



The Sword & The Plow

Newsletter of the Bimillennial Preterist Association

Vol. XIX, No. 11 – November 2015

Commentary on Joel Chapter 2:1-11

Editor's note: I am writing a commentary on Joel and the other Minor Prophets. Due to length, we will spread comments on chapter two over two months. This month we offer comments on 2:1-11.

1 - Blow the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain:

Zion is the name of the Jebusite garrison or stronghold that David captured; it became the seat of his kingdom and was called the city of David after his name (II Sam. 5:4-12); Zion was also the place of the ark of the covenant in David's day (II Sam. 6:1-19); it was here that David built an altar to the Lord in the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite, and here that Solomon built the temple (II Sam. 24:18-25; I Chron. 21:18-22:19). Zion thus became a symbol of God's dwelling place among his people, and was therefore called his *holy mountain*.¹

¹ Because Zion was the seat of God's earthly throne, it also came to be called upon heaven itself, the true tabernacle and throne of God (Ps. 11:4; 15:1). As Zion

The two most prominent words translated "trumpet" in the Old Testament are the Hebrew *shophar*, which occurs here and describes a trumpet made of ram's horn (Josh. 6:4), and the *chatsotserah*, the silver trumpets used by priests in various ceremonial capacities (Num. 10:1-10). The term *shophar* is used for the voice of the Lord, which sounded as a trumpet

became the seat of David's earthly kingdom, so the heavenly Zion became the seat of Christ's throne when he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (Ps. 2:6-12; cf. Acts 13:33; Ps. 110:1, 2); the church is the seat of Christ's earthly and temporal kingdom, and is thus called the new Jerusalem, the covenantal habitation of the saints (Rev. 21:2, 3; cf. Gal. 4:21-31; Heb. 12:22-28; Isa. 2:1-5). It is from the heavenly Zion that the Lord roars against his enemies on behalf of the church in Joel 3:16, 17.

upon mount Sinai when he spoke to Moses (Ex. 19:16, 19; 20:18, 19; Deut. 18:16; cf. I Thess. 4:16 where “*the voice of the archangel and the trump of God*” contemplate the same thing, and Rev. 1:10 where the voice of Christ is described as a trumpet). *Shophar* occurs most frequently where a trumpet is sounded to assemble the people either to receive important information, to prepare against imminent threat, or to rally to or retire from battle (I Sam. 13:3; II Sam. 2:28: 18:16; Neh. 4:18, 20; Ezek. 7:14); it is the word used for the trumpet given to watchmen charged with sounding the alarm warning of invasion (Ezek. 33:3-6). The plague of locusts is treated figuratively as the invading armies of an alien people; the sentinels are thus charged to sound the alarm and blow the trumpet to prepare against the impending danger.

let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand;

In ancient warfare, walled cities were besieged and encompassed about with armies; shut up within, their inhabitants were forced to eat bread and drink water by measure. Such sieges might endure for months or even years, until at length the city’s provisions failed and the inhabitants perished from famine, or were forced to surrender. The prospect of famine by drought and locust plague would have instilled no less terror than an invading army; its consequences equally real and dire. As the trumpet gave warning of approaching armies, so here it would announce the cloud of descending of locusts; the day of divine visitation was near at hand and the inhabitants are called to fear and trembling.

2 – A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness,

Light and joy would flee away; darkness and gloom would cover the land in the day of the Lord’s wrath. The language is figurative and poetic, evoking natural phenomena to describe the emotional, spiritual, and political conditions that would prevail in time of crisis and trouble. We encounter similar language in Ezekiel’s prophecy against Pharaoh and Egypt:

And when I shall put thee out, I will cover the heaven, and make the stars thereof dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over thee, and set darkness upon thy land, saith the Lord God. Ezek. 32:7, 8

Prior to Noah, the heavens did not rain; the earth was watered by dew and mist (Gen. 2:5, 6). Storm clouds and rain first occurred with the universal flood. Clouds thus came to be associated by the prophets with times of divine judgment, as if the face of the sky represented

the disposition of heaven and the wrath of God who set his face against men.

as the morning spread upon the mountains:

Jesus said “*When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather today: for the sky is red and lowering*” (Matt. 16:2, 3). That is the sense of the phrase use here: “*as morning spread upon the mountains*” bespeaks the face of the sky at dawn and the threatening weather the clouds portend as they descend upon the mountains.

a great people and a strong;

With these words calling the locust swarms “a great people” we encounter the first intimation of a *plenior sensus* (Lat. “fuller sense”) that looked beyond the immediate historical setting unto Messianic times and the destruction of the nation by Rome. The intimation, though but faintly suggested here, will go on and grow as the prophecy unfolds and Joel foretells of the “great and notable day of the Lord” Peter warned was fast overtaking his generation (Acts 2:14-21). Here, however, the prophet’s purpose is to liken the locusts to an invading army, which calling them “a people” helps to advance. Precedence for such use occurs in Proverbs, where Solomon says “*The ants are a people not strong, yet they prepare their meat in summer; the conies are but a feeble folk, yet make they their houses in the rocks*” (Prov. 30:25, 26).

there hath not been ever the like, neither shall be any more after it, even to the years of many generations.

This description provides further intimation of a *plenior sensus*, looking ahead to the Roman Empire, which was the greatest empire ever to rise upon earth. Daniel described it as iron that “*breaketh in pieces and subdueth all things*” (Dan. 2:40) and “*dreadful, terrible, and strong exceedingly*” (Dan. 7:7). Rome has never been equaled, even to the years of many generations. The language is reminiscent of the locust plague visited upon the Egyptians, which was described, saying, “*before them there were no such locusts as they, neither after them shall be such, for they covered the face of the whole earth*” (Ex. 10:14, 15).

3 – A fire devoureth before them and behind them a flame burneth: the land is as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness; yea, and nothing shall escape them.

The locusts are now likened to a prairie fire, which sweeps across the land devouring everything in its

path. Before the army the land appears as the very garden of Eden for fertility and fatness, filled with orchards, vineyards, and fields of grain and produce of every kind; behind them is left a desolate waste; nothing escapes; all is consumed as if by fire.

4 – The appearance of them is as the appearance of horses; and as horsemen, so shall they run.

With this verse, the apostle John begins to freely appropriate the vision in the Apocalypse (Rev. 9:1-11). In its immediate historical context, Joel describes a plague of locusts that strips the land of *vegetation*. In the Apocalypse, the locusts become the “abomination of desolation”—the Roman infantry and cavalry—that descended upon Jerusalem, Judea, Galilee, and Palestine, denuding the land of *men* (*cf.* Matt. 24:15-20 and Luke 21:20-24). The phrase “abomination of desolation” originates in the book of Daniel, who employed the term to describe the desolating power that would end the Jewish state 490 prophetic years from the restoration of the Babylonian captivity and the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s wall by Nehemiah in 454 B.C. Daniel was told in vision that there were “seventy weeks” of years (490) “determined upon thy people and upon the holy city;” and that following the “cutting off” (crucifixion) of Messiah,² the Romans would “destroy the city and the sanctuary;” and that for the “overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate, even until the consummation” (Dan. 9:24-27). Daniel was further informed that the abomination of desolation would be “set up” (e.g., the forces assembled) 1290 days, or a little more than 3 ½ years, following the taking away of the daily sacrifice (Dan. 12:11, 12). This should be understood in reference to the cessation of the twice daily offering by the Jewish nation on behalf of Nero Caesar in the late summer of A.D. 66, which Josephus says was the true cause and beginning of the war.³ The siege itself, however, would begin 1335 days from the said starting point, as in fact it came about, the Roman army suddenly appearing before Jerusalem at the feast of Passover, shutting up within the city two million seven hundred thousand Jews, almost half of whom perished from famine during the siege.⁴ Hence, the famine here predicted by Joel because of locusts, found its ultimate fulfillment in

² Christ would be manifest 483 years after the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem, or at his baptism in the fall of A.D. 29, the fifteenth year of Tiberius (Lk. 2:1-23). The remaining week is divided between Christ’s 3 ½ year ministry and the 3 ½ year war with Rome. There is a gap following the cutting off of Messiah in A.D. 33 until his coming again in wrath at the outbreak of the war that destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 66.

³ Josephus, *J.W.*, 2.17.2 (Whiston ed.)

⁴ Josephus, *J.W.*, 6.9.3 (Whiston ed.)

the Roman siege of Jerusalem, sent by God in vengeance upon the nation for the murder of Christ and persecution of his church and gospel.

5 – Like the noise of chariots on the tops of mountains shall they leap, like the noise of a flame of fire that devoureth the stubble, as a strong people set in battle array.

In verse 4, the prophet likens the locust plague to the charge of mounted horsemen. In the instant verse, Joel expands upon the simile of an invading army, likening the noise of millions of locusts to the jostling of chariots, and the crackling of fire as it devours stubble after the harvest.

We may well envision the Roman army as it marched into Judea and encamped before Jerusalem, the soldiers in their armor, together with their eagles and standards, set about the task of returning Jerusalem to Roman rule or to consign it to utter destruction. But the terror of the Romans without the city was surpassed only by the seditious within it: for three competing groups formed who, in fighting one another to determine which would be tyrant of them all, managed to destroy the city’s store of grain, dooming the inhabitants to famine. According to Josephus:

It was now a miserable case, and a sight that would justly bring tears into our eyes, how men stood as to their food, while the more powerful had more than enough, and the weaker were lamenting [for want of it.] But the famine was too hard for all other passions, and it is destructive to nothing so much as to modesty; for what was otherwise worthy of reverence was in this case despised; insomuch that children pulled the very morsels that their fathers were eating out of their very mouths, and what was still more to be pitied, so did the mothers do as to their infants; and when those that were most dear were perishing under their hands, they were not ashamed to take from them the very last drops that might preserve their lives: and while they ate after this manner, yet were they not concealed in so doing; but the seditious every where came upon them immediately, and snatched away from them what they had gotten from others; for when they saw any house shut up, this was to them a signal that the people within had gotten some food; whereupon they broke open the doors, and ran in, and took pieces of what they were eating almost up out of their very throats, and this by force: the old men, who held their food fast, were beaten; and if the women hid what they had within their hands, their hair was torn for so doing; nor was there any commiseration shown either to the aged or to the infants, but they lifted up children from the ground as they hung upon the morsels they had gotten, and shook them down upon the floor. But still they were

more barbarously cruel to those that had prevented their coming in, and had actually swallowed down what they were going to seize upon, as if they had been unjustly defrauded of their right. They also invented terrible methods of torments to discover where any food was, and they were these to stop up the passages of the privy parts of the miserable wretches, and to drive sharp stakes up their fundamentals; and a man was forced to bear what it is terrible even to hear, in order to make him confess that he had but one loaf of bread, or that he might discover a handful of barley-meal that was concealed; and this was done when these tormentors were not themselves hungry; for the thing had been less barbarous had necessity forced them to it; but this was done to keep their madness in exercise, and as making preparation of provisions for themselves for the following days. These men went also to meet those that had crept out of the city by night, as far as the Roman guards, to gather some plants and herbs that grew wild; and when those people thought they had got clear of the enemy, they snatched from them what they had brought with them, even while they had frequently entreated them, and that by calling upon the tremendous name of God, to give them back some part of what they had brought; though these would not give them the least crumb, and they were to be well contented that they were only spoiled, and not slain at the same time.

6 – Before their face the people shall be much pained: all faces shall gather blackness.

The advancing army excites terror, causing great anxiety and anguish of heart. “All faces gather blackness” like soot upon a pot is a figure of speech used to describe the fear and dread that that covers men’s faces as the danger approaches and their doom is realized(cf. Nahum 2:10). Similar usage occurs in the book of Esther, when Haman was confronted with his doom: “As the word went out of the king’s mouth, they covered Haman’s face” (Est. 7:8).

To feed themselves, the Jews crept from the city to gather herbs in the rough valleys below. Many of these were caught by the Romans. And because they could not let them go nor guard so great a number of prisoners, they were crucified before Jerusalem’s walls five hundred or more a day:

So now Titus's banks were advanced a great way, notwithstanding his soldiers had been very much distressed from the wall. He then sent a party of horsemen, and ordered they should lay ambushes for those that went out into the valleys to gather food. Some of these were indeed fighting men, who were not contented with what they got by rapine; but the greater part of them were poor people, who were deterred from

deserting by the concern they were under for their own relations; for they could not hope to escape away, together with their wives and children, without the knowledge of the seditious; nor could they think of leaving these relations to be slain by the robbers on their account; nay, the severity of the famine made them bold in thus going out; so nothing remained but that, when they were concealed from the robbers, they should be taken by the enemy; and when they were going to be taken, they were forced to defend themselves for fear of being punished; as after they had fought, they thought it too late to make any supplications for mercy; so they were first whipped, and then tormented with all sorts of tortures, before they died, and were then crucified before the wall of the city. This miserable procedure made Titus greatly to pity them, while they caught every day five hundred Jews; nay, some days they caught more: yet it did not appear to be safe for him to let those that were taken by force go their way, and to set a guard over so many he saw would be to make such as guarded them useless to him. The main reason why he did not forbid that cruelty was this, that he hoped the Jews might perhaps yield at that sight, out of fear lest they might themselves afterwards be liable to the same cruel treatment. So the soldiers, out of the wrath and hatred they bore the Jews, nailed those they caught, one after one way, and another after another, to the crosses, by way of jest, when their multitude was so great, that room was wanting for the crosses, and crosses wanting for the bodies.⁵

7 – They shall run like mighty men; they shall climb the wall like men of war; and they shall march every one on his ways, and they shall not break their ranks:

Proverbs says, “The locusts have no king, yet go they forth all of them by bands” (Prov. 30:27). The plague of locusts resembles a marching army as it advances: they scale walls like men upon ladders; each one follows the one that precedes it in an orderly fashion; they do not scatter in many directions, but keep their ranks like an army, advancing methodically step by step, devouring whatever lay in their path.

Jerusalem had three walls. The Romans gained the first two walls within a month of beginning the siege. However, the Jews managed to burn the embankments built by the Romans to take the third wall. Despairing to take the city with their usual engines of war, and as there were no materials to construct new embankments, the Romans dug trenches and mounds around the city, enclosing the inhabitants to allow the famine to weaken

⁵ Josephus, J. W., 5.11,1; (Whiston ed.)

the city's defenses. This fulfilled Jesus' prophecy in Luke 19:41-44:

And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! But now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, what thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, and shall lay thee even with the ground, and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation.

8 – Neither shall one thrust another; they shall walk every one in his path: and when they fall upon the sword, they shall not be wounded.

In the press and confusion of hand-to-hand battle, as soldiers thrust and swing their swords, it must sometimes happen that they inadvertently wound their comrades, get in one another's way and trip and fall upon the sword. The locust army is not subject to the like casualties: having no swords, they do not thrust one another; facing no opponent in battle, they do not break their ranks, depart from their paths, or trip each other; and being so light, even should one fall upon a sword, it would not be wounded. Thus, unlike a human army that may be opposed with sword and shield, the locusts advance unhindered; no weapon forged against them can prosper.

Closed in by the Romans, the famine quickly consumed the city's inhabitants:

So all hope of escaping was now cut off from the Jews, together with their liberty of going out of the city. Then did the famine widen its progress, and devoured the people by whole houses and families; the upper rooms were full of women and children that were dying by famine, and the lanes of the city were full of the dead bodies of the aged; the children also and the young men wandered about the market-places like shadows, all swelled with the famine, and fell down dead, wheresoever their misery seized them. As for burying them, those that were sick themselves were not able to do it; and those that were hearty and well were deterred from doing it by the great multitude of those dead bodies, and by the uncertainty there was how soon they should die themselves; for many died as they were burying others, and many went to their coffins before that fatal hour was come. Nor was there any lamentations made under these calamities, nor were heard any mournful complaints; but the famine confounded all natural passions; for those who were just going to die looked upon those that were gone to rest before them with dry eyes and open mouths. A

deep silence also, and a kind of deadly night, had seized upon the city; while yet the robbers were still more terrible than these miseries were themselves; for they brake open those houses which were no other than graves of dead bodies, and plundered them of what they had; and carrying off the coverings of their bodies, went out laughing, and tried the points of their swords in their dead bodies; and, in order to prove what metal they were made of they thrust some of those through that still lay alive upon the ground; but for those that entreated them to lend them their right hand and their sword to despatch them, they were too proud to grant their requests, and left them to be consumed by the famine. Now every one of these died with their eyes fixed upon the temple, and left the seditious alive behind them. Now the seditious at first gave orders that the dead should be buried out of the public treasury, as not enduring the stench of their dead bodies. But afterwards, when they could not do that, they had them cast down from the walls into the valleys beneath. However, when Titus, in going his rounds along those valleys, saw them full of dead bodies, and the thick putrefaction running about them, he gave a groan; and, spreading out his hands to heaven, called God to witness that this was not his doing⁶

9 – They shall run to and fro in the city; they shall run upon the wall, they shall climb up upon the houses; they shall enter in at the windows like a thief.

The locusts behave like an army once it has gained a city, spreading themselves everywhere, entering the streets and lanes, breaking open houses, slaying the inhabitants, looting and plundering the city of spoils. Josephus describes the Romans in similar terms when they got the mastery of the city:

So the Romans being now become masters of the walls, they both placed their ensigns upon the towers, and made joyful acclamations for the victory they had gained, as having found the end of this war much lighter than its beginning; for when they had gotten upon the last wall, without any bloodshed, they could hardly believe what they found to be true; but seeing nobody to oppose them, they stood in doubt what such an unusual solitude could mean. But when they went in numbers into the lanes of the city with their swords drawn, they slew those whom they overtook without and set fire to the houses whither the Jews were fled, and burnt every soul in them, and laid waste a great many of the rest; and when they were come to the houses to plunder them, they found in them entire families of dead men, and the upper rooms full of dead corpses, that is, of such as died by the famine; they

⁶ Josephus, *J. W.*, 5.12.3, 4; (Whiston ed.)

then stood in a horror at this sight, and went out without touching any thing. But although they had this commiseration for such as were destroyed in that manner, yet had they not the same for those that were still alive, but they ran every one through whom they met with, and obstructed the very lanes with their dead bodies, and made the whole city run down with blood, to such a degree indeed that the fire of many of the houses was quenched with these men's blood. And truly so it happened, that though the slayers left off at the evening, yet did the fire greatly prevail in the night; and as all was burning, came that eighth day of the month Gorpheus [Elul] upon Jerusalem, a city that had been liable to so many miseries during this siege, that, had it always enjoyed as much happiness from its first foundation, it would certainly have been the envy of the world. Nor did it on any other account so much deserve these sore misfortunes, as by producing such a generation of men as were the occasions of this its overthrow.⁷

10 – The earth shall quake before them; the heavens shall tremble: the sun and the moon shall be dark, and the stars shall withdraw their shining:

This language is best understood as figurative and poetic, intended to emphasize the immensity of the coming calamity; *viz.*, so terrible is the preternatural host sent against the rebellious nation that creation itself trembles and shrinks from the sight of them. But if the inanimate creation is so affected, how much more should the people and rulers fear the destruction decreed? A second way the language may be understood is metaphorically, in which the world *natural* is put in place for the world *political*, so that the earth represents the people or masses, the ruling orbs, the governing authorities—the sun, the king or governor; the moon, the high priest or priestly caste; and stars, the princes and elders of the people—all whose brilliance would be overshadowed, impotent to arrest or allay the impending disaster.

11 – And the LORD shall utter his voice before his army:

The Lord not only commands the invasion, but leads it himself, going before the host into battle against his enemies. Hence, inasmuch as the vision's *plenior sensus* looked ahead to the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome, implicit in this passage is Christ's providential rule over the kingdoms of men, and his coming—*his second coming*—to execute wrath upon the Jewish nation. Christ received the government of the world at his ascension, when he sat down on the right hand of the majesty in heaven “angels, authorities, and powers

being made subject unto him” (I Pet. 3:22; *cf.* Acts 2:33; Heb. 1:3; 2:8). As heir of the world (Rom. 4:13), Christ rules the nations with a rod of iron: “*Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel*” (Ps. 2:8, 9; *cf.* Rev. 2:27). “*The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. The LORD shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies*” (Ps. 110:1, 2). It is sometimes imagined that Christ's kingdom and coming would entail an earthly throne seated in Jerusalem, where he would rule the world in human form. Yet, Jesus rejected this very thing, not only when he was tempted to yield to his fleshly passions, but a second time when the Jews sought to make him king by force (Matt. 4:8-10; John 6:15); moreover, he told Pilate in the plainest terms “*my kingdom is not of this world*” (John 18:36). Nay, rather as the Psalms quoted directly above show, Christ has had the government of the world from the time of his ascension and he rules in the power of his divine glory. But if his kingdom and reign are of a divine nature, consisting in his invisible government and providential rule of the nations, how much more must his second coming conform to this rule, seeing that he would come in the glory of his Father with the holy angels? (Mark 8:38; *cf.* Matt. 16:27, 28). For “glory” by definition is the heavenly realm; and whatever is of the heavenly realm is invisible to the eye of man, as Paul expressly states: “*Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour, and glory for ever and ever. Amen*” (I Tim. 1:17). Toward the end of the same epistle, Paul states this same basic fact again:

That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ: which in his times shall shew, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen. I Tim. 6:14-16

In his humiliation, Christ assumed human form, taking on him the seed of Abraham, and was therefore “manifest in the flesh” (I Tim. 3:16; *cf.* Heb. 2:14-16; Phil. 2:7, 8); however, in his ascension and glorification, Christ resumed his divine glory. Since, therefore, no man can see Christ in his glory, his “appearing” and “revelation” was not to the physical eye of man, but to the eye of his *understanding* through the fulfillment of world events he foretold while yet upon earth, showing that he was in fact the blessed and only Potentate, King of kings and Lord of lords. This is

⁷ Josephus, *J.W.*, 6.8.5; (Whiston ed.)

also the essence of John's Apocalypse; viz., the revelation of Christ's divinity by his command of history and nature, putting his enemies beneath his feet and avenging the blood of his saints and prophets upon the Jews and Romans.

for his camp is very great: for he is strong that excuteth his word:

The exceeding greatness of the Roman power rendered impossible the success of the Jewish revolt, which was fated from the beginning to bring about the nation's destruction. The national election of Israel had been merely temporary and provisional, to bring Christ into the world that he might die upon a Roman cross and thus bring salvation to all mankind. However, the death of Christ meant that the calling and election of Israel had this ironic twist: that the nation would incur the blood-guilt of its own Messiah and so suffer divine wrath and retribution. Isaiah prophesied of the nation's end in terms particularly forceful:

I am sought of them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me not: I said, Behold me, behold me, unto a nation that was not called by my name. I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people, which walketh in a way that was not good, after their own thoughts...Thus saith the Lord, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest?...He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man; he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a god's neck; he that offereth an oblation, as if he offered swine's blood; he that burneth incense, as if he blessed an idol. Yea, they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations. I also will choose their delusions, and will bring their fears upon them; because when I called, none did answer; when I spake, they did not hear: but they did evil before mine eyes, and chose that in which I delighted not. Hear the word of the LORD, ye that tremble at his word; Your brethren that hated you, that cast you out for my name's sake, said, let the LORD be glorified: but he shall appear to your joy, and they shall be ashamed. A voice of noise from the city, a voice from the temple, a voice of the LORD that rendereth recompense to his enemies...For, behold the LORD will come with fire, and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his

and who can abide it?

The prophet Malachi asked this same question in connection with the coming of Christ and the day of the Lord upon the Jewish nation:

*anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. Isa. 65:1, 2; 66:1-6, 15*The fulfillment of this prophecy in New Testament times is unmistakable: First, Paul cites it in his epistle to the Romans regarding the call of the Gentiles, which should have incited the Jews to emulation and to imitate the Gentiles by obedience to the gospel. However, the nation obstinately persisted in rebellion and unbelief, and thus came to destruction (Rom. 10:20). Second, reference to "casting out" for the Lord's name sake was fulfilled in the Jews putting out of the synagogue anyone who confessed Christ (John 9:22, 34; 12:42; 16:2). Third, the prophecy, which twice makes reference to the coming of the Lord in wrath against the Jewish nation, was cited by Stephen at his trial for saying Jesus would come and destroy the city and temple and change the customs delivered to the people by Moses (Acts 6:14; 7:49, 50). Stephen quoted Isaiah in support of the proposition that the temple was sacred only insofar as ordained by God and that God himself had condemned it to overthrow more than seven hundred years before. Hence, in rejecting Stephen's warning, they were in effect rejecting God's warning, sealing their own fate.

for the day of the Lord is great and very terrible;

The apostle Peter quoted Joel on the first Pentecost following the Lord's resurrection; saying that the "great and terrible day of the Lord" would overtake his generation (Acts 2:14-21, 40). This same day of the Lord is the subject of Peter's second epistle, which speaks of the heavens passing away with a great noise and the elements melting with fervent heat (II Pet. 3:10-12). The language is figurative and metaphoric, as may be seen by the promised "new heavens and earth" that follows. The promise of new heavens and earth occurs in Isaiah's prophecy, which is cited immediately above. Reference to the new heavens and earth occur at Isa. 65:17 and 66:22. The only thing spoken of between these verses is the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem. Hence, it is clearly seen that it is not the physical cosmos that was to be destroyed, nor a new, physical creation that was contemplated by the new heavens and earth; rather, the new heavens and earth refer to the *socio-political economy* of the world beneath the reigning Christ, whose kingdom and gospel are ever advancing, overspreading the earth, converting the nations and regenerating the fallen race of man. *Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts. But **who may abide** the day of his coming? and **who shall stand** when he appeareth?... For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh*

shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch...Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. Mal. 3:1, 2; 4:1, 5 (emphasis added)

The messenger sent to prepare the way before Christ was John the Baptist (Matt. 11:10-14). John's message was eschatological; warning the Jewish nation to repent and avert the wrath Malachi foretold. According to John the Baptist, God had already laid the Roman ax against Israel's national tree, and would shortly hew it down and cast it into the burning:

But when he saw the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: and think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly pure his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. Matt. 7-12

The exclamation "who can abide it?" also occurs in Revelation:

And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men,

and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand? Rev. 6:15-17 (emphasis added)

Yet, the language about hiding themselves in the rocks and dens of the earth was used by Jesus regarding the destruction of Jerusalem as he was led out to be crucified:

And there followed him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him. But Jesus turning unto them said, Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. For, behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck. Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us. For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry? Luke 23:27-31

Jesus was the "green tree," moist and alive with the Spirit of God; the Jews were the "dry tree," dead and withered in sin and disbelief, who would be burned up like chaff in the coming judgment. Thus, at every turn we find that the prophesied "day of the Lord," be it Joel's or any other prophet's, had as its primary subject the destruction to be visited upon the Jewish nation for the murder of Christ. We say "primary" because divine retribution was also meted out upon Rome and the nations of the Roman Empire for their part in persecuting the church and refusing the gospel (see comments at Joel 3:9-17, below).

In the new heavens and earth, the church is the new Jerusalem, which carries the gospel to all mankind, winning the nations to Christ. Rev. 21:1, 2, 9, 10

New Heavens & Earth

For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered nor come to mind. But be ye glad and rejoice forever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. Isa. 65:17, 18

Destruction of Jerusalem

A voice of noise from the city, a voice of noise from the temple, a voice of the LORD that rendereth recompense to his enemies... For, behold the LORD will come with fire, and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire Isa. 66:6, 15

New Heavens & Earth

For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith the LORD, so shall your seed and your name remain. And it shall come to pass that... all flesh shall come to worship before me, saith the LORD. Isa. 66:22, 23

The promised new heavens and earth are like bookends enclosing the destruction of Jerusalem; nothing else comes between them.

The Time of Reformation

Kurt Simmons

Theme of Hebrews

The over-arching theme of the epistle to the Hebrews is the superiority of Christ and the culmination of God's salvific purpose in him. Christ is better than the angels (Heb. 1:4-14); he is better and worthy of more glory than Moses (Heb. 3:3); he has a better priesthood (Heb. 7:11-28); he has "obtained a more excellent ministry," and is the mediator of a "better covenant;" established upon "better promises" (Heb. 8:6); he is high priest of a "greater and more perfect tabernacle" (Heb. 9:11), and has secured eternal redemption by the blood of "better sacrifices" (Heb. 9:23), by which he has secured for us inheritance in the "better country" (Heb. 11:15) and promise of a "better resurrection" (Heb. 11:35). The temple service and levitical priesthood were temporary and provisional; they could not take away sins, or perfect the worshipper, but stood merely as prophetic types, imposed until God's "something better" was put in place. That something better is the New Testament of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Historical Context

The epistle to the Hebrews bears strong evidence of having been written shortly before the persecution under Nero. The epistle is believed by many to have been written by Paul, whose martyrdom, together with that of Peter, would mark the beginning of the persecution under Nero and the beast.⁸ The epistle is written from Italy, and Timothy, who had been arrested, has been set at liberty (Heb. 13:23, 24). Since we do not read of Timothy's arrest during Paul's first trial before Nero, it seems likely that this arrest occurred in connection with Paul's second trial, perhaps when Timothy went to visit Paul in Rome, bringing the parchments and other things Paul requested (II Tim. 4:11-13). That Timothy has been set at liberty shows that general persecution has not yet broken out, although Paul's impending martyrdom means it shortly will.

Revelation describes a period of political stability in Palestine during which the mission to the Jews would be carried out, harvesting the "144,000" from the tribes

⁸ Peter and Paul both foretold their martyrdom (II Tim. 4:6; II Pet. 1:14; cf. Jn. 21:18, 19) and are best understood as the "two witnesses" whose deaths would mark the beginning of the persecution under Nero (Rev. 11:3-10).

of Israel (Rev. 7: 1-8). The power to put men to death was reposed exclusively in the Roman governor (Jn. 18:31). While Claudius was on the throne, Christianity was protected by Roman law (the *religio licita*), which viewed it as a sect of Judaism. Claudius represented the restraining power of the Roman government. Claudius is the "angel" of Rev. 20:1, which held the keys of the bottomless pit (political authority over heathendom), and thus bound the dragon (Roman Empire) and beast (persecuting power) from persecuting the church. However, with the death of Claudius, the situation in Palestine and Rome would change. Claudius had banished the Jews from Rome (Acts 18:1); Nero welcomed them back. Nero's wife, Poppea Sabina, was a Jewish proselyte and Josephus reports that she exerted influence with Nero in favor of the Jews, and the temple in particular.⁹ Faced with belief that he had ordered the burning of Rome, Nero needed someone to fix the blame upon. Christians became the scapegoat. The mortal wound received when the persecution over Stephen collapsed would heal, and the beast would revive and rise again to persecute the church anew (Rev. 11:7; 13:3, 14; 17:8; 20:1-3).

Although unbelieving Jews could not put Christians to death, the epistle makes clear that Hebrew Christians were under a time of increasing pressure and peril. While our Lord was still on earth, the leaders of the Jews had declared that those confessing Christ were to be "cast out" of the synagogue (Jn. 9:22, 34; 12:42). This policy did not end, but continued after our Lord's ascension (Jn. 16:1, 2). To be cast out or excommunicated meant the loss of all social standing and many of one's civil rights. Jews in good standing in the synagogue were charged to shun those who were cast out; they were to treat excommunicates as alien sinners and Gentiles, and were forbidden to have any dealings with them (cf. Matt. 18:17).¹⁰ Moreover, leaders of the synagogues had jurisdiction over their countrymen to impose fines, confiscations, and cause

⁹ "This was granted in order to gratify Poppea, Nero's wife, who was a religious woman, and had requested these favors of Nero." Josephus, Ant. XX, viii, 11.

¹⁰ It is probable that this is at least part of the meaning of the "mark of the beast" in Rev. 13:16-18, by which the "false prophet" caused men to receive a mark without which no man might buy or sell: viz., a test imposed by rulers of the synagogue requiring men to renounce Christ and profess obedience to the law

them to be scourged with rods or whips. Hence, even during the period when the Jews were restrained by Roman law, Paul could say *"of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned"* (II Cor. 11:24, 25). In a word, the Hebrew Christians are suffering and being pressured to return to Moses' law.

The context of the epistle suggests that much of the controversy and persecution directed against Christians rose in connection with the temple and its service. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that the hour was coming when worship at the Jerusalem temple would cease (Jn. 4:24). He repeated this prophecy in the Olivet Discourse days before his arrest (Matt. 23:37-39; 24:1-2, 34). Stephen repeated these predictions, saying Jesus would destroy the city and temple and change the customs delivered by Moses (Acts 7:13, 14). For this saying, Stephen was tried and condemned to death, provoking the great persecution under Caiaphas, Pilate, and Saul (Paul). It is with these circumstances in mind that the prophet Isaiah thus described the nation immediately before its destruction by Rome, when the Jews were persecuting believers, a passage quoted by Stephen at his trial (Acts 8:48):

"Thus saith the Lord, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build for me? And where is the place of my rest? For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the Lord: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word. He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man; he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a dog's neck; he that offereth an oblation, as if he offered swine's blood; he that burneth incense, as if he blessed an idol. Yea, they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations. I also will choose their delusions, and will bring their fears upon them; because when I called none did answer; when I spake, they did not hear;: but they did evil before mine eyes, and chose that in which I delighted not. Hear the word of the Lord, ye that tremble at his word: Your brethren that hated you and cast you out for my name's sake, said, Let the Lord be glorified: but he shall appear to your joy, and they shall be ashamed. A voice of the Lord that rendereth recompense to his enemies" (Isa. 66:3-6).

This passage surveys the whole period from the cross to Christ's second coming and the destruction of Jerusalem. It shows Jewish obstinacy and rebellion in clinging to the dead ritual of the law, rejecting Christ, and persecuting believers. The passage makes unmistakably clear God's attitude toward the law during the period from the cross to the destruction of

Jerusalem: it was abominated as an implicit denial of Christ. This brings us to

The Time of Reformation

The epistle to the Hebrews says that the temple service was imposed (e.g. was to be obeyed) until the time of reformation:

"Then verily the first covenant had also ordinances of divine service, and a worldly sanctuary. For there was a tabernacle made; the first, wherein was the candlestick, and the table, and the showbread; which is called the sanctuary. And after the second veil, the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of all; which had the golden censer, and the ark of the covenant overlaid round about with gold, wherein was the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; and over it the cherubim of glory shadowing the mercy seat; of which we cannot now speak particularly. Now when these things were thus ordained, the priests went always into the first tabernacle, accomplishing the service of God. But into the second went the high priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he offered for himself, and for the errors of the people: The Holy Ghost thus signifying that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest while as the first tabernacle was yet standing: Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices that could not make him that did the service perfect as pertaining to the conscience; which stood only in meats and drinks, and diverse washings, and carnal ordinances imposed on them until the time of reformation" (Heb. 9:1-10).

Notice that the whole passage is set in the *past tense*:

- The first covenant *had* ordinances (v. 1)
- There *was* a tabernacle made, wherein *was* the candle stick, etc.
- When these things *were thus ordained*, the priest *went* always into the first tabernacle, accomplishing the service of God
- But into the second *went* the high priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he *offered*
- The Holy Ghost thus signifying that the way into the holiest of all *was not yet* made manifest *while as yet* the first tabernacle had a standing
- Which *was a figure* for the *time then present*, in which *were offered* both gifts and sacrifices that *could not make* him that did the service perfect
- Which *stood* only in meats and drinks, and diverse washings, and carnal ordinances

- *Imposed on them* until the time of reformation.

Thus, the thrust of the whole passage is to demonstrate that temple service belonged to another *time* and to another *people*. "The first covenant *had* ordinances *imposed on them* until the time of reformation." There is no indication that the writer identifies either himself or his readers with the Old Testament or the temple system. For him, it is entirely a thing of the past. He does not say it is imposed upon us, but was imposed *on them*. This does not mean the temple service was not on-going, for indeed it was. Unbelieving Jews continued to cling to the dead body of Moses, supposing that in it they were justified with God. But for Christians, the ceremonial law had no claim or demand, but stood merely as a relic of the past with which they were not to become entangled in again. "For if I build again the things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor" (Gal. 2:18).

Subject of the Reformation

Next, let us consider the substance of the reformation. What things had Christ come to reform? The writer lists the following items as belonging to the former dispensation:

- The first covenant
- The worldly sanctuary
- The priestly service
- The appointed days and ceremonies
- The blood sacrifices
- The washings
- The dietary restrictions
- Miscellaneous carnal ordinances


In the epistle to the Colossians, Paul addressed the issue of the law, saying, "let no man judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ" (Col. 2:16, 17). The ritual and observances of the law stood as shadows, looking ahead to Christ. *The shadow ends where the body (substance) begins.* Since Paul tells Christians not to become inveigled in the law, it is clear that he considered the shadow past, and the body and substance of redemption as having arrived. Indeed, the writer of Hebrews says this very thing:

"But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us" (Heb. 9:11, 12).

Notice the verb tenses in this passage:

- Christ *being come* (historical present, describing past events in the present voice)
- *Entered* by his blood (past tense)
- *Having obtained* eternal redemption (perfect tense, showing completed action in the past)

In other words, the whole substance of the law looked to the work of Christ upon the cross which was fulfilled in his death, burial, and resurrection.

Shadow	The Shadow Ended at the Cross	Body & Substance
First covenant Worldly sanctuary Priestly service Appointed days and feasts Animal sacrifices Diverse washings Dietary restrictions Misc. carnal ordinances		New Covenant Heavenly Sanctuary High Priesthood of Christ His own Blood Atonement Eternal Redemption Perfected Forever

Let's look at the feasts of the Jews just to make sure this point is clear and that these all looked ahead to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. There were three major feasts of the Jews and one fast

- Passover, which marked the beginning of the year (Ex. 12:1-17; Deut. 16:1).
- Pentecost, which fell the 50th day of the Sabbath following Passover and marked the first fruit of the wheat harvest (Lev. 23:15; Deut. 16:9).
- Atonement, which fell the 10th day of the seventh month (Lev. 23:27; 25:9).
- Feast of Ingathering or Tabernacles (booths), which fell in the time of autumn vintage of grapes, five days after the Atonement, and commemorated the Jews encampment at Succoth after the Exodus ("Succoth" means booths, Strong's #5523), but looked ahead to the redemption we have in Christ from the slavery of sin (Ex. 12:37; 23:42-44; Deut. 16:13).

That these were fulfilled in Christ is apparent from the following verses:

- I Cor. 5:7 - Christ our *Passover* is sacrificed for us. Jesus is the sacrificial Lamb whose death redeemed the church of the firstborn.

- I Cor. 15:23 - But every man in his own order: Christ the *firstfruits*; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming. The Sunday following Passover, the firstfruit of barley was offered, prefiguring Christ's resurrection. 50 days later, the wheat harvest fell and Pentecost was kept, prefiguring establishment of the church (Lev. 23:11, 15; Acts 2:1, 47). Christ is the firstfruit that sanctifies the whole harvest.
- Rom. 5:11- And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the *atonement*; (cf., Heb. 9:11, 12).
- And the Word was made flesh and dwelt ("tabernacled") among us (Jn. 1:14).

We sometimes hear that the Feast of Tabernacles symbolized the general resurrection, but I find no support for this. Zechariah uses the Feast of Tabernacles as a symbol to describe New Testament worship commemorating the salvation of Christ, saying, those nations that keep not the Feast of Tabernacles will be plagues:

"In that day thee shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness...And it shall be, that whoso will not come up of all the families of the earth unto Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, even upon them shall be no rain...this shall be the punishment of all nations that come not up to keep the feast of tabernacles" (Zech. 13:1; 14:16, 19).

Clearly, this shows that Tabernacles is a commemoration of our deliverance from sin (the second Exodus), not a looking forward to our resurrection.

All things associated with the first covenant pointed to Christ upon the cross and were thus cast in the past tense by the writer of Hebrews, Christ being come the High Priest of good things to come.

Entering the Most Holy

The epistle to the Hebrews attaches symbolism to the tabernacle. The tabernacle was divided into two sections: The first tabernacle is called "Holy place." In this section the priests went daily about their ministry. The second tabernacle, called the Holy of Holies, was separated from the first by a veil into which the High Priest alone went once a year. God's presence was within the Holy of Holies, above the Mercy Seat between the cherubim. The stranger that drew nigh was to be put to death (Num. 1:51; 3:10, 38). The point of this symbolism was to show that the way into God's presence was not open to the worshipper under the

Mosaic system of animal sacrifices, for the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins (Heb. 10: 1-4). The high priest who entered annually into the Holy of Holies depicted Christ who would carry his blood into God's presence by his death on Calvary. Thus, when Jesus died, the veil in the temple was "rent in twain" from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51), showing that the atonement was made (Rom. 5:11) and the way into God's presence was now legally and covenantally opened by Jesus' death.

I once debated a friend who labored under the idea that "entering the Most Holy Place" signified actual entrance into heaven. Since this did not occur until the general resurrection in AD 70, he argued that the Old Law was still valid until then. However, this belies a fundamental mistake. The two sections of the tabernacle represent *the two covenants* and systems of worship: one that could not make the worshipper perfect, and the other that can. The first tabernacle symbolized the Old Testament, which could not take away sins. The second tabernacle symbolizes the New Testament in which we are "perfected forever" by the sacrifice of Christ (Heb. 10:14). Milton Terry thus writes:

"The holy place represents the period of Mosaism, that intermediate stage of revelation and law, when many a type and symbol foreshadowed the better things to come, and the exceptional entrance of the high priest once a year within the veil signified that 'the way of the holies was not yet made manifest' (Heb. 9:8). The Holy of Holies represents the Messianic aeon, when the Christian believer, having boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus (Heb. 10:19), is conceived to 'have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22).'"¹¹

Jameson, Brown, and Faucett says the same:

"The Old Testament economy is represented by the holy place, the New Testament economy by the Holy of Holies. Redemption, by Christ, has opened the Holy of Holies (access to heaven by faith now, Heb. 4:16 7:19, 25 10:19, 22; by sight hereafter)." (Jameson, Brown, and Faucett in loc.)

The relevant facts represented and symbolized by the two sections of the tabernacle may be portrayed thus:

¹¹ Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Hunt & Eason, 1890), p. 275

The Tabernacle and the Two Covenants

"We have now received the atonement" - Rom. 5:11

Holy Place – Old Testament	Most Holy Place – New Testament
"Time Then Present"	"Time of Reformation"
Worldly Sanctuary	Heavenly Sanctuary / Spiritual Temple
Way to Holiest Closed	Holiest Opened by Jesus' Death
Could Not Perfect (save)	Hath Perfected Forever (Heb. 10:14)

During the Old Testament period, the worshipper remained in a condition of legal estrangement, banishment, and exile from God, unable to enter his presence because of sin. The New Testament marks the time when reconciliation has been made, the veil of separation "rent in twain," and man can come into God's presence free from the taint of sin.

If Christians could not legally and covenantally enter the Most Holy Place prior to AD 70, then the New Testament was not yet in force. But the writer of Hebrews makes clear that that the New Testament came into force at the Testator's (Jesus') death (Heb. 9:17). But as the New Testament verily came into force with Jesus' death, then were believers admitted into the presence of God, cleansed and justified from sin before AD 70. The writer thus encourages believers to have "boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus," signifying that they should boldly embrace the New Covenant, leaving behind the relics of Moses without hesitation or fear.

The Coming of Christ to Save his People

Isaiah's prophesy, above, about the Jews' clinging to the priestly service, while rejecting Christ and persecuting Christians, held out the promise of Christ's coming to save his people and destroy the city and temple.

"Your brethren that hated you and cast you out for my name's sake, said, Let the Lord be glorified: but he shall appear to your joy, and they shall be ashamed. A voice a noise from the city, a voice from the temple, a voice of the Lord that rendereth recompense to his enemies" (Isa. 66:5, 6).

This same promise is repeated several times to the Hebrew Christians.

"Thou hast put all things under his feet.' For in that he put all things in subjection under him, he left nothing that is not put under him. But now we see not yet all things put under him. But we see Jesus, who was make

e a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man." (Heb. 2:8, 9).

This verse implies that although Christ has not yet put his enemies beneath his feet, he soon will. Meanwhile, having made the atonement, he is co-regent with God, seated at his right hand.

"So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation" (Heb. 9:28).

This verse teaches the same as above: Christ died for man's sins and has so entered heaven, but would shortly appear to save his people from their persecutors.

"For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry" (Heb. 10:38).

Here we see that the persecution of the end time - the mystery of iniquity - was already evincing itself. Hebrew Christians needed patience to endure their suffering and plight until Christ's coming to save them.

"Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Wherefore, we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:26-28).

This is a quote from the prophet Haggai, who makes clear that shaking of heaven and earth would not only overthrow the Jews, but the thrones and kingdoms of the heathen (Hag. 2:6, 7, 21, 22). "Heaven and earth" here thus clearly signify, not the Jewish temple and economy, but the political powers of the world. The "new heavens and earth" would follow the overthrow of the persecutors, heralding the kingdom and dominion of Christ, who rules the nations with a rod of iron.

Conclusion

The "time of reformation" describes the New Testament gospel of Christ. The Old Testament was done away at the Cross and the New assumed its place.

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The Great Persecution under Caiaphas, Pilate, and Paul

Introduction

The book of revelation depicts two persecutions against the church: the persecution of the dragon and the persecution under the beast, harlot, and false prophet. In this article, we will identify the time and circumstance of the first of these two great persecutions.

The Dragon, the Woman, and the Man-child

The persecution under the dragon is portrayed in Revelation twelve where it attempts to destroy the man-child at the time of its very birth:

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars. And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.

And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born.

And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days. [Rev. 12:1-6](#)

The basic imagery is taken from the garden where the dragon appears in the form of the serpent, which tempted the woman. The serpent was not a demonic being; it was a serpent, just as the text says. It was chosen as the medium by which the woman was tempted because of the symbolic value associated with the venom of its bite. Just as the bite of the serpent produces physical death, so sin produces moral, spiritual, and eternal death. From an actual serpent that

was given man's voice to tempt the woman, the serpent is thence abstracted and made a symbol for sin and death and those that act in obedience to their command; the woman a symbol for the people of God. The scripture's then foretell the conflict between offspring of the woman and the serpent:

And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life: and I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. [Gen. 3:14-16](#)

The woman's Seed is Christ; the promised Kinsman Redeemer; the serpent would "bruise the heel" of the promised Seed (strike a nonfatal blow) in the crucifixion, but the Seed would crush the serpent's head by the power of his cross and resurrection. (Cf. [Col. 2:14, 15](#)) The enmity between the woman and the serpent is manifested in the struggle between the people of God and their worldly oppressors. The symbol of the serpent was appropriated upon by the prophets, where it was merged into the symbol of Leviathan, the world civil power opposing God and oppressing his people:

In that day the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish Leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea. [Isa. 27:1](#)

In the Old Testament, Leviathan most often stood for Egypt, but similar imagery was also used for other world powers. (Cf. [Isa. 14:29](#); [Jer. 51:34](#) – *Assyria and Babylon*) In Revelation, the dragon is Imperial Rome. The seven heads of the serpent symbolize the seven Caesars that would rule unto the eschaton; the ten horns represent Rome's ten provinces. ([Rev. 17:10-12](#)) The woman is the mother church in Palestine to whom the promised Seed was given. Most

will concede that Christ is symbolized by the “man child” brought forth by the woman. This is made certain by the reference in v. 5 that he would “rule the nations with a rod of iron” and was “caught up to God and to his throne.” Jesus uses this language about himself in [Rev. 3:21](#); however, the ultimate source of the language is the second Psalm, where it describes the risen and ascended Messiah:

Ask of me and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel. [Ps. 2:8, 9](#)

The dragon's attempt to devour the Christ-child at his birth refers to Herod's slaughter of the Innocents. ([Matt. 2:16-18](#)) Catching up of the man child to the God and his throne is prospective, and looks to the ascension of Christ following his death and resurrection. Christ's earthly ministry is depicted in the imagery of Michael and his angels (Christ and the apostles) doing battle with the dragon and his angels (Sin, Rome and the Jews). The victory over the dragon was obtained by the blood of Christ and the testimony of the gospel:

And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death. [Rev. 12:11](#)

When the dragon saw that he was defeated, he turned his wrath upon the woman, pouring out persecution from its mouth like a flood. (vv. 13-15) This persecution, following as it does fast upon the heels of the man-child's ascension, is readily identified with the persecution that arose over St. Stephen. Stephen was arraigned before the Sanhedrin on charges of blasphemy for teaching that Christ would come and destroy the city and temple and change the customs delivered by Moses. (Acts 6:14, 15) This had been the substance of Jesus' Olivet Discourse (Matt. 23:34-39; 24, 25); Christ had also foretold of his coming while on trial before the Sanhedrin ([Matt. 26:64](#)), and the destruction of Jerusalem when led to Calvary. ([Lk. 23:37-41](#)) The destruction of Jerusalem by Rome had also been prophesied by Daniel (Dan. 9:24-27) and Isaiah ([Isa. 66:1-1-6, 15](#)), the latter whom Stephen quoted in his defense, exciting the counsel to murder him. (Acts 7:48, 49) With the death of Stephen, the persecution of the woman began.

The narrative relates that the woman was given wings for flight and a place to hide in the wilderness, where she was sustained for a time, times, and half a time, or one thousand two hundred three score days. (vv.6,

14) This refers to the scattering of the church upon the persecution. Driven from Judea, the disciples carried the gospel to foreign cities among the Gentiles (“the wilderness”).

As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and hauling men and women committed them to prison. Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word. [Acts 8:4](#); cf. 11:19

Not content to persecute the church in Judaea, Saul sought letters from the chief priests to go unto foreign cities and arrest those he found that professed the name of Christ. ([Acts 9:1, 2, 14](#)) Unlike today, when jurisdiction is based upon territory and the *place* where an act occurs, in ancient times, jurisdiction was also based upon *citizenship*. This is nowhere more apparent than in the case of Paul. As we read Acts, we encounter several instances where Paul's Roman citizenship protected him against the whim and caprice of local laws and officials, and entitled him to certain procedural and substantive rights, including the right to be tried before a Roman magistrate. It was Paul's Roman citizenship that enabled him to appeal to Caesar, and thus escape the wrath and power of the Sanhedrin.

I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged: to the Jews have I done no wrong, as thou very well knowest. For if I be an offender, or have committed any thing worthy of death, I refuse not to die: but if there be none of these things whereof these accuse me, no man may deliver me unto them. I appeal unto Caesar. [Acts 25:10, 11](#)

This facet of Roman law, which recognized jurisdiction based upon citizenship, lay behind Saul's ability to travel to foreign cities and there arrest Jews professing faith in Christ. For it had been a right granted the Jews from the time of Julius Caesar that they were allowed to keep their own laws, were exempt from military duty and certain taxes, recognition of the Sabbath day, the right of living according to the customs of their forefathers, and full jurisdiction over their own members. Josephus records numerous edicts by the Romans on behalf of the nation, securing them various privileges and immunities. One in particular testifies to the fact that Jews were allowed legislative bodies and courts in foreign cities with power to make decrees and adjudicate cases binding their members.

Lucius Antonius, the son of Marcus, vice-quaestor, and vice-praetor, to the magistrates, senate, and people of the Sardians, sendeth greeting. Those Jews that are our fellow-citizens of Rome, came to me, and

demonstrated that they had an assembly of their own, according to the laws of their forefathers, and this from the beginning, as also a place of their own wherein they determined their suits and controversies with one another. Upon their petition therefore to me, that these might be lawful for them, I give order that these their privileges be preserved, and they be permitted to do accordingly.

The Sceptre of Judah and the *ius gladii*

Notwithstanding the ability to arrest Jewish citizens and bring them to Jerusalem for trial, the power to put men to death rested solely with the Roman governor. The authority to adjudicate and execute sentence over capital crimes, known in Roman law as the *ius gladii* (“right of the sword”), is an integral part of the sovereign power given to the ruling authority by God from the days of Noah, to repress lawlessness on earth:

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.” Rom. 13:3, 4; cf. [Gen. 9:5, 6](#)

The *ius gladii* was part of the sceptre of Judah: the sovereign power reposed in the tribe of Judah. Jacob’s prophecy to his sons indicated that the sovereign power would not cease from Judah until the Messiah had come:

The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be. [Genesis 49:10](#)

The sovereign power embodied in the sceptre, including the right to adjudicate and execute capital crimes, was made sure to Judah until the Messiah (Shiloh) had come. The Messiah would then hold the sceptre. But, as the seat of Christ’s kingdom is in heaven, the sceptre of the Davidic throne would cease upon earth. And this is precisely what occurred. In the first quarter of the first century God took the *ius gladii* away from Judah and gave it to the Romans. First, in the person of Herod the Great and his heirs, then in the person of the Roman procurator, and, finally, by the destruction of the nation itself. In the absence of a king, the Sanhedrin was the sole repository of the *ius gladii*. Josephus records that Herod the Great, when he had the government of Galilee, was tried before the

Sanhedrin for putting the arch-robber, Hezekias, and his followers to death, but made his escape to Sextus Caesar, where he obtained the government of all Syria.[111](#) Later, he was made king of Judaea by the Roman senate at the instance of Mark Antony and was able to put men to death as an incident of the monarchical power.[112](#) With the death of Herod, Archelaus reigned in his stead but was banished to Vienna, a city of Gaul, in the ninth year of his reign.[113](#) Augustus thus sent Coponius to be governor over Judaea, who held the sole authority to sit in judgment upon capital offenses.

And now Archelaus’s part of Judea was reduced into a province, and Coponius, one of the equestrian order among the Romans, was sent as a procurator, having the power of life and death put into his hands by Caesar.[114](#)

The Persecution Collapses

At length, Pontius Pilate succeeded to the office of procurator by the appointment of Tiberius.[115](#) The book of Acts is silent about Pilate’s role in the persecution that arose over Stephen, but, as no one might be put to death in Judea without his consent, it is almost certain that he yielded to Caiaphas in this matter, much as he had about the murder of Christ. However, the persecution’s length had been determined at the outset. Revelation depicts the end of the persecution by the earth wondrously opening its mouth to swallow the flood. ([Rev. 12:16](#)) The imagery of the earth swallowing the flood is taken from the story of Dathan and Abriam who opposed Moses, and thus went down to the pit live and whole, when the earth opened its mouth as a sign against them. ([Num. 16:29-32](#)) This began to be fulfilled in A.D. 36, when the future emperor, Vitellius, then president of Syria, compelled Pilate to travel to Rome to answer charges about the death of some Samaritans that resulted in the suppression of an uprising.[116](#) Since the Roman procurator held the *ius gladii*, the persecution depended upon his cooperation if the disciples were to be put death. Robbed of Pilate, the Jews could only beat, imprison, and excommunicate.[117](#)

At the same time he removed Pilate, Vitellius traveled to Jerusalem during the Passover where he was magnificently received by the Jews. In return, Vitellius remitted certain taxes and restored custody of the high priest’s garments to the Jews, which, until that time, had been kept in the fortress Antonia under Roman guard. Josephus records that as a further kindness to the Jews, Vitellius removed Caiaphas from the high priesthood.[118](#) Caiaphas contrived the murder of Christ together with his father-in-law, Annas. (John

18:13, 24) The house of the Annas (viz., “Hanan,” “Annas” is the Greek form of “Hanan”) had long oppressed the Jews, together with the high priestly houses of Beothus, Kathros, and Ismael ben Phabi, as the Talmud records.

Restoring the care and custody of the high priestly garments to the Jews at the same time he removed Caiaphas indicates that issues concerning the high priesthood were of high priority to the Jews and that there was widespread dissatisfaction with Caiaphas. Upon the death of Festus, before Albinus arrived to replace him, Ananus, the son of Annas the father-in-law of Caiaphas, convened the Sanhedrin and put to death James, the Lord’s brother, with several of his fellow disciples. Josephus records that many of the leading Jews complained to Albinus of Ananus’ convening of the Sanhedrin and unlawful usurpation of the *ius gladii*:

Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he [Ananus] assembled the Sanhedrim of the judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or some of his companions;] and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned: but as for those who seemed the most equitable of the citizens, and such as were the most uneasy at the breach of the laws, they disliked what was done; they also sent to the king [Agrippa,] desiring him to send to Ananus that he should act so no more, for that what he had already done was not to be justified: nay, some of them went also to meet Albinus, as he was upon his journey from Alexandria, and informed him that it was not lawful for Ananus to assemble a Sanhedrim without his consent: whereupon Albinus complied with what they said, and wrote in anger to Ananus, and threatened that he would bring him to punishment for what he had done; on which king Agrippa took the high priesthood from him, when he had ruled but three months, and made Jesus, the son of Damneus, high priest. [1110](#)

Given that the apostles and church were held in high esteem by the Jewish people at the time Caiaphas was removed ([Acts 5:12-16](#)) and that many of the priests were obedient to the faith ([Acts 6:7](#)), it is quite possible that the persecution of the church contributed to the request Caiaphas be removed from office, much as it did thirty years later when Ananias was removed by Agrippa II for having stoned James.

Undaunted by the loss of the *ius gladii* in the person of Pilate, Saul would go on to press the persecution to foreign cities, seeking letters from the high priests to imprison those calling upon Christ. However, Saul

would never reach Damascus, but would instead himself become a disciple of the Lord. (Acts 9) The conversion of Saul marked the end of the first great persecution.

Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; waling in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied. (Acts 9:31)

Agrippa I would slay James, the brother of John, with the sword, but his persecution ended almost as abruptly as it started by Agrippa’s untimely death. (Acts 12) Agrippa II was too young to manage his father’s kingdom, so Claudius returned Judea to a province and sent thither Fadus as procurator. The church thus had the protection of law under Roman rule until the death of Claudius when Nero ascended the throne.

Revelation indicates the persecution under Caiaphas, Pilate, and Paul, lasted three and a half years. Beginning with the death of Stephen until the conversion of Paul is three and a half years. Paul states that he went up to Jerusalem three years after his conversion; then, he went again fourteen years later to the Jerusalem Counsel to settle the question whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised and obey the law of Moses. ([Gal. 2:1](#); [Acts 15:2](#)) Most authorities place this at A.D. 50. He returned two or three years later, while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia. (Acts 18:12, 22) From an inscription found at Delphi, we know that Gallio was proconsul in A.D. 52-53. Moreover, mention of Claudius’ expulsion of the Jews from Rome further fixes this date, for Claudius expelled the Jews in the eleventh year of reign, or A.D. 52. ([Acts 18:2](#)) Two years later, he went up again and was arrested. ([Acts 19:10](#); 20:22; 24:17, 18) Paul remained in custody under Felix for two years. ([Acts 24:27](#)) We know that Festus replaced Felix in A.D. 59-60. Thus, A.D. 59-2-2-14-3 = A.D. 38. From the martyrdom of Stephen in A.D. 34 to Paul’s conversion in A.D. 38 accords perfectly with the three and a half year persecution portrayed in Revelation twelve.

Conclusion

Revelation twelve depicts the birth of the Savior, his earthly ministry, and the persecution that erupted over the martyrdom of Stephen. The wisdom and foresight of God removed the *ius gladii* from the tribe of Judah and placed it in Roman officials for the protection of the church. Had God not so provided, the church and gospel could not have survived and would have been extirpated at its very birth.