is that most of the material in John's mind that gave birth to the Revelation was Scripture. It assumes that the Revelation can only be understood by tracing the Old Testament roots for the imagery in the book. These are controversial but relatively predictable assumptions.

The final assumption behind this study is far more unusual. The interpretation presented in this study is based primarily on a chronological scheme. This suggested chronology will find little support in the academic community and will be accepted by few readers of the study. However, the chronological scheme determines the shape of the interpretation presented here. After 30 years of distance from this work, the author remains convinced that the basic parameters of this interpretation are correct even though a number of the details in the interpretation may be in need of review. The author presents this study with the full understanding that its conclusions will not convince most of those who read it. It is included on this web page in faith that the Holy Spirit will use it as He wishes.

The chronological perspective in this study begins with the theological importance of Genesis 1. Moses Silver argued that both the 1st century AD Jewish community and the early Christian church believed that the "days" of Genesis 1 would shape the course of human history. Both early Christian and 1st century Jewish authors accepted the principle that a day was as a thousand years with the Lord, and a thousand years was as a day. Silver argued that 1st century Jewish and Christian authors thought that human history would last for 7,000 years. The first 5,000 years would be comprised of normal history. This period would be followed by the 6th millennium of human history. Since Adam was created in the

6th day, the 6th millennium would be the messianic age. In the 7th millennium, God would enter into His rest. Silver argued that both 1st century Jewish authors like Josephus and early Christian authors counted the Old Testament genealogical information in a different way than it is counted today. Many believed that they were living very close to the year 5,000, and that the chronology would produce the messianic age. Silver argued that so many messianic figures sprung up in the first century because of the widespread belief that the chronology would produce the Messianic age.<sup>1</sup>

The interpretation of Revelation presented in this study is based on the suggestion that Genesis 1 may have been very important to the prophets, but it played a different role in Revelation than the one suggested by Silver. This study suggests that the prophets anticipated seven "last days" that would parallel the "days" of creation in Genesis 1. This study suggests that the "last days" motif could be used to explain several of the nebulous passages in Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation. The clearest descriptions of the 7 "last days" came from the book of Daniel. In Daniel 2:31ff, the prophet interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream. The king had seen a single great statue with a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of mixed iron and clay. A stone cut out without hands struck the statue's feet, crushing them. Then the whole statue was crushed at one time. Not a trace was left of the statue, but the stone became a great mountain that filled the whole earth. Daniel interpreted this dream for the king. Nebuchadnezzar and his empire were the head of gold. The next three layers of the statue would be successive world empires. With the aid of hindsight, these empires can be identified as Persia, Greece, and Rome. The feet represent a period of mixed nations when no one nation dominated all others. History since the fall of Rome has fit this description. Daniel also prophesied that the period of mixed nations would end in instant destruction. Then the whole statue would be destroyed in a moment. Finally, Christ's kingdom, Mount Zion, would fill the whole earth. The seven events described in Nebuchadnezzar's dream were then 1) Assyria and Babylon, the empires of Mesopotamia, 2) the empire of the Medes and Persians, 3) the Greece Empire formed by Alexander the Great, 4) the Roman Empire, 5) the mixed nations that grew out of the Roman Empire, 6) the events associated with Armageddon, and 7) the kingdom after Christ's return.

The next vision that Daniel saw describing future events was recorded in Daniel 7. This vision followed the same pattern as the first. The prophet saw four beasts coming out of the sea. The first was like a lion and had the wings of an eagle. The second resembled a bear. The third looked like a leopard with four wings that resembled a bird's wings. The fourth beast was extremely strong and had ten horns. One of the horns became extremely strong and uttered great boasts. This horn was killed and its body was given to the fire. Dominion was taken away from the rest of the beasts, but an extension of life was given to them. Then the Son of Man would be given a kingdom which would not pass away. Daniel was given an interpretation of this vision. He was told that the four beasts were four kings. The ten horns were ten kings who would arise after the fourth king. One of these ten kings would be extremely strong, and would persecute God's people. He would be judged and his dominion would be taken away. Then the saints of the Holy One would receive the kingdom. This vision can be interpreted in light of the pattern found in Daniel 2. The four beasts are the empires of Mesopotamia, Persia, Greece, and Rome. The ten horns are the period of mixed nations that followed the fall of Rome. The destruction of the proud horn came at the end of this period. It represented the events associated with Armageddon. Then Christ will return with His people and will inherit the kingdom forever.

Daniel's next vision named the second and third empires. In Daniel 8, the prophet was standing by a canal in Susa, the capital of the Persian empire. Daniel saw a ram standing by the canal that was shattered by a male goat. As soon as the male goat became strong, its large horn was broken into four smaller horns. One of these smaller horns became powerful and magnified itself to be equal to the Commander of the host. It removed the regular sacrifices and the sanctuary was thrown down. Then the host was given

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Abba Hillel Silver, *A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel*, (New York: Macmillan, 1927)..

over into the power of that horn because of the host's transgressions. Finally, the holy place would be properly restored. The angel Gabriel explained Daniel's vision. The ram standing beside the canal in Susa represented the kings of Media and Persia. The male goat was Greece. As soon as Alexander the Great conquered the known world, he died and his empire was broken into four pieces. Later, a power would arise which would oppose the Prince of Peace. This vision fit the pattern found in the first two visions. Assyrian and Babylon were captured by Persia, and Persia was captured by Greece. Later another power arose, Rome. The Roman Empire established emperor worship. It opposed Christ, destroyed the temple, and scattered the Jews. After a long period of wandering during the mixed nations, Israel was properly restored. According to Luke 21:24, Israel's return to Jerusalem marked the end of the age of the gentiles, and Israel was being properly restored.

Several other places in Scripture described the same historical pattern. The book of Joel predicted that Jerusalem would be destroyed by four successive invasions of locusts. These locusts were constantly described as God's mighty army. They represented the empires of Mesopotamia, Persia, Greece and Rome. Joel 2:18-27 described a restoration of the blessings of Palestine when the northern army was driven away. Joel 2:28-32 described an outpouring of the Holy Spirit which was identified in Acts 2:17-21 as Pentecost. Joel 3:1 predicted a return of the Jews to Jerusalem. This return was after Pentecost, so it referred to the present return and it marked the end of the period of mixed nations. Joel 3:2-17 described Armageddon, and the closing verses of Joel described the kingdom age after Christ returned.

Zechariah had a similar view of history. In Zechariah 5, the curse of the law went out over the whole earth. This may have represented the establishment of the Old Testament community and of God's revelation of the law through it. Then a woman named wickedness was given a temple in Babylon. This woman resembled the great harlot Babylon in Revelation 17, but "wickedness" was the first Babylon. After the establishment of Babylon, the prophet saw in Zechariah 6:1-8, four chariots coming forth from between two mountains. The chariots were drawn by red, black, white, and dapple horses. An angel described these chariots as the four spirits of heaven going forth after standing before the Lord of the whole earth. These chariots patrolled the earth, and the second and third chariots appeased God's wrath in the land of the north. The four chariots may have been the four empires of Mesopotamia, Persia, Greece, and Rome. The empires patrolled the earth maintaining some degree of law on the earth. They were spirits of heaven just as Romans 13:4 called human government a "minister of God." The second and third empires of Persia and Greece appeased God's wrath in the land of the north. During these empires, God's anger at His people was appeased, and Jews returned to Palestine. During the first and fourth empires, God's anger was not appeased, but Jerusalem was carried into exile. The next prophecies in Zechariah were the coming of Christ (Zechariah 6:12-13), of Christ's return, and of His kingdom (Zechariah 8).

Ezekiel 8 described the abominations of Judah. In response to these abominations, Ezekiel 9 called the executioners of Jerusalem to come with their destroying weapons. Among them was a certain man dressed in linen with a writing case at his loins. This man went through Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who groaned over the abominations of God's people. The six executioners killed everyone else. These executioners devastated Jerusalem. Ezekiel was so terrified of the devastation that he prayed for the remnant of Israel. The man dressed in linen reported to God that he had done just as he was commanded. The man with a writing case was a symbol for Christ. Paul noted in II Corinthians 1:22 that Christ had sealed us and had given us the Holy Spirit as a pledge. Christ appeared among six executioners. While Ezekiel's meaning is somewhat less clear, the six executioners might have represented the six empires of Mesopotamia, Persia, Greece, Rome, the mixed nations, and the events around Armageddon. During these periods, Christ's people were chastened for their sins, and the remnant of the Old Testament community was persecuted. There were only six executioners because God's people would be delivered forever during the seventh period. After Armageddon, Zephaniah 3:18 promised that Christ would gather those who groaned over Israel as Ezekiel did. Ezekiel's message was a promise of judgment and hope for those who were sealed by God.

Why were there seven specific period? Why not six, eight, or an indefinite list? The answer may come from prophetic dating. Christ lived, died, and rose at the high point of the Roman Empire. Rome was the fourth of the seven last "days" or events. So Christ's life divided the history of the last "days" into two equal halves of three and a half "days" each. These three and a half days were described constantly through Daniel and Revelation. Whenever the prophets mentioned  $3\frac{1}{2}$  days, weeks, or years, the prophecy may have been describing history either from the Israel and Judah's captivity to Christ, or from Christ to the eschaton. Scripture also mentioned 42 months which equaled  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years or periods. 1260 days was also common. 1260 days equaled 42 months if Biblical months were calculated as 30 day periods. The phrase time (1), times (2) and half a time could also add up to  $3\frac{1}{2}$  times, or last days. This principle could provide the key for understanding several obscure prophecies both in the Old Testament and in Revelation.

One passage that could be interpreted with this principle might be Daniel 12:12. The prophet was told, "How blessed is he who keeps waiting and attains to the 1335 days!" What could 1335 days have been? Daniel received this prophecy in the third year of the Persian king Cyrus. From this point forward to the end of history, there would be  $2\frac{1}{2}$  "days" until Christ's birth (Persia, Greece, and half of the Roman Empire), then  $3\frac{1}{2}$  periods until the end of history (half of the Roman Empire, the mixed nations, the events around Armageddon, and the kingdom). Daniel 12:12 might have described these periods. Subtracting 1260 days ( $3\frac{1}{2}$  periods) from 1335 days would leave 75 days. This 75 days could be  $2\frac{1}{2}$  months (or periods) of 30 days each. So Daniel may have been claiming that there would be  $2\frac{1}{2}$  periods followed by  $3\frac{1}{2}$  periods, and how blessed would be the one who kept waiting and attained to the end of the age. That calculation is necessarily tenuous, and the numbers could be interpreted in a number of other ways as well. Yet if the idea of seven last days is accepted, it provides a possible interpretation to a very nebulous passage.

This pattern could also be used to interpret the much discussed last four verses of Daniel 9. In Daniel 9:2, Daniel noticed Jeremiah's prophecy that the desolation of Jerusalem would be completed in 70 years. So Daniel prayed that God would keep His promise and spare Jerusalem. Then Gabriel appeared to teach Daniel about the city's future. Daniel 9:24 confirmed God's promise through Jeremiah. Jerusalem's desolation would be completed in 70 years. Daniel 9:25 spoke about the coming of Messiah the Prince. Daniel could not understand that Christ would come twice. He would come after seven weeks. These seven weeks might have been the seven "last day" which would culminate with Christ's return. Christ would also come in sixty two weeks. This would have been 434 days, or perhaps years. Daniel was told that from the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem till Messiah the Prince would be 434 years. That date could be fit roughly with Nehemiah's final return from Babylon which ended the restoration of Jerusalem. Daniel 9:26 said that after 62 weeks, the Messiah would be cut off and have nothing. The prince who was to come would destroy Jerusalem and its temple. The city's end would come in a flood of gentile enemies. It would lie desolate until the end of history and there would be wars until that time. Daniel 9:27 may then have put Jerusalem's destruction in the context of the last seven "days" introduced by verse 25. Gabriel said that Satan, the prince to come, would make a firm covenant with many nations for seven periods. However, in the middle of those periods, he would destroy the temple and set up Israel's desolation. This could be the abomination of desolation in Matthew 24:15. Israel would lie desolate until a complete destruction was poured out on Satan and his empire. Daniel 9 is a very difficult passage to understand. It can be (and has been) interpreted in many different ways. This suggestion is no more probable than so many others. However, if the motif of seven last days is assumed to be correct, the passage can be fit into that context.

If there were seven last days, they could have been described by the seven seals in Revelation 6. The seven seals would then give the general structure of history. John promised that the seven last days would be a time of persecution for God's people. Jews have suffered constantly since the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. The New Testament church has often been persecuted. This suffering would

increase as history neared its climax. Daniel was told that his prophecies would be completed, “as soon as they finish shattering the power of the holy people” (Daniel 12:7).