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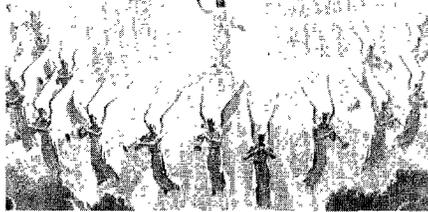


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The Christ of the Apocalypse—5

THE COMING KING

By WALTER F. SPECHT

ONE OF THE CENTRAL affirmations of New Testament faith is that Jesus Christ is King and Lord. Upon His ascension He was enthroned at God's right hand as a reigning Messiah.¹ "All authority in heaven and on earth" are now His.² "Angels, authorities, and powers" are subject to Him.³ But His rulership on this rebellious planet has not, as yet, been actualized. Satan has established a counterkingdom, and there are hostile forces to be overcome.

Christ's rulership is evident only to His followers and can be apprehended only by faith. But the book of Revelation looks forward to the time when all authority will be wrested from opposing powers, the reign of Christ will become actualized, and He will be unveiled in all His majesty and glory.

When the seventh trumpet is blown, loud voices in heaven proclaim, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever."⁴ At these words the 24 elders bow in adoration and exclaim, "We give thanks to thee, Lord God Almighty, who art and who wast, that thou hast taken thy great power and begun to reign."⁵ The marriage supper of the Lamb is preceded by a shout of joy by a great multitude whose voice reminded John of the mighty sea and loud thunder peals, crying, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns."⁶

At a time when it was feared that the ruling world power of Rome might crush the church, John could affirm by faith that Jesus Christ is "the ruler of kings on earth."⁷ By

this phrase he probably gave a Christological interpretation to the words of the eighty-ninth psalm, which say of David: "I will make him the first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth."⁸ He would thus seek to reassure the persecuted Christians that our Lord will triumph over the temporal powers that are oppressing them.

While Jesus is a Messianic King now, His rulership is not apparent to the world. Hence at the end of history He will be revealed for what He really is. He will be unveiled in all His majesty and glory. This future coming in triumph of the great Lord of history is the theme of the book of Revelation. His true dignity as Messiah and Son of God are to be disclosed for all men to see.

At the beginning of the Apocalypse, John sets down the motto and theme of the whole book: "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen."⁹

Symbol of Divine Activity

He comes with the clouds. Clouds are often associated with divine activity in the Sacred Scriptures.¹⁰ Hence His return with clouds indicates that this is a scene of divine majesty; our Lord is returning in victorious triumph. This return, John emphasizes, will be a public event; it will transcend geographical limitations and be made visible to all. This great universal event will focus all places, all peoples, and all times upon it. Even those who pierced¹¹ our Lord are raised to witness His triumphant coming.¹² "Those who mocked and smote Him will be there. . . . Then the whole world will know and understand. They will realize who and what they, poor, feeble, finite beings, have been warring against."¹³

The revelation will be disconcert-

ing indeed. Most of earth's inhabitants, unfortunately, will view it with terror and remorse, rather than hope and joy.

In one of his visions John sees the great climax of human history as the gathering of two eschatological harvests: one of grain, the other of grapes. Describing the first of these he writes: "Then I looked, and lo, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat upon the cloud, 'Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.' So he who sat upon the cloud swung his sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped."¹⁴

It is because the harvest is initiated by the call of an angel, "Put in your sickle, and reap," that some have hesitated to interpret the reaper as Christ. It is objected that surely our Lord would not begin the eschatological harvest at the command of an angel. But this angel may be understood simply as a messenger conveying to the Son of man the will of the Father.

What is signified by this grain harvest? Is it the gathering in of the wicked, or of the righteous, or of both together? No specific interpretation of it is given. Passages can be cited from the Old Testament that use the figure of reaping grain for judgment on wicked men and nations.¹⁵ In the Gospels, however, harvesting grain is a figure used for the gathering in of the redeemed.¹⁶ In the parable of the wheat and the tares the gathering of both the righteous and the wicked is presented.¹⁷ Since the vision of Revelation 14 describes two harvests (which correspond to the grain and fruit harvests of Palestine), and the vintage is thrown into the winepress of

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God's wrath, we conclude that the first is a gathering in of the righteous.

The ripeness of the grain would then indicate that God's people have reached maturity. They are fully prepared for the final harvest. What has caused them to reach this mature state? In the language of Palestine's climate, this means that the early and latter (or spring) rains have fallen and have done their work in developing the harvest. These rains appropriately represent the work of God's grace through the Holy Spirit upon Christians.¹⁸

The meaning of the grape harvest¹⁹ that followed is not in doubt: it clearly refers to judgment on the wicked. The clusters of grapes were reaped and cast into the "great wine press of the wrath of God." To understand the picture, one needs to recall how grapes were pressed into wine in ancient times. Ancient wine presses consisted of two troughs, an upper one and a lower one, connected by a channel. In the upper one the grapes were placed and pressed out by trampling with the bare feet. The juice then flowed to the lower trough by the channel connecting the two.

Mighty Triumph

In another victory scene John beholds the conquering Christ riding forth in mighty triumph: "Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses. From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thighs he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords."²⁰

He rides forth on a white horse, an emblem of victory. As the commander in chief, He is followed by the hosts of heaven, a vast unnumbered throng, who fill the sky with their radiant forms.²¹ "He comes, victor in heaven and earth, to judge the living and the dead."²² He comes to conquer the powers of evil that have oppressed His people. Even so, He will not judge on the basis of personal vindictiveness or

arbitrary power, but will wage war in righteousness.

"His eyes are like a flame of fire," which implies that nothing can be hidden from His searching gaze. The only weapon He uses is His word, symbolized by the sword issuing from His mouth.

On His head are many diadems, the insignia of His royal power. They are many because He is Lord of all the kingdoms of the world.²³ "He is clad in a robe dipped in blood."²⁴ Commentators are divided on the question as to whose blood is on His robe. Some understand this as a reference to Calvary.²⁵ Indeed, it was by His own shed blood that Christ became a conqueror. It seems more probable, however, that in this context the picture is similar to that of God treading the wine press in Isaiah 63, where the question is asked and answered:²⁶

"Why is thy apparel red,
and thy garments like his that
treads in the wine press?

"I have trodden the wine press
alone,
and from the peoples no one was
with me;
I trod them in my anger
and trampled them in my wrath;
their lifeblood is sprinkled upon
my garments,
and I have stained all my raiment."²⁷

The warrior-Christ bears the designation "The Word of God."²⁸ "What speech is to thought, so is Christ to the invisible Father."²⁹ Jesus Christ is "God's thought made audible."³⁰ He is also God's word in action, embodying promise, judgment, and power. Besides this there is a secret name inscribed, which He alone knows.³¹ Finally, inscribed on His robe and on His thigh is the majestic title "King of kings and Lord of lords."³² No designation could more forcefully set forth His absolute sovereignty.

Space does not permit us to deal with other passages in Revelation dealing with the climax of history. But we must note the reverberating message of Jesus, "I am coming soon." "I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown."³³ "Lo, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is he who is awake, keeping his garments that he may not go naked and be seen exposed!"³⁴

This keynote is repeated three times in the epilogue to the book.³⁵ "Behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."³⁶ "Behold I am coming soon, bringing my

recompense, to repay every one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."³⁷

Our Lord also declares Himself to be not only "the root and the offspring of David" but "the bright and morning star."³⁸ The shining of the morning star precedes the sunrise. So Jesus Christ inaugurates a new era of light to succeed the darkness of the present world. He heralds the morning of a new and unending day. "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"³⁹

John's response, "Come, Lord Jesus," is a translation of the fervent prayer of the early Aramaic-speaking church: "Maranatha," "Our Lord, come!"⁴⁰ Thus the early church sighed and prayed for the return of their King and Messiah. How much more should the present-day Adventist Church pray, "Our Lord, come!" □

Concluded

REFERENCES

- ¹ Acts 2:31-33; Eph. 1:20; Rev. 3:21.
- ² Matt. 28:18, R.S.V. All Bible texts quoted in this article are from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise designated.
- ³ 1 Peter 3:22.
- ⁴ Rev. 11:15.
- ⁵ Verse 17.
- ⁶ Chap. 19:6.
- ⁷ Chap. 1:5.
- ⁸ Ps. 89:27.
- ⁹ Rev. 1:7.
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Numbers 11:25; Psalm 104:3; Isaiah 19:1; and compare the manifestations of God in clouds at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:9); the pillar of cloud by which God led the Israelites (Ex. 13:21; Deut. 1:33); and the cloud at the transfiguration (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34f).
- ¹¹ The reference to those who pierced Him is reminiscent of Zechariah 12:10. Here again John follows a Theodotianic reading, close to the Hebrew, rather than the LXX.
- ¹² Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 637, 642, 643.
- ¹³ ———, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 739, 740.
- ¹⁴ Rev. 14:14-16.
- ¹⁵ Jer. 51:33; Joel 3:13.
- ¹⁶ Matt. 9:37, 38; Luke 10:2; Mark 4:29; John 4:35.
- ¹⁷ Matt. 13:30, 37-40, 43.
- ¹⁸ See Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 506ff. *The Great Controversy*, p. 611.
- ¹⁹ Rev. 14:17-20.
- ²⁰ Chap. 19:11-16.
- ²¹ *The Great Controversy*, p. 641.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ In Ellen G. White's description of the same scene she speaks of "a crown within a crown, seven in number" (see *Early Writings*, pp. 53, 54, 281); and compare *The Desire of Ages*, p. 739). The hymn "Crown Him With Many Crowns" tries to suggest an interpretation for these various crowns.
- ²⁴ Some manuscripts read "sprinkled with."
- ²⁵ See, for example, Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, p. 230.
- ²⁶ Isa. 63:2, 3.
- ²⁷ The Palestinian Targum on Genesis 49:11 gives a similar picture of the victorious Messiah: "How beautiful is the King Messiah! Binding his loins and going forth to war against them that hate him, he will slay kings with princes, and make the rivers red with the blood of their slain, and his hills white with the fat of their mighty ones, his garments will be dipped in blood, and he himself like the juice of the winepress."
- ²⁸ Rev. 19:13; cf. John 1:1; 1 John 1:1f.
- ²⁹ *The SDA Bible Commentary*, Ellen G. White's Comments, on John 1:18, p. 1131.
- ³⁰ *The Desire of Ages*, p. 19.
- ³¹ This is the fourth mention of our Lord's secret name (see Rev. 2:17; 3:12; 14:1; 19:12). Some advocate that the name is "Jesus," but Christ alone knows for sure.
- ³² Rev. 19:16.
- ³³ Chap. 3:11.
- ³⁴ Chap. 16:15.
- ³⁵ Chap. 22:6-21.
- ³⁶ Verse 7.
- ³⁷ Verses 12, 13.
- ³⁸ Verse 16.
- ³⁹ Verse 20.
- ⁴⁰ 1 Cor. 16:21. It is rendered by the R.S.V. as, "Our Lord, come!" Although this clause has been translated as "The Lord has come," or "The Lord is coming," the most likely rendering is the one given by the R.S.V. and the N.E.B.