



The Sword & The Plow

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Commentary on the Book of Joel

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Editor's Note: I am writing a commentary on the book of Joel. This is an early draft of my comments on chapter one. Chapter two will appear in next month's edition; chapter three sometime thereafter. Joel is very important eschatologically, as he foretold the Day of the Lord and destruction of Jerusalem, and was cited by Peter against that event in the very first gospel sermon after Christ's ascension into heaven. As always, we hope you find these comments useful.

1 – The word of the LORD

The Bible everywhere claims to be the “word of the Lord,” not of man. If scripture merely represents the subjective thoughts and impressions of man, then it has only the authority of man; it is fallible, subject to error, and may be gainsaid and ignored with impunity. But if scripture represents the word of God, then it speaks with the infallibility and authority of God and cannot be ignored without mortal peril. That scripture is the word of God, not man, is affirmed by Peter: “*Knowing this first, that no prophecy of scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time*

by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Pet. 1:20, 21). Peter, speaking as an apostle of Jesus Christ, thus affirms that scripture does not find its origin in the “will of man,” but the Spirit of God. That not merely the thoughts, but the very words themselves (*verbissima ipsi*) are selected by God’s Spirit, is implicit in the statement of Paul that “*all scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim. 3:16).* The word “inspiration” here is from the Greek “*qeopneustoV*” (theo-pneustos), or “God-breathed” and signifies that scripture is *spoken* (“breathed out”) by God, making the prophets merely the instruments through which he

speaks. If we can think of the prophets and apostles as musical instruments, each with its unique qualities and characteristics given by God, which the Spirit “plays,” selecting each note and the very mood and tone conveyed, we would come close to the conception of scripture that the Bible communicates about itself (cf. 1 Cor. 14:6-8). However, scripture is inerrant only in the *original autographs*; the text has suffered small errors of spelling and other oversights at the hands of copyists and scribes. However, none of these errors or omissions affects the slightest part of the Bible’s message; God has *provisionally preserved* his word for the benefit and salvation of man. “*The word of the Lord endureth forever*” (1 Pet. 1:23-25; Ps. 119:89; Isa. 40:8; Matt. 24:35).

that came to

When Aaron and Mariam spoke against Moses because he had married a woman of Ethiopia, God rebuked them, saying,

If there be a prophet among you, I the LORD will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so, who is faithful in all mine house. With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the LORD shall he behold. (Num. 12:7, 8; cf. Ex. 33:11

Whereas God spoke face to face with Moses and Moses beheld the similitude of the Lord, God revealed himself to other prophets by *dreams and visions*. These dreams and visions included *oracular* revelation impressed upon the prophet’s mind. In the first book of Samuel, the Lord thus “appeared” to Samuel “by the word of the LORD” (1 Sam. 3:1, 21). Similarly, Paul states that he learned the gospel not from man, but by revelation (Gal. 1:11, 12). So here, God’s revelation came to Joel in oracular form, recorded here in the book bearing his name.

Joel the son of Pethuel.

The name “Joel” means “JHWH (Jehovah) is God.” Nothing more is known of this prophet than that he was the son of Pethuel, whose name signifies “the sincerity” or “open-heartedness of God” (the suffix “el” is the Hebrew for “God”). Even the time Joel prophesied is cloaked in mystery. The only certain indication we possess is reference in Joel 3:2, 12 to the “valley of Jehoshaphat,” so that he must have written sometime after the event of which that became a symbol (2 Chron. 20). It is supposed by some that Joel wrote before Amos and Isaiah on the ground that these seem to borrow from him (cf. Joel 3:16 with Amos 1:2,

Joel 3:18 with Amos 9:13; Joel 1:15 with Isa. 13:6). However, the opposite inference is equally plausible; viz., that Joel borrowed from Isaiah and Amos. Besides, since God is ultimately the author of all scripture, no real inference can be drawn about the priority of any given writer based upon similar usage of speech, since common authorship makes inevitable the use of common themes and language. In the end, the time the book of Joel was written cannot be known.

2 – Hear this, ye old men, and give ear, all ye inhabitants of the land.

The prophet calls the eldest representatives of the community and all the inhabitants of the land to heed the events he is about to predict. “Old men” are specifically named because Israel was a *patriarchal* society in which men were charged with the weight and responsibility of leadership, and women were to be in subjection to their husbands or fathers, such that the prophet’s calling old men to listen is most natural, whereas had he said “hear this, ye old women” we should be very surprised.

Hath this been in your days, or even in the days of your fathers?

The coming calamity is without precedent in the mind and memory those living; nothing like it has occurred in their lives, or in the lives of their fathers. “Fathers” are mentioned, again laying emphasis to the patriarchal order of Israelite society. When a nation wanders into spiritual apostasy, the natural role of the members and sexes are often reversed, further aggravating the people’s ability to find their way and order their lives and society. The prophet Isaiah, in the midst of Israel’s great spiritual apostasy leading to the Assyrio-Babylonian captivity, thus indicts the nation, saying, “*As for my people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them*” (Isa. 3:12). The apostle Paul was similarly at pains to establish the divine order for the human race, of which the woman’s headship veiling is a symbol (1 Cor. 11:2-16), saying, “*I would have you to know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God*” (1 Cor. 11:3). Thus, although it is not Joel’s purpose here to give instruction regarding the role of the sexes; it is nevertheless implicit in addressing men as the natural, appointed leaders and representatives of the community.

3 – Tell ye your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation.

Like the plague of locusts upon the Egyptians, which “neither thy fathers, nor thy fathers’ fathers have seen”

and which would be retold “in the ears of thy son, and of thy son’s son” (Ex. 10:2, 6), the coming catastrophe would be so great that it would be recounted for generations among the Jews, and thus serve to warn future generations to fear and obey the Lord lest they suffer similar calamity. God is reluctant to visit man’s sins upon him; only when there is no other remedy is God’s hand forced to bring his mighty judgments upon mankind to turn them from their sinful ways. When calamity strikes, generations profit and thus keep themselves from evil.

4 – That which the palmerworm hath left hath the locust eaten; and that which the locust hath left hath the cankerworm eaten; and that which the cankerworm hath left hath the caterpillar eaten.

The plagues of insects here are sometimes taken metaphorically for the Assyrio-Babylonian invasions of Tiglath-Pileser, Shalmaneser, Sennacherib, and Nebuchadnezzar, or the succession of four world empires depicted by Daniel; *viz.*, Babylon, Medepersia, Greece, and Rome. In support of this view we may note that the prophet Nahum wrote against Nineveh, likening the invading armies of foreigners to swarms of locusts and cankerworms:

There shall the fire devour thee; the sword shall cut thee off, it shall eat thee up like the cankerworm: make thyself many as the cankerworm, make thyself many as the locusts. Thou hast multiplied thy merchants above the stars of the heaven: the cankerworm spoileth, and flieth away. Thy crowned are as the locusts, and thy captains as the great grasshoppers, which camp in the hedges in the cold day. Nahum 3:15-17

Jeremiah used similar imagery against Babylon, saying, “cause the horses to come up as caterpillars” (Jer. 51:27). Finally, Revelation borrows directly from Joel’s imagery to depict the legions of Vespasian and Titus sent against the Jewish nation (Rev. 9:1-11). Since invading armies are likened by the prophets to a plague of locusts, and Revelation in particular uses Joel’s imagery in a figurative and symbolic sense, some commentators interpret Joel metaphorically here. However, merely because a passage will bear an interpretation does not mean it is correct. The only valid interpretation is the one the author *intended*. In the passages we have looked at, the author’s intention and use of figurative expressions is apparent; we recognize instantly that the writer is employing a simile to liken one thing to another, and does not intend we understand him literally. However, no such intention is apparent in Joel. Although use of Joel’s prophecy by Peter at Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21) and John in

Revelation indicates Joel’s imagery possessed a *plenior sensus* (fuller sense) that looked ahead to Messianic times and the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome (A.D. 66-70), the better view is that the verses before us are intended in the *first instance* to be understood literally of various species of locusts and crop-destroying pests.

5 – Awake, ye drunkards, and weep; and howl, all ye drinkers of wine; for it is cut off from your mouth.

Those addicted to wine and given to drunkenness are roused from their stupors; the careless abandon with which they have neglected God and righteousness, giving themselves instead to pleasure and banqueting, is rebuked by destruction of the vine; they bewail the loss of wine.¹

6 – For a nation is come up upon my land, strong, and without number,

The source of the vintage’s destruction is now revealed: The land will undergo an invasion as if by a foreign army. In the book of Judges, the Israelites’ sins caused the Lord to deliver them into the hand of the Midianites and Amalekites who invaded the land in such numbers that they were likened to swarming grasshoppers: “For they came up with the cattle and their tents, and they came as grasshoppers for multitude; for both they and their camels were without number: and they entered into the land to destroy it” (Jud. 6:5). In Judges, the armies of men were likened to locusts; in Joel, the plague of locusts is likened to an army of men. Collectively, the locust army is called “a nation” just as the ants collectively are called “a people” and the conies a “feeble folk” (Prov. 30:25, 26). “My land” refers to the Lord: “For the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me” (Lev. 25:23; *cf.* Deut. 32:43; 2 Chr. 7:20; Ps. 85:1). The prophet uses the *prophetic perfect* “is come” to show the certainty of what is foretold. Although spoken of in absolute terms, such pronouncements nevertheless

¹ This should not be mistaken to teach that use of wine is unlawful *per se*. To the contrary, a “blessing” is in the vine (Isa. 65:8); it “cheereth God and man” (Jud. 9:13); and wine “maketh glad the heart of man” (Ps. 104:15). Christ’s first miracle was to furnish wine for the wedding couple at Cana, which is commemorated by the feast of “Epiphany,” because in it he manifested his divine glory to his disciples (Jn. 2:1-11). Moreover, it was almost certainly wine Christ used when he instituted the Lord’s Supper, for Passover is in the spring; but the vintage is not brought in until late summer/early fall (Micah 7:1), leaving only fermented, not fresh, “fruit of the vine” available for use (Luke 22:15-20).

are generally conditional: If the people turn from evil and seek the Lord, God may relent, as the prophet states in the following chapter: “*For he is gracious, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil*” (Joel 2:14). If the predicted judgment was absolute, why should God tell them beforehand unless it were to move the people to repentance that the destruction warned might be avoided?

At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; If a nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. Jer. 18:7, 8

whose teeth are the teeth of a lion, and he hath the cheek teeth of a great lion

The prophet compares the teeth of the locusts and caterpillars to the teeth of a lion; as lions strangle their prey and devour it with their teeth, the locusts will devour crops and foliage.

7 – He hath laid my vine waste, and barked my fig tree:

The vine and fig tree were proverbial in Israel as symbols of plenty and security: “*And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree*” (1 Kng. 4:25). “*But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid*” (Mic. 4:4). “*In that day, saith the Lord of hosts, shall ye call every man his neighbor under the vine and under the fig tree*” (Zech. 3:10). The vine and fig are also used collectively as symbols of God’s people: “*Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: thou hast cast out the heathen, and planted it*” (Ps. 80:8; cf. Jer. 2:21; Lk. 13:6, 7). It is unclear here which sense the prophet intends, whether literal vines and fig trees or as a symbol of Judah itself. The fact that the singular is used—“my vine” and “my fig tree”—suggests the prophet has in mind the kingdom of Judah collectively: “*For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant*” (Isa. 5:7). Conversely, if the general destruction of the vintage and fig harvest were intended, we would expect the plural “my vines” and “my fig trees.” In the end, however, both are true: In the general destruction of the vintage and fig harvest Judah itself is laid waste and bare.

he hath made it clean bare, and cast it away; the branches thereof are made white.

The inner cambium layer beneath the outer bark carries nourishment to the tree’s branches and limbs; this is the

life of the tree and the part that adds “rings” to its annual growth. When this layer is eaten away, the tree cannot send sap to its extremities and will die. As trees are stripped of their outer bark to reveal the soft inner layer which the locusts devour, so Judah will be stripped clean in the ensuing plague; it will be as a tree whose limbs have been barked, her branches white, unable to send nourishment to its limbs.

8 – Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth.

The verb “lament” is feminine imperative and requires a feminine subject, here assumed but not expressed. The subject almost certainly is the collective people and congregation of Judah to whom the prophecy is directed. The image is that of a young maiden betrothed to marry but as yet unwed, whose husband-to-be is suddenly and tragically cut off, such that she puts off her bridal gown, donning sackcloth instead. Passions are strongest in our youth; the unfulfilled anticipation of marriage is replaced by premature widowhood, evoking the bitterest weeping and sorrow.

9 – The meat offering and the drink offering is cut off from the house of the LORD; the priests, and LORD’S ministers, mourn.

The famine resulting from the locust plague will impact the whole of Judea; even the temple and priesthood feel the effects. Meat offerings consisted of fine flour, sprinkled with oil and frankincense. The priest would take a handful of flour, pour oil and frankincense upon it and burn it before the Lord. The rest and remainder of the flour belonged to the priests as a thing most holy; it was to be baked in a pan without leaven and eaten in the holy place, in the court of the tabernacle. Lev. 2:1-3, 6:14-18). The priests were prohibited to drink wine or alcohol while serving in the tabernacle (Lev. 10:8-10); therefore, unlike meat offerings which belonged to the priests, drink offerings consisted of wine poured out unto the Lord, usually accompanying a burnt offering, sin offering, or other sacrifice (Num. 15:5, 7, 10).

10 – The field is wasted, the land mourneth; for the corn is wasted: the new wine is dried up, the oil languisheth.

The three great staples of ancient life are mentioned: grain, wine, and oil. These three appear together under the horseman of the Apocalypse that brought famine, a probable reference to the famine that occurred in the days of Claudius Caesar (Acts 11:28):

And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And

I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine. Rev. 6:5, 6

The plagues in Revelation progressively worsen and grow more pervasive in effect as God attempted to lead the Jewish people to repentance and acceptance of the gospel. Hence, a limit is set upon the famine: Oil and wine are there ordered not to be hurt. But the famine in Joel admits of no such limitation: grain, wine, and oil will all suffer scarcity.

11 – Be ashamed, O ye husbandmen; howl, O ye vinedressers, for the wheat and for the barley; because the harvest of the field is perished.

Those occupied as husbandmen and vinedressers are called to join the priestly caste in mourning the devastation of crops; their means of gainful employment vanishes before their eyes by the ever-advancing army of locusts. Wheat and barley are spring crops. Barley winters over and is ready for harvest at Passover, at the first full moon following the vernal equinox; the offering of the sheaf of firstfruits of the barley harvest on the “morrow after the Sabbath” following Passover prefigured the resurrection of Christ (Lev. 23:4-14). The wheat harvest follows fifty days later marked by Pentecost (Ex. 34:22; Lev. 23:15-21). The grape harvest came at the end of summer and was followed by the feast of Tabernacles or Ingathering the fifteenth day of the seventh month (Ex. 34:22; Lev. 23:33-44; Deut. 16:13). The plague would apparently be so timed as to destroy the barley when it was ripe, the wheat when it was as yet unripe, and the new growth of the vine, destroying the entire harvest of grain and summer fruit.

12 – The vine is dried up, and the fig tree languisheth; the pomegranate tree, the palm tree also, and the apple tree, even all the trees of the field, are withered: because joy is withered away from the sons of men.

When Moses described the blessed state of the Promised Land that the Jews were about to enter, he mentions the products here:

For the LORD thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey; a land wherein thou

shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass. When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the LORD thy God for the good land which he hath given thee. Deut. 8:7-10

But the happy condition of the land is now reversed, and famine and scarcity overtake the people because of their sin and apostasy from God. The principle crops of grain, grapes, and figs are not alone affected; all the trees of the field are ravished by the locust plague. The pomegranate, the date-palm, and apple trees are all denuded of foliage and wither away. The greatness of the calamity is inexpressible; therefore joy also withers and departs from the sons of men.

13 – Gird yourselves, and lament, ye priests: howl, ye ministers of the altar: come, lie all night in sackcloth, ye ministers of my God: for the meat offering and the drink offering is withholden from the house of your God.

Priests were mediators between God and man. Under the Old Testament, the worshiper was prohibited to approach God except through the sprinkling of blood and an appointed intermediary; the stranger that drew nigh was to be put to death (Num. 1:51). As the appointed mediators of the people, the priestly caste is called upon to intercede for the nation with God by humbling themselves in sackcloth and prostrating themselves before God in night-long vigil. Sackcloth was made from goat’s hair; was coarse and black (*cf.* Rev. 6:12 – “black as sackcloth of hair”); and was worn against the skin, often upon the loins in private self-affliction (Gen. 37:34; 2 Kng. 6:30), but upon the whole body as an outward display of repentance and humiliation (Isa. 37:1, 2; Jonah 3:5-8); its coarseness made it uncomfortable and suitable for afflicting oneself before God; black made it appropriate for mourning. As it would seem impious and inappropriate to dress in festal garb when one is overtaken by great calamity or the death of a loved one, sackcloth was deemed an appropriate expression of personal grief and mourning, or, as in the present case, repentance and contrition for sin.

14 – Sanctify ye a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry unto the LORD,

Fasting was another form of self-affliction, appropriate to times of mourning and grief, or when seeking heaven’s mercy or assistance. The priests were to take the lead in bringing the nation to repentance before

God; they were charged to *believe* the words of the prophet and to take all necessary action to avoid the predicted calamity by prayer and fasting. The priests were to be followed by the elders and rulers of the people. In calling a solemn assembly, all the inhabitants of the land were marshalled to the house of God where they might seek God's mercy and implore his pardon that the plague might be averted and his favor restored to his people.

15 – Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD

A “day of the Lord” bespeaks a time of judgment and divine visitation, and is either *special*, limited to a particular nation and people, or *general*, bringing numerous nations and peoples within its sweep. The book of Zephaniah provides an example of a day of the Lord that represented a general visitation upon various nations. The prophecy was given in the time of Josiah, king of Judah, and described the Babylonian invasion and conquest that brought most of the known world under the power of the Chaldeans. The nations mentioned include Judea, Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Moab, Ammon, Ethiopia, and Nineveh (Zeph. 1:14; 2:1-15). Another example exists in the third chapter of Joel, which depicts a time of judgment and wrath upon the nations of those that persecuted and oppressed God's people (Joel 3:1-17). This day of the Lord was eschatological and is the topic of New Testament teaching, and describes the series of judgments that ensued shortly after Christ received the kingdom of the world when he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. However, the locust plague now under discussion was a special day of the Lord, limited in scope to God's visitation upon Judah.

is at hand,

The phrase “at hand” signifies that divine visitation would overtake the generation of those living when the prophecy was spoken. This also follows from the fact that the priests, elders, and people were called to don sackcloth, and to fast and pray, for it is *their* sins that brought on the threatened plague, not a people yet to be born. It is sometimes objected that “at hand” can bespeak *certainty*, rather than nearness— an argument made by those who assume that Revelation was not fulfilled in the generation of those to whom it was written and addressed. It is true that there are several instances where the phrase seems to describe events many centuries in the future. However, in these cases “at hand” is used *proleptically*, and contemplates the nearness of judgment upon future peoples whose sins would provoke divine wrath, but who were not alive when the prophecy was given. Thus, Moses says that destruction would be “at hand” upon the generation of the Jews whom God would move to jealousy with a

“foolish nation” and those which are “not a people”— that is, the first generation of Jews who rejected the gospel even while the Gentiles received it (Deut. 32:21-35; cf. Rom. 10:19). “At hand” in this case must be viewed from the perspective of the generation and people to suffer judgment, not those alive when Moses uttered the prophetic announcement. This is clear from the entire context of the passage, which describes the latter end of the Jewish nation accomplished in A.D. 70. But in the case before us, as in the overwhelming majority of all others, the judgment was near upon those called to repentance, and is therefore characterized as already “at hand.”

and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come.

The plagues evoked by Moses upon Egypt were clearly understood by Pharaoh's counsellors as divine visitation, and nothing less than the “finger of God” (Ex. 8:19). So here, the plague of locusts would be such that its origin and source could not be mistaken as the result of chance or misadventure, but would be clearly understood as destruction from the Almighty.

16 – Is not the meat cut off before our eyes, yea, joy and gladness from the house of our God?

When the people enjoyed plenty, their joy and gladness overflowed into the house of God, which assumed a festive atmosphere. But when there was drought and famine, the temple became a place of mourning and lamentation, as the people bewailed their unhappy condition and besought the mercies of God. So, now in ensuing plague, joy and gladness are banished from the temple precincts by the suffering of the people.

17 – The seed is rotten under their clods, the garners are laid desolate, the barns are broken down; for the corn is withered.

Not only are the new growth and early crops like barley and wheat devoured, but later maturing crops like corn and vegetables rot beneath the soil for lack of rain to germinate their seeds. Consequently, the grain garners and barns have fallen into disuse and disrepair.

18 – How do the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed, because they have no pasture; yea, the flocks of sheep are made desolate.

The hapless beasts suffer because of the sins of men; field and pasture are afflicted by the drought; there is no tender herb for the cattle to lick up or the sheep to graze upon. The want of necessary pasturage renders the flocks desolate; they do not conceive, or if they conceive, their offspring are born still; those that are

born alive, are abandoned by their mothers; sheep become like the barren field whose seeds rot beneath the clods, their offspring abortive, still-born, and abandoned. So Jeremiah:

Judah mourneth, and the gates thereof languish; they are black unto the ground; and the cry of Jerusalem is gone up. And their nobles have sent their little ones to the waters: they came to the pits, and found no water; they returned with their vessels empty; they were ashamed and confounded and covered their heads. Because the ground is chapt, for there was no rain in the earth, the plowmen were ashamed and covered their heads. Yea, the hind also calved in the field, and forsook it, because there was no grass. Jer. 14:2-5

19 – O LORD, to thee will I cry: for the fire hath devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and the flame hath burned all the trees of the field.

The curse pronounced upon the Jews if they forsook God and his law threatened drought and famine:

And thy heaven that is over thy head shall be brass, and the earth that is under thee shall be iron. The LORD shall make the rain of thy land powder and dust: from heaven shall it come down upon thee, until thou be destroyed. Deut. 28:23, 24

So here Judea suffers drought and famine for the iniquity of the inhabitants of the land. Joel commiserates the plight of man and beast and intercedes with God. The prophet Amos also made supplication to God when shown a plague of grasshoppers and drought, saying, “*O Lord God, forgive, I beseech thee: by whom shall Jacob arise, for he is small?*” The Lord relented, saying, “*It shall not be*” (Amos 7:1-6). “Fire” here, as in Amos (Amos 7:4), is best understood figuratively of a great drought that consumes vegetation like fire, leaving the land scorched and the soil baked and cracked.

20 – The beasts of the field cry also unto thee: for the rivers of waters are dried up, and the fire hath devoured the pastures of the wilderness.

Man and beast alike suffer perplexity for want of necessary sustenance; cattle which have their dwelling in the field groan and cry for want of food and provender; their accustomed places of watering have slowly dried up and shrunk away; the grasslands have been consumed by drought; famine approaches and the grim reaper begins his awful harvest of mortal man and beast.

Questions from our Readers

Q: Your recent article on the Dead Sea Scrolls and the coming of Christ as viewed by the Essenes was fascinating! The informative article was very well written. I suspect, that while many are curious, most are uninformed about the Essenes--who they were and what distinguished their beliefs. Great article!

At this time, I have one question that concerns how to clearly understand Rev. 20:5: **"But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished."**

I understand that *all the righteous dead* in Paradise *live and reign* with Christ until the general resurrection, but the construction of **verse 5** would suggest, at first glance, that more of the righteous would awaken to life later. If the **"rest of the dead"** refers to the *wicked*, how could they ever be stated as to **"live again?"**

I have always thought **"the rest of the dead"** did refer to the *lost*, but the passage seems either incomplete or awkward. Perhaps the problem surrounds the application of **"until."** With your understanding, how would you explain or have written the passage for clearer understanding?

A: I understand the phrase "the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished" in reference to the *lost*. Consider this syllogism:

Major Premise: Those who partake in the first resurrection will not suffer the second death.

Minor Premise: The "rest of the dead" do not partake of the first resurrection. Therefore,

Conclusion: The rest of the dead will suffer the second death

Jesus mentioned only two resurrections: the resurrection of life and the resurrection of damnation (John 5:28, 29). When John mentions the "rest of the dead" he refers to those that will suffer the *resurrection of damnation*; these did not live again until the time of the last judgment when they came forth from Tartarus to be condemned and suffer annihilation in Gehennah. They do not "live again" in the sense of attaining eternal life, but in the sense of rising again to stand judgment before God and Christ before suffering the second death (Rev. 20:11-15).

Hope that helps.

The SCOTUS Gay Marriage Decision

By Chuck Baldwin

By now, everyone on the planet knows that the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) has rendered a decision to legalize same-sex marriage nationwide. In a landmark 5-4 decision, Justices Anthony Kennedy, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sonia Sotomayor, Stephen Breyer, and Elena Kagan ruled that states may not prohibit homosexual couples from getting “married.” The reasoning of their decision was based on the 14th Amendment’s “Due Process” clause.

Writing for the majority, Justice Kennedy said, “Under the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, no State shall ‘deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.’ The fundamental liberties protected by this Clause include most of the rights enumerated in the Bill of Rights.”

Obviously, there is nothing in the Bill of Rights specifically about the right of homosexuals to “marry.” But there is something in the Bill of Rights specifically about the right to keep and bear arms. Using the reasoning and conclusion of the Court’s homosexual “marriage” ruling, states have absolutely no authority to deny recognition of concealed carry permits that have been issued in other states. In other words, if the 14th Amendment protects an unspecified right (same-sex “marriage”), it certainly protects a specified right (the right to keep and bear arms). And since some states recognize the right of citizens to openly carry firearms, this right should also be determined to be protected by the 14th Amendment. If states must recognize driver’s licenses (and now same-sex “marriage” licenses) issued in other states, it is now clear that they must also be required to recognize concealed weapon licenses issued in other states.

It should be obvious to any objective person that by providing 14th Amendment protection to homosexual “marriage,” SCOTUS has banned most gun control laws throughout the country. However, I seriously doubt that the five justices passing the same-sex “marriage” decision had gun control in mind. Nevertheless, that shouldn’t

stop gun rights activists from taking advantage of the SCOTUS decision.

Many libertarian jurists are lauding the SCOTUS same-sex decision as a victory for the right of individuals to enter into contracts with one another. But marriage is more than a “contract.” It is an institution--an institution created by GOD. No human authority can redefine what our Creator has already defined in both revealed and Natural Law. Forevermore, true marriage can only be between a man and a woman--a SCOTUS decision notwithstanding.

Senator Rand Paul wisely noted, “While I disagree with Supreme Court’s redefinition of marriage, I believe that all Americans have the right to contract.

“The Constitution is silent on the question of marriage because marriage has always been a local issue. Our founding fathers went to the local courthouse to be married, not to Washington, D.C.

“I’ve often said I don’t want my guns or my marriage registered in Washington.

“Those who disagree with the recent Supreme Court ruling argue that the court should not overturn the will of legislative majorities. Those who favor the Supreme Court ruling argue that the 14th Amendment protects rights from legislative majorities.

“Do consenting adults have a right to contract with other consenting adults? Supporters of the Supreme Court’s decision argue yes but they argue no when it comes to economic liberties, like contracts regarding wages.

“It seems some rights are more equal than others.

“Marriage, though a contract, is also more than just a simple contract.

“I acknowledge the right to contract in all economic and personal spheres, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t a danger that a government that involves itself in every nook and cranny of our lives won’t now enforce definitions that conflict with sincerely felt religious convictions of others.

“Some have argued that the Supreme Court’s ruling will now involve the police power of the state in churches, church schools, church hospitals.

“This may well become the next step, and I for one will stand ready to resist any intrusion of government into the religious sphere.

“Justice Clarence Thomas is correct in his dissent when he says: ‘In the American legal tradition, liberty has long been understood as individual freedom from governmental action, not as a right to a particular governmental entitlement.’

“The government should not prevent people from making contracts but that does not mean that the government must confer a special imprimatur upon a new definition of marriage.

“Perhaps the time has come to examine whether or not governmental recognition of marriage is a good idea, for either party.”

Note that Dr. Paul correctly recognized that the SCOTUS attempted to render a “redefinition” of marriage. That it did.

Since the beginning of human history (not to mention Western Civilization) marriage has been recognized as being between a man and a woman. Again, marriage is much more than a civil contract.

As I have noted several times, the right of civil contracts includes the right of homosexuals to enter into civil unions. But marriage is NOT a civil union. Nor is it merely a civil contract. In fact, real marriage is NOT a civil matter at all. It is a spiritual matter. Civil governments can recognize or not recognize all they want; it doesn’t change the definition of marriage one iota. Civil governments can no more redefine marriage than they can redefine worship or prayer. Marriage is a divine institution.

Therefore, it is completely outside the scope and jurisdiction of SCOTUS or any other civil authority.

The problem is that many years ago the Church decided to allow civil government licensing authority over marriage. When they did this, they absconded divine authority over marriage and reduced it into nothing more than just another government-sanctioned civil contract. Now the chickens have come home to roost.

The problem is not SCOTUS; the problem is the CHURCH.

Rand Paul is right: “Perhaps the time has come to examine whether or not governmental recognition of marriage is a good idea, for either party.”

So far, the only State to have the correct response to the SCOTUS decision is the State of Alabama, led by my friend Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore. The State of Alabama is encouraging county courthouses to not issue ANY marriage licenses. And this is exactly what many Alabama counties are doing. This strategy should be replicated by all fifty states and the counties within those states.

Furthermore, pastors across the country should stop performing ALL marriages that are licensed by the State. In other words, the Church should do what it did for some 1,800+ years of Church history: keep the State out of the marriage business.

But all of that doesn’t change the intention of the Court decision and the agenda of the radical secularists who are the impetus behind the decision and their attempt to expunge all semblances of Christianity (and morality) from America’s public life.

In the majority decision, Justice Kennedy attempted to throw people of faith a bone by stating, “Finally, it must be emphasized that religions, and those who adhere to religious doctrines, may continue to advocate with utmost, sincere conviction that, by divine precepts, same-sex marriage should not be condoned. The First Amendment ensures that religious organizations and persons are given proper protection as they seek to teach the principles that are so fulfilling

and so central to their lives and faiths, and to their own deep aspirations to continue the family structure they have long revered.”

However, notice that Kennedy said that religious people may “advocate” for traditional marriage, but he said nothing about non-compliance. What will happen to those pastors and churches that refuse to “marry” same-sex couples? If you think for one minute that radical homosexuals are going to be content with a Supreme Court decision that doesn’t have enforcement power, you are very mistaken.

Already, allies of the militant homosexual agenda are promoting public censorship and the loss of tax exempt status for those churches that refuse to submit to the Supreme Court decision.

My friend Cal Thomas got it right: “Given their political clout and antipathy to Christian doctrines, some gay activists are likely to go after the tax-exempt status of Christian colleges that prohibit cohabitation of unmarried students, or openly homosexual ones, as well as churches that refuse to marry them. As with legal challenges to the owners of bakeries that have been in the news for refusing to bake a cake for same-sex weddings, activists who demand total conformity to their agenda will seek to put out of business and silence anyone who believes differently.”

Cal is exactly right. The purge has already begun.

“CNN Senior Legal Analyst Jeffrey Toobin said that it wasn’t legal ‘to talk about gay people the way Justice Scalia used to talk about gay people’ while recounting Scalia’s prior dissent in *Lawrence v. Texas* on Friday’s ‘CNN Newsroom.’”

Again, this is from CNN’s SENIOR LEGAL ANALYST. “Beam me up, Mr. Speaker.” Anti-Christian purgers are already advocating the cancellation of the right of free speech in the wake of the SCOTUS decision.

Look at this: “A newspaper in Harrisburg, PA has announced henceforth it intends to censor certain views about marriage deemed no better than racism, sexism, anti-Semitism.

“John L. Micek, editorial page editor and formerly state capital reporter, made the announcement shortly after the Supreme Court handed down its imposition of gay marriage on the county. Micek wrote:

“‘As a result of Friday’s ruling, PennLive/The Patriot-News will no longer accept, nor will it print, op-Eds and letters to the editor in opposition to same sex marriage.’ In a Tweet later in the day, Micek doubled down, ‘This is not hard: We would not print racist, sexist, or anti-Semitic letters. To that we add homophobic ones. Pretty simple.’”

You can take this to the bank: there will be hundreds of local and State laws reflecting the SCOTUS decision and hundreds of lawsuits forthcoming against people who seek to live by their religious convictions to not directly participate in homosexual “marriages.” And that means there will be hundreds of court decisions ruling in favor of the plaintiffs, hundreds of arrest warrants, civil fines, prison sentences, etc. Anyone who doesn’t see this coming is blind.

Then there is this column written by Mark Oppenheimer who writes for America’s flagship newspaper, The New York Times, calling for the elimination of tax-exempt status for churches on the heels of the SCOTUS gay “marriage” decision.

You can mark it down: his will not be the last such call.

So, this begs the question, what will all of these Romans 13 “obey-the-government-no-matter-what” preachers do now? When they are told by the IRS and local civil authorities to “marry” homosexuals or lose their tax exemption--or maybe even go to jail--what will they do?

All of this goes back to what I’ve been saying for years: the Church is to blame for this mess. Pastors are to blame for this mess.

For decades, pastors and churches allowed the state to supplant the authority of Christ over them. They volunteered to become creatures of the state by submitting to the IRS 501c3 non-profit, tax-exempt status. By doing so, they forfeited their independence and autonomy (not to mention their spiritual identity and authority)

and became nothing more than a state-created non-profit organization. Again, now the chickens are coming home to roost.

Actually, I think it's time for pastors and churches to decide once and for all to whom they belong and what they are. And if that means losing their precious tax-exempt status, SO BE IT.

For the sake of tax exemption, pastors and churches have stayed mostly silent on virtually every evil contrivance of civil government under the sun. Most of them said nothing when SCOTUS expunged prayer and Bible reading from our schools; most of them said nothing when the Gun Control Act of 1968 (which is almost copied word for word from Adolf Hitler's gun control act) was passed; most of them said nothing when SCOTUS legalized the murder of unborn babies; most of them said nothing with the Patriot Act, Military Commissions Act, indefinite detention of American citizens under NDAA was passed, and just recently, when the Republican Congress collaborated with Barack Obama to cast America's national sovereignty upon the altar of international "free trade" deals. For the sake of tax exemption, the vast, vast majority of today's pastors and churches are totally silent about almost EVERYTHING.

So, what will America's pastors and churches do now? What will they do when they must choose between "marrying" same-sex couples and losing tax exemption? If their track record is any indicator, we know what most of them will do: THEY WILL SUBMIT TO CAESAR.

Plus, the SCOTUS decision opens the door for a host of other possibilities. If every consenting adult has an absolute right to enter into civil contracts, how can a State prohibit polygamy? In his dissenting opinion, Chief Justice Roberts said that the Court's decision to legalize same-sex "marriage" made the future legalization of polygamy inevitable. Where does it end?

And if a State must recognize polygamous "marriages," what's next? Where will it end?

And there is one more thing that almost no one is willing to talk about: what is at stake here is the national acceptance of sexual perversion. The SCOTUS decision lends national approbation to

an act that our Creator has condemned with the strongest language. (See Romans chapter one.) It has lent national approbation to an act that Western Civilization has always (rightly) regarded as deviant.

Understand this: once any society universally embraces and promotes the sodomite lifestyle, there is no going back. One cannot find a single civilization in history that has survived once homosexuality has become a driving, dominant force over it. It is both a divine and Natural Law. There is a huge difference between recognizing the civil rights of individuals to live immorally (that is a personal matter between the individual and God) and forcing society as a whole to grant societal acceptance and recognition to the immoral act. To quote Rand Paul again: "The government should not prevent people from making contracts but that does not mean that the government must confer a special imprimatur upon a new definition of marriage." Yet, that is exactly what the Supreme Court has done.

But, once again, the fault is the Church. The Church has refused to be the moral leader of the country. Things like homosexuality are too "controversial" for most pulpits. It is a forbidden subject. And too many churches that have been willing to address the issue have done so with such a lack of love and compassion as to do more harm than good. To not speak the truth is bad; to not speak the truth in love is worse.

And dare I say that many of our Christian churches, schools, colleges, and universities have become breeding grounds for homosexual behavior. The absence of male leadership is epidemic in the Church--and in the home, for that matter. And by leadership, I do not mean dictatorship. But true, godly, strong, kind, loving male leadership has eroded significantly from twentieth, and now twenty-first, century churches.

The Church is the moral rudder of a nation. The SCOTUS decision to legalize same-sex "marriage" is the result of the Church abandoning its moral leadership. The Church surrendered its spiritual and moral authority to the state. Why should it now be surprised when the state chooses to not recognize a moral authority that the Church, itself, refuses to recognize?

A.D. 1891

THE RISE OF THE ANTICHRIST

F.W. Farrar

Excerpts from The Early Days of Christianity

All the vice, all the splendour, all the degradation of Pagan Rome seemed to be gathered up in the person of that Emperor who first placed himself in a relation of direct antagonism against Christianity. Long before death ended the astute comedy in which Augustus had so gravely borne his part,² he had experienced the Nemesis of Absolutism, and foreseen the awful possibilities which it involved. But neither he, nor any one else, could have divined that four such rulers as Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius, and Nero – the first a sanguinary tyrant, the second a furious madman, the third an uxorious imbecile, the fourth a heartless buffoon – would in succession afflict and horrify the world. Yet these rulers say upon the breast of Rome with the paralyzing spell of a nightmare. The concentration of the old prerogatives of many offices in the person of one who was at once Consul, Censor, Tribune, Pontifex Maximus, and perpetual Imperator, fortified their power with the semblance of legality, and that power was rendered terrible by the sword of the Praetorians, and the deadly whisper of the informers. No wonder that Christians saw the true type of the Antichrist in that omnipotence of evil, that apotheosis of self, that disdain for humanity, that hatred against all mankind besides, that gigantic aspiration after the impossible, that frantic blasphemy and unlimited indulgence, which marked the despotism of a Gaius or a Nero. The very fact that their power was precarious as well as gigantic – that the lord of the world might at any moment be cut off by the indignation of the *canaille* of Rome, nay, more, by the revenge of a single tribune, or the dagger-thrust of a single

² On his death-bed he asked his friends “whether he had fitly gone through the play of life,” and, if so, begged for their applause like an actor on the point of leaving the stage (Suet. *Octav.* 99).

slave³ - did but make more striking the resemblance which they displayed of the gilded monster of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. Their autocracy, like that visionary idol, was an image of gold on feet of clay. Of that colossus many a Christian would doubtless be reminded when he saw the huge statue of Nero, with the radiated head and the attributes of the sun-god, which once towered 120 feet high on the shattered pediment still visible beside the ruins of the Flavian Amphitheatre.⁴

The sketch which I am now presenting to the reader is the necessary introduction to the annals of that closing epoch of the first century, which witnessed the early struggle of Christianity with the Pagan power. In the thirteen years of Nero’s reign all the worst elements of life which had long mingled with the sap of ancient civilization seem to have rushed at once into their scarlet flower. To the Christians of that epoch the dominance of such an Emperor presented itself in the aspect of wickedness raised to superhuman exaltation, and engaged in an impious struggle against the Lord and against His saints.

Till the days of Nero, the Christians had never been brought into collision with the Imperial Government. We may set aside as a worthless fiction the story that Tiberius had been so much interested in the account of the Crucifixion forwarded to him by Pontius Pilate, as to consult the Senate on the advisability of admitting Jesus among the gods of the Pantheon.⁵ It is very

³ Out of 43 persons in Lipsius’s *Stemma Caesarum*, 32 died violent deaths, *i.e.*, nearly 75 per cent.

⁴ Suet. *Ner.* 31; Mart. *Spect. Ep.* 2.

⁵ Ps. Clem. *Hom.* i. 6; Tert. *Apol.* 5; Euseb. *H.E.* ii. 2; Jer. *Chron. Pasch.* i. 430. Braun (*De Tiberii Chritum in Deorum numerum referendi consilio*,

unlikely that Tiberius ever heard of the existence of the Christians. In its early days the Faith was too humble to excite any notice out of the limits of Palestine. Gaius, absorbed in his mad attempt to set up in the Holy of Holies “a desolating abomination,” in the form of a huge image of himself, entertained a savage hatred of the Jews, but had not learned to discriminate between them and Christians. Claudius, disturbed by tumults in the Ghetto of Jewish freedmen across the Tiber, had been taught to look with alarm and suspicion on the name of Christus distorted into “Chrestus;” but his decree for the expulsion of the Jews from Rome, which had been a dead letter from the first, only affected Christianity by causing the providential migration of Prisca and Acquila, to become at Corinth and Ephesus the hosts, the partners, and the protectors of St. Paul.⁶ Nero was destined to enter into far deadlier and closer relations with the nascent Faith, and to fill so vast a space in the horrified imaginations of the early Christians as to become by his cruelties, his blasphemies, his enormous crimes, the nearest approach which the world has yet seen to the “Man of Sin.” He was the ideal of depravity and wickedness, standing over against the ideal of all that is sinless and Divine. Against the Christ was now to be ranged the Antichrist, - the man-god of Pagan adulations, in whom was manifested the consummated outcome of Heathen crime and Heathen power.

Up to the tenth year of Nero’s reign the Christians had many reasons to be grateful to the power of the Roman Empire. St. Paul, when he wrote from Corinth to the Thessalonians, had indeed seen in the fabric of Roman polity, and in Claudius, its reigning representative, the “check” and the “checker” which must be removed before the coming of the Lord.⁷ Yet during his stormy life the Apostle had been shielded by the laws of Rome in more than one provincial tumult. The Roman politarchs of Thessalonica had treated him with humanity. He had been protected from

Bonn, 1834) vainly tried to support this fable. Tiberius, more than any Emperor, was “circa Deos et religiones negligentior” (Seut. *Tib.* 69).

⁶ See Tert. *Apol.* 3; *ad Natt.* i. 3; my *Life and Works of St. Paul*, i. 559. I cannot accept the view of Herzog (*Real-Encykl.*, s.v. Claudius) that Chrestus was some seditious Roman Jew.

⁷ *Life and Works of St. Paul*, i. 584, fg.

the infuriated Jews in Corinth by the disdainful justice of Gallio. In Jerusalem the prompt interference of Lysias and of Festus had sheltered him from the plots of the Sanhedrin. At Caesarea he had appealed to Caesar as his best security from the persistent hatred of Ananias and the Sadducees. If we have taken a correct view of the latter part of his career, his appeal had not been in vain, and he owed the last two years of his missionary activity to the impartiality of Roman Law. Hence, apart from the general principle of submission to recognized authority, he had special reason to urge the Roman Christians “to be subject to the higher powers,” and to recognize in them the ordinance of God.⁸ With the private wickedness of rulers the Christians were not directly concerned. Rumours, indeed, they must have heard of the poisoning of Claudius and of Britannicus; of Nero’s intrigues with Acte; of his friendship with the bad Otho; of the divorce and legal assassination of Octavia; of the murders of Agrippina and Poppaea, of Burrus and Seneca. Other rumours must have reached them of nameless orgies, of which it was a shame even to speak. But knowing how the whole air of the bad society around them reeked with lies, they may have shown the charity that hopeth all things, and imputeth no evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity, by tacitly setting aside these stories as incredible or false. It was not till A.D. 64, when Nero had been nearly ten years on the throne, that the slow light of History fully revealed to the Church of Christ what this more than monster was.

A dark spirit was walking in the house of the Caesars – a spirit of lust and blood which destroyed every family in succession with which they were allied. The Octavii, the Claudii, the Domitii, the Silani, were all hurled into ruin or disgrace in their attempt to scale, by intermarriage with the deified race of Julius, “the dread summits of Caesarean power.” It has been well said that no page even of Tacitus has so somber and tragic an eloquence as the mere *Stemma Caesarum*. The great Julius, robbed by death of his two daughters, was succeeded by his nephew Augustus,⁹ who, in ordering the

⁸ Rom. Xiii. 1-7.

⁹ It is characteristic of the manners of the age that Julius Caesar had married four times, Augustus thrice, Tiberius twice, Gaius thrice, Claudius six times, and Nero thrice. Yet Nero

assassination of Caesarion, the natural son of Julius by Cleopatra, extinguished the direct line of the greatest of the Caesars. Augustus by his three marriages was the father of but one daughter, and that daughter disgraced his family and embittered his life. He saw his two elder grandsons die under circumstances of the deepest suspicion; and being induced to disinherit the third for the asserted stupidity and ferocity of his disposition, was succeeded by Tiberius, who was only his stepson, and had not a drop of the Julian blood in his veins. Tiberius had but one son, who was poisoned by his favourite, Sejanus, before his own death. This son, Drusus, left but one son, who was compelled to commit suicide by his cousin, Gaius; and one daughter, whose son, Rubellius Plautus, was put to death by order of Nero. The marriage of Germanicus, the nephew of Tiberius, and the elder Agrippina, the granddaughter of Augustus, seemed to open new hopes to the Roman people and the imperial house. Germanicus was a prince of courage, virtue, and ability, and the elder Agrippina was one of the purest and noblest women of her day. Of the nine children of this virtuous union six alone survived. On the parents, and the three sons in succession, the hopes of Rome were fixed. But Germanicus was poisoned by order of Tiberius, and Agrippina was murdered in banishment after the endurance of the most terrible anguish. Their two elder sons, Nero and Drusus, lived only long enough to disgrace themselves, and to be forced to die of starvation.¹⁰ The third was the monster Gaius. Of the three daughters, the youngest, Julia Livia was put to death by the orders of Messalina, the wife of her uncle Claudius. Drusilla died of prosperous infamy, and Agrippina the younger, after a life of crime so abnormal and so detestable that it throws into the shade even the monstrous crimes of many of her contemporaries, murdered her husband, and was murdered by the orders of the son for whose sake he had waded through seas of blood.

was the last of the Caesars, even of the adoptive line. No descendants had survived of the offspring of so many unions, and, as Merivale says, "a large proportion, which it would be tedious to calculate, were the victims of domestic jealousy and politic assassination" (*Hist.* vi. 366).

¹⁰ Tac. *Ann.* v.3, vi. 24.

That son was Nero! Truly the Palace of the Caesars must have been haunted by many a restless ghost, and amid its vast and solitary chambers the guilty lords of its splendour must have feared lest they should come upon some spectre weeping tears of blood. In yonder corridor the floor was still stained with the life-blood of the murdered Gaius;¹¹ in that subterranean prison the miserable Drusus, cursing the name of his great-uncle Tiberius, tried to assuage the pangs of hunger by chewing the stuffing of his mattress;¹² in that gilded saloon Nero had his private interviews with the poison-mixer, Locusta, whom he salaried among "the instruments of his government;"¹³ in that splendid hall Britannicus fell into convulsions after tasting his brother's poisoned draught; that chamber, bright with the immoral frescoes of Arellius, witnessed the brutal kick which caused the death of the beautiful Poppaea. Fit palace for the Antichrist – fit temple for the wicked human god! – a temple which reeked with the memory of infamies - a palace which echoed with the ghostly footfall of murdered men!

Agrippina the Second, mother of Nero, was the Lady Macbeth of that scene of murder, but a Lady Macbeth with a life of worse stains and a heart of harder steel. Born at Cologne in the fourteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, she lost her father, Germanicus, by poison when she was three years old, and her mother, Agrippina, first by exile when she was twelve years old, and finally by murder when she was seventeen. She grew up with her wicked sisters and her wicked brother Gaius in the house of her grandmother Antonia, the widow of the elder Drusus. She was little more than fourteen years old when Tiberius married her to Cnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus. The Domitii were one of the noblest and most ancient families of Rome, but from the time that they first emerged into the light of history they had been badly pre-eminent for the ferocity of their dispositions. They derived the surname of Ahenobarbus, or brazen-

¹¹ "The Verres of a single province sank before the majesty of the law, and the righteous eloquence of his accuser; against the Verres of the world there was no defense except in the dagger of the assassin" (Freeman, *Essays*, ii. 330).

¹² Tac. *Ann.* vii. 23.

¹³ Tac. *Ann.* xii. 66, xiii. 5.

beard, from a legend of their race intended to account for their physical peculiarity.¹⁴ Six generations earlier, the orator Crassus had said of the Domitius Ahenobarbus of that day, “that it was no wonder his beard was of brass, since his mouth was of iron and his heat of lead.” But though the traditions of cruelty and treachery had been carried on from generation to generation,¹⁵ they seemed to have culminated in the father of Nero, who added a tinge of meanness and vulgarity to the brutal manners of his race. His loose morals had been shocking to a loose age, and men told each other in disgust how he had cheated in his praetorship; how he had killed one of his freedmen only because he had refused to drink as much as he was bidden; how he had purposely driven over a poor boy on the Appian Road; how in a squabble in the Forum he had struck out the eye of a Roman knight; how he had been finally banished for crimes still more shameful. It was a current anecdote of this man, who was ‘detestable through every period of his life,’ that when, nine years after his marriage, the birth of his son Nero was announced to him, he answered the congratulations of his friends with the remark, that from himself and Agrippina nothing could have been born but what was hateful, and for public ruin.

Agrippina was twenty-one when her brother Gaius succeeded to the throne. Towards the close of his reign she was involved in the conspiracy of Lepidus, and was banished to the dreary island of Pontia. Gaius seized the entire property both of Domitius and of Agrippina. Nero, their little child, then three years old, was handed over as penniless orphan to the charge of his aunt Domitia, the mother of Messalina. This land entrusted the education of the child to two slaves, whose influence is perhaps traceable for many subsequent

¹⁴ Suet. *Ner.* I; Plut. *Aemil.* 25.

¹⁵ “The grandfather of Nero had been checked by Augustus from the bloodshed of his gladiatorial shows...his great-grandfather, ‘the best of his race, had changed sides three times, not without disgrace, in the civil wars...his great-great-grandfather had rendered Roman infamous by cruelty and treachery at Pharsalia, and was also charged with most unRoman pusillanimity’ (see Suet. *Ner.* 1-5; Merivale, vi. 62, *seq.*).

years. One of them was a barber, the other a dancer.

On the accession of Claudius, Agrippina was restored to her rank and fortune, and once more undertook the management of her child. He was, as we see from his early busts, a child of exquisite beauty. His beauty made him an object of special pride to his mother. From this time forward it seems to have been her one desire to elevate the boy to the rank of Emperor. In vain did the astrologers warn her that his elevation involved her murder. To such dark hints of the future she had but one reply – *Occidat dum imperet!* “Let him slay me, so he do but reign!”

By her second marriage, with Crispus Passienus, she further increased her already enormous wealth. She bided her time. Claudius was under the control of his freedmen, Narcissus and Pallas, and of the Empress Messalina, who had borne him two children, Britannicus and Octavia. The fierce and watchful jealousy of Messalina was soon successful in securing the banishment and subsequent murder of Julia, the younger sister of Agrippina, and in spite of the retirement in which the latter strove to withdraw herself from the furious suspicion of the Empress, she felt that her own life and that of her son were in perpetual danger. A story prevailed that when Britannicus, then about seven years old, and Nero, who was little more than three years older,¹⁶ had ridden side by side in the Trojan equestrian game, the favour of the populace towards the latter had been so openly manifested that Messalina had dispatched emissaries to strangle him in bed, and that they had been frightened from doing so by seeing a snake glide from under the pillow.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Messalina was diverted from her purpose by the criminal pursuits which were notorious to every Roman with the single exception of her husband. She was falling deeper and deeper into that demerit preceding doom which at last enabled her enemy Narcissus to head a palace conspiracy and to strike her to the dust. Agrippina owed her escape from a fate

¹⁶ Tacitus says two years; but see Merivale, v. 517, vi. 88.

¹⁷ Suetonius thinks that the story rose from a snake’s skin which his mother gave him as an amulet, and which for some time he wore in a bracelet (*Ner.* 6).

similar to that of her younger sister solely to the infatuated passion of the rival whose name through all succeeding ages has been a by word of guild and shame.

But now that Claudius was a widower, the fact that he was her uncle, and that unions between uncle and niece were regarded as incestuous, did not prevent Agrippina from plunging into the intrigues by which she hoped to secure the Emperor for her third husband. Aided by the freedman Pallas, brother of Felix, the Procurator of Judaea, and by the blandishments which her near relationship to Claudius enabled her to exercise, she succeeded in achieving the second great object of her ambition. The twice-widowed matron became the sixth wife of the imbecile Emperor within three months of the execution of her predecessor. She had now but one further design to accomplish, and that was to gain the purple for the son whom she loved with all the tigress affection of her evil nature. She had been the sister and the wife, she wished also to be the mother of an Emperor.

The story of her daring schemes, her reckless cruelty, her incessant intrigues, is recorded in the stern pages of Tacitus. During the five years of her married life,¹⁸ it is probable that no day passed without her thoughts brooding upon the guilty end which she had kept steadily in view during so many vicissitudes. Her first plan was to secure for Nero the hand of Octavia, the only daughter of Claudius. Lucius Junius Silanus, a great-great-grandson of August, who might well be dreaded as a strong protector of the rights of his young brother-in-law, Britannicus. As a favourite of the Emperor, and the betrothed of the Emperor's daughter, Silanus had already received splendid honours at the hands of the Senate, but at one blow Agrippina hurled him into the depths of shame and misery. The infamous Vitellius – Vitellius who had once begged as a favour a slipper of Messalina, and carried it in his bosom and kissed it with profound reverence – Vitellius who had placed a gilded image of the freedman Pallas among his household gods – trumped up a false charge against Silanus, and, as Censor, struck his name off the list of the Senate. His betrothal annulled, his praetorship abrogated, the high-spirited

¹⁸ She was married in A.D. 49, and poisoned her husband in October, A.D. 54.

young man, recognizing whose hand it was that had aimed this poisoned arrow at his happiness, waited till Agrippina's wedding-day, and on that day committed suicide on the altar of his own Penates. The next step of the Empress was to have her rival Lollia Paulina charged with magic, to secure her banishment, to send a tribune to kill her, and to identify, by personal inspection, her decapitated head. Then Calpurnia was driven from Rome because Claudius, with perfect innocence, had praised her beauty. On the other hand, Seneca was recalled from his Corsican exile, in order to increase Agrippina's popularity by an act of ostensible mercy, which restored to Rome its favourite writer, while it secured a powerful adherent for her cause and an eminent tutor for her son. The next step was to effect the betrothal of Octavia to Nero, who was twelve years old. A still more difficult and important measure was to secure his adoption. Claudius was attached to his son Britannicus, and, in spite of his extraordinary fatuity, he could hardly fail to see that his son's rights would be injured by the adoption of an elder boy of most noble birth, who reckoned amongst his supporters all those who might have natural cause to dread the vengeance of a son of Messalina. Claudius was an antiquary, and he knew that for 800 years, from the days of Attus Clausus downwards, there had never been an adoption among the patrician Claudii. In vain did Agrippina and her adherents endeavour to poison his mind by whispered insinuation about the parentage of Britannicus. But he was at last overborne, rather than convinced, by the persistence with which Agrippina had taken care that the adoption should be pressed upon him in the Senate, by the multitude, and even in the privacy of his own garden. Pallas, too, helped to decide his wavering determination by quoting the precedents of the adoption of Tiberius by Augustus, and of Gaius by Tiberius. Had he but well weighed the fatal significance of those precedents, he would have hesitated still longer ere he sacrificed to an intriguing alien the birthright, the happiness, and ultimately the lives of the young son and daughter whom he so dearly loved.

And now Agrippina's prosperous wickedness was bearing her along full sail to the fatal haven of her ambition. She obtained the title of Augusta, which even the stately wife of Augustus had never borne during her husband's lifetime. Seated on a lofty throne by her husband's side, she received foreign embassies

and senatorial deputations. She gained permission to antedate the majority of her son, and secured for him a promise of the Consulship, admission to various priesthoods, a procursular *imperium*, and the title of "Prince of the Youth." She made these honours the pretext for obtaining a largess to the soldiery, and Circensian games for the populace, and at these games Nero appeared in the manly toga and triumphal insignia, while Britannicus, utterly eclipsed, stood humbly by his side in the boyish *pretexta* – the embroidered robe which marked his youth. And while step after step was taken to bring Nero into splendid prominence, Britannicus was kept in such deep seclusion, and watched with such jealous eyes, that the people hardly knew whether he was alive or dead. In vain did Agrippina lavish upon the unhappy lad her false caresses. Being a boy of exceptional intelligence, he saw through her hypocrisy, and did not try to conceal the contemptuous disgust which her arts inspired. Meanwhile he was a prisoner in all but name: every expedient was invented to keep him at the greatest distance from his father; every friend who loved him, every freedman who was faithful to him, every soldier who seemed likely to embrace his cause, was either secretly undermined, or removed under pretext of honourable promotion. Tutored as he was by adversity to conceal his feelings, he one day through accident or boyish passion returned the salutation of his adoptive brother by the name of Ahenobarbus, instead of calling him by the name Nero, which was the mark of his new rank as the adopted son of Claudius. Thereupon the rage of Agrippina and Nero knew no bounds; and such insolence – for in this light the momentary act of carelessness or venial outburst of tempter was represented to Claudius – made the boy a still more defenceless victim to the machinations of his stepmother. Month and month she wove around him the web of her intrigues. The Praetorians were won over by flattery, gifts, and promises. The double prefecture of Lucius Geta and Rufius Crispinus was superseded by the appointment of Afranius Burrus, and honest soldier, but a partisan of the Empress, to whom he thus owed his promotion to the most coveted position in the Roman army. From the all-powerful freedman of Claudius, Agrippina had little to fear. Callistus was dead, and she played off against each other the rival influences of Pallas and Narcissus was afraid to move in opposition to her, because the accession of Britannicus would have been his own certain

death-warrant, since he had been the chief against in the overthrown of Messalina.

As for the phenomena on which the populace looked with terror – the fact that the skies had seemed to blaze with fire on the day of Nero's adoption, and violent shocks of earthquake had shaken Rome on the day that he assumed the many toga – Agrippina cared nothing for them. She would recognize no omen which did not promise success to her determination. Nothing could now divert her from her purpose. When Domitia, the aunt under whose roof the young Nero had been trained, began to win his smiles by the contrast between her flatteries and presents and the domineering threats of his mother, Agrippina at once brought against her a charge of magic, and, in spite of the opposition of Narcissus, Domitian was condemned to death. The Empress hesitated at on crime which helped to pave the way of her son to power, but at the same time her ambition was so far selfish that she intended to keep that son under her own exclusively influence.

Many warnings now showed her that the time was ripe for her supreme endeavour. Her quarrel with Narcissus had broken out into threats and recriminations in the very presence of the Emperor. The Senate showed signs of indignant recalcitrance against her attacks on those whose power she feared, or whose wealth she envied. Her designs were now so transparent, that Narcissus began openly to show his compassion for the hapless and almost deserted Britannicus. But, worst of all, it was clear that t Claudius was growing weary both of her and of her son. He had changed his former wife for worse. If Messalina had been unfaithful to him, so he began to suspect was Agrippina, and he could not but feel that she had changed her old fawning caresses for a threatening insolence. He was sick of her ambition, of her intrigues, of the hatred she always displayed to his oldest and most faithful servants, of her pushing eagerness for her Nero, of her treacherous cruelty towards his own children. He was heard to drop ominous expressions. He began to display towards Britannicus a yearning affection, full of the passionate hope that when he was a little older his wrongs would be avenged. All this Agrippina learnt from her spies. Not a day was to be lost. Narcissus, whose presence was the chief security for his master's life, had gone to the baths of Sinuessa to find relief from a fit of

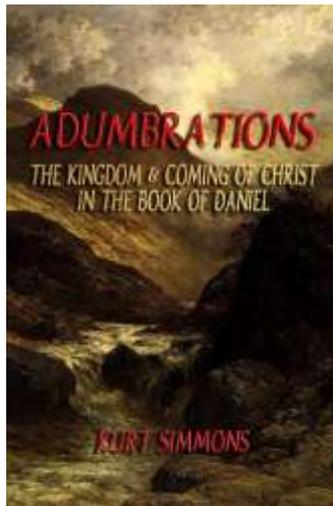
the gout. There lay at this time in prison, on a charge of poisoning, a woman named Locusta, whose career recalls the Mrs. Turner of the reign of James I., and the Marchioness de Brinvilliers of the court of Louis XIV. To this woman Agrippina repaired with the promise of freedom and reward, if she would provide a poison which would disturb the brain without too rapidly destroying the life. Halotus, the Emperor's *praegustor*, or taster, and Xenophon, his physician, had been already won over to share in the deed. The poison was infused into a fine and delicious mushroom of a kind of which Claudius was known to be particularly fond, and Agrippina gave this mushroom to her husband with her own hand. After tasting it he became very quiet, and then called for wine. He was carried off to bed senseless, but the quantity of wine which he had drunk weakened the effects of the poison, and at a assign from Agrippina the faithless physician finished the murder by tickling the throat of the sufferer with a poisoned feather. Before the morning of Cot 13, A.D. 54, Claudius was dead.

His death was concealed from the public and from his children, whom Agrippina with hypocritical caresses and false tears kept by her side in her own chamber, until everything was ready for the proclamation of Nero. At noon, which the Chaldaeans had declared would be the only lucky hour of an unlucky day, the gates of the palace were thrown open, and Nero walked forth with Afranius Burrus by his side. The Praetorian Praefect informed the guard that Claudius had appointed Nero his successor. But as no one answered, and the young prince was not forthcoming, they accepted what seemed to be an accomplished fact. Nero went to the Praetorian camp, promised a donation of 15,000 sesterces (more than *L* 130) to each soldier, and was proclaimed Emperor. The Senate accepted the initiative of the Praetorians, and by sunset Nero was securely seated on the throne of the Roman world. The dream of Agrippina's life was accomplished. She was now the mother, as she had been the sister and the wife of an Emperor; and that young Emperor, when the tribune came to ask him the watchword for the night, answered in the words – *Optimae Matri!* "To the Best of Mothers!"

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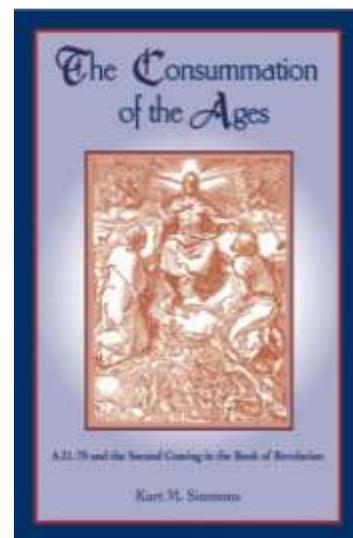
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