

The Seven Heads of Revelation 17
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Originally an Appendix to the book *Armageddon at the Door*

The death of Pope John Paul II and the election of his successor triggered a great deal of interest among Adventists in the seven-headed beast of Revelation 17. A flurry of emails from pastors, friends and former students indicated considerable “buzz” about the possible implications of the chapter for current events. And this is not the first time I have experienced a flurry of interest in chapter 17. So I would be remiss if I said nothing at all about the issues in this chapter.

The focus of greatest interest is verse 10, which describes the seven heads of the beast as consecutive. “Five have fallen, one is now, the other has not yet come, and when he comes he must remain for a short time.” Adventist lay interpreters have, for several decades, sought to connect these heads with the series of popes who have been in place since the Vatican was re-established as a recognized nation in 1929. Most studies through the years saw John Paul II as the last or next to last in the sequence. Thus his death, and the age of his successor, rekindled speculation regarding the nearness of the end, especially since Benedict XVI is the seventh pope since 1929.

The Position of Mainstream Scholarship

In the wider world of mainstream scholarship, research on Revelation 17 is limited largely to a preterist approach, which sees the book of Revelation as a symbolic reflection on the situation of John's day. According to this view, the seven churches of Revelation faced threats from both inside and outside the church. The "Nicolaitans" and the followers of "Jezebel" (presumed to be a church leader at variance with John late in the first century) challenge the churches from the inside. The Jews and the Roman authorities challenge the churches from outside. The symbolism of John's vision, therefore, would address how the church should respond to these threats in the first-century context, particularly the threat from the Roman authorities.

When it comes to Revelation 17, the preterist position notes that the "seven mountains" of 17:9 could also be translated "seven hills." (The biblical "Mount" of Olives, for example, is a mere hill, several hundred feet above the site of ancient Jerusalem) Several first-century writers referred to Rome as the "city of seven hills."¹ The bulk of preterist scholars, therefore, see in the seven heads references to seven specific emperors of the first century.

This perspective is flawed, however, in the sense that there is no consensus regarding the specific emperors intended.² David Aune, author of the most detailed commentary on Revelation ever written³ summarizes no less than nine contradictory lists of emperors that can be found in

¹David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52c (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 944-945.

²See the analysis of this position by Kenneth A. Strand, "The Seven Heads: Do They Represent Roman Emperors?" in *Symposium on Revelation—Book II*, edited by Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 7 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 178-206.

³David E. Aune, *Revelation*, 3 vols., Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52, David A. Barker and Glenn W. Hubbard, editors (Waco, TX: Word Publishers, and Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997-1998). The commentary contains more than 1800 pages of relatively small print.

the scholarly literature.⁴ So even if the preterist interpretation were John's intention, it is not at all clear what John was intending here. And recent discoveries raise doubts that there was extensive persecution against Christians during the time of Domitian.⁵ So the Roman emperor hypothesis is shaky at best.⁶

A number of preterist scholars like Aune, therefore, see the seven heads of Revelation 17 in more symbolic terms, although here too there is a lack of consensus on their meaning.⁷ So for mainstream scholarship, Rev 17:10 remains an unclear text, one of the most vexing in all of the Bible. This fact should caution anyone who seeks to find meaning for today in a superficial reading of the passage.⁸

Major Adventist Interpretations

Turning to Adventist interpretation of the passage, Ellen White, the most authoritative

⁴Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 946-948.

⁵Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 69-76; Leonard Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 174-185.

⁶Note also Strand's observation ("Seven Hills," page 186 and note 18) that elsewhere in Rev the word for "hill" in Rev 17:9 is translated "mountain" and nowhere else in Scripture is this word applied to an individual. In addition, Strand notes (page 187) that Rome's seven hills are not sequential, as are the "hills" of Rev 17:9.

⁷*Ibid.*, 948.

⁸I have not analyzed the viewpoints of dispensational futurists regarding the seven heads of Revelation 17 (this is the viewpoint portrayed in the *Left Behind* series of novels). The reason for this is that the viewpoint, while wildly popular among evangelical Christians, is not taken seriously by any mainstream scholar of Revelation for sound, exegetical reasons. I do not feel, therefore, that this approach to Revelation will be helpful to Adventist students of Revelation 17, even though careful study of the chapter may lead to the conclusion (as I currently hold) that the vision focuses on the final events of earth's history. This dismissal is based on quality of exegesis issues, not merely disagreement with dispensational futurist conclusions.

Adventist interpreter, does not seem to address the issue of Rev 17:10 at all. In fact, she has extremely little to say even about Revelation 17 as a whole.⁹

Uriah Smith also had relatively little to say about the seven heads of Rev 17:7-11. He does seem to believe that the “one is now” head of Rev 17:10 is the Rome of John’s day.¹⁰ He makes no attempt to interpret the “five have fallen.”

In his revision and update of Smith’s work,¹¹ Mervyn Maxwell seems to move away from Smith’s position that the “one is now” head must be understood as reigning in John’s day (although he is not perfectly clear on this). Instead he suggests the “one is now” could be the time of the wounded head of Rev 13:3, which he understands as “Christian Rome in its wounded state.” In this scheme the seven heads are Babylon, Persia, Greece, pagan Rome, Christian Rome, Christian Rome (wounded) and Christian Rome (revived).¹² Maxwell’s position has been endorsed in some detail by Jacques Doukhan.¹³

Kenneth Strand, in an article submitted to the Daniel and Revelation Committee of the

⁹A quick look at standard references offers the following comments on Revelation 17 as a whole: GC 382, 440, 536 and 7BC 983 (Letter 232, 1899; MS 24, 1891; RH, Nov. 29, 1892). If there are any further clear comments on Revelation 17 in published or unpublished works, I would be delighted to hear about them.

¹⁰Uriah Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation*, revised edition (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1944), 711.

¹¹C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares: The Message of Revelation For You and Your Family* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1985).

¹²*Ibid.*, 471-475.

¹³Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse Through Hebrew Eyes* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 161-164. Though this little book has gone relatively unnoticed, Doukhan in these pages offers the single most extensive exegesis of this difficult passage by any church leader or scholar. I will share his view as a significant alternative to mine at the end of this essay.

General Conference, agreed with Smith that the standpoint of the “one now is” is John’s day.¹⁴ But like Smith, he asserted that view, he did not make a case for it. He also argued that the “hills” of Rev 17:9 should be translated as “mountains”¹⁵ and that mountains in Bible prophecy never represent individuals, they always represent kingdoms or empires. He goes on to list the five “that have fallen” as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Greece, and the “one now is” as the Rome of John’s day.¹⁶ One can infer from Strand’s comments elsewhere that he understood the seventh head to be papal Rome in the Middle Ages.¹⁷ His presentation, unfortunately (for our purposes), was more of an attack on preterism than an outline of what Adventists could or should make of the text.

Ranko Stefanovic, in his recent commentary, seems to take up the view of Strand, but without detailed argument.¹⁸

In conclusion, I would note that neither the scholars nor the administrators of the church have put major effort into the interpretation of Rev 17:7-11. This may reflect Ellen White’s seeming disinterest, the difficulty of the passage, and the sense that it is not crucial to Adventist faith and identity. Given the current interest in the passage, however, it seems that a more careful analysis of the text from an Adventist perspective is called for.

¹⁴Kenneth A. Strand, “The Seven Heads: Do They Represent Roman Emperors?” in *Symposium on Revelation— Book II*, edited by Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 7 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 191.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 186.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2002), 515.

The Exegetical Process

What follows is not an exhaustive study of the possibilities in the text or in the secondary literature about the text. But I trust that it will be a helpful starting point and guide for future work. All who wish to contribute to the church's understanding of this text will want to consider the methodology offered in my book, *The Deep Things of God*, pages 93-176. If anyone is aware of a more thorough method for approaching the text of Revelation, I would welcome learning about it. The following is based on understanding grounded in that method.

A brief note on the role of scholarly exegesis in the church's exploration of the Bible is warranted. Many people feel that if all the scholarly evidence in the Greek and other sources could be examined, every Bible text would become clear. Other people see the disagreements among scholars as evidence that the whole process of biblical scholarship is a waste of time. Both extreme positions fall short of reality. The process of exegesis will sometimes clarify things that were poorly understood. But at other times it will muddy waters that we thought were clear.

In simple terms, exegesis helps us discern which texts of the Bible are clear and which are unclear. "In a multitude of counselors there is safety." When exegetes from a wide variety of backgrounds and perspectives all agree on a text, we can safely conclude that the text is reasonably clear. When the same exegetes find little to agree about in a text, it is usually a "problem text" or a "difficult passage." My playful description of an unclear text is one "where it is much easier to see the flaws in someone else's interpretation than to build a convincing interpretation of your own." Rev 17:10 is one of those unclear texts.

Texts can be unclear for a lot of reasons. We may not be familiar with the exact meaning

of certain words in the text. The grammar and syntax of the Greek may allow more than one interpretation of a construction. We may not know the audience to which a work is addressed. We may not know a viewpoint that a biblical author is contradicting. We may not know the setting or the time in which a revelation was presented. We may not know that an author is alluding to some earlier literary text. Or an author may be alluding to an oral tradition that we do not have access to. God meets people where they are. And when we are not where the original readers were, the chances of misunderstanding can be great.

But God is in control of His revelations. The Spirit is available to help us understand what is of ongoing validity and importance. There are tools of exegesis that open our eyes to evidence and unlock possibilities that we would otherwise miss. So there is hope that careful exegesis can shed some light on Rev 17:7-11, bringing at least pockets of clarity to what has been so unclear in the past. At the least it can help us see what is clear and what is not clear and why. This can help us avoid overstating our case for a particular interpretation of the text.

A Brief Analysis of the Context

Relation to Chapters 16 and 18

As we have seen, Revelation 17 builds on the earlier vision of the seven bowl/plagues in Revelation 15-16. Since the woman of 17:1 is named Babylon (Rev 17:5), and the “many waters” of Babylon are the Euphrates River (Jer 51:7, 13), Revelation 17 is particularly an exegesis of Rev 16:12-16 (which includes reference to Armageddon), the sixth bowl/plague. Revelation 17 is about the final battle of earth’s history (Rev 17:12-17).

After John's initial encounter with the bowl angel (Rev 17:1-2), he goes into vision "in the spirit" (Rev 17:3). He sees a woman (presumably the prostitute of verses 1-2) sitting on a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns (Rev 17:3). The woman is dressed in spectacular, royal fashion (Rev 17:4), reminiscent of the city Babylon (Rev 18:16) and, perhaps, of Israel's High Priest (Exod 28:1-43).¹⁹ Upon her forehead is a miter, naming her "Babylon the Great, Mother of Prostitutes" (Rev 17:5). John sees that the woman is drunk with the blood of the saints and the martyrs of Jesus (Rev 17:6a). John is amazed by what he has seen (Rev 17:6b). The rest of the chapter is an angelic explanation of the vision of verses 3-6. So chapter 17 could be structured as follows:

- 1-2: Angelic Introduction to the Vision
- 3-6: Vision of the Woman Riding the Beast and John's Reaction
- 7-11: Angelic Explanation of the Beast and Its Seven Heads
- 12-14 Angelic Explanation of the Ten Horns and the Lamb's War
- 15-18 Angelic Explanation of the Woman's Destruction

The crucial distinction here is between the vision (Rev 17:3-6), where John sees images without explanation, and the angelic explanation, where various details of the vision are explained and sometimes expanded (Rev 17:1-2, 7-18). This distinction between vision and explanation will prove helpful at a later stage of this study.

Revelation 18 is, in some ways, a mirror image of Revelation 17, they are two sides of the same coin. In Revelation 17 Babylon is portrayed in terms of a prostitute, in Revelation 18 she is portrayed in terms of the Great City. Rev 17:18 (ESV) links the two images into one: "And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion (Greek: "kingship:;) over the kings of

¹⁹J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 38 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 287-288, cf. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 857.

the earth.” Since Revelation 18 clearly portrays some of the final events of earth’s history, Revelation 17 is a description of end-time realities as well.

Relation to Earlier Beasts

A second aspect of the context is that both woman and beast have interesting antecedents in chapters 12-13. The seven-headed, ten-horned beast is preceded by the dragon in Revelation 12 and the beast from the sea in Revelation 13. The seven heads in Revelation 17 are clearly consecutive (Rev 17:10). In Revelation 12, on the other hand, there is no indication whether the heads of the dragon function all at once or in sequence. In Revelation 13, however, it says about the beast from the sea that “one of his heads was, as it were, wounded to death.” Rev 13:3. So the seven heads of Revelation 13 should also be seen as consecutive.²⁰

If this is so, the dragon of chapter 12, the sea beast of chapter 13, and the scarlet beast of chapter 17 manifest three different stages of one and the same beast. The dragon of chapter 12 is best associated with the actions of the Empire (in the person of Herod the Great) against the Christ child (Rev 12:5).²¹ The activities of the sea beast are later.²² Evidently the sea beast operates under two separate heads, the first is wounded to death, but then the sea beast returns

²⁰The fact that the beast of Revelation 13 is grounded in the consecutive beast/kingdoms of Daniel 7 is further evidence that the seven heads of the sea beast occur in consecutive order.

²¹Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 639; J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, edited by Grant R. Osborne (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 147; James Moffat, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, The Expositor’s Greek Testament, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 5:425; J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation*, Westminster Pelican Commentaries (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), 196-197.

²²The crowns move from the heads (on the dragon in Rev 12) to the horns (on the sea beast in Rev 13). This mirrors the move from the head of the fourth best to the ten horns in Daniel 7. Just as the ten horns are later than the fourth beast in Daniel 7, the shift of crowns from heads to horns indicates the sea beast (which receives its authority from the dragon— Rev 13:2) is

with a new head at a later time (Rev 13:3, 12). Adventists have been fairly unanimous in seeing the actions of the sea beast before its wounding as a forecast of the medieval papacy.

The scarlet beast of Revelation 17 clearly functions in the context of the seven last plagues, so it is the final manifestation of the beast, presumably under the “eighth” head. It is the very last manifestation before the beast joins the false prophet in the lake of fire (Rev 19:17-21). The seven heads of the beast in Rev 17:7-11 would, therefore, seem to include the actions of the dragon and the sea beast. These actions are manifestations of the beast under earlier heads.

Relation to the Woman of Revelation 12

The woman of Revelation 17 recalls the faithful woman of Revelation 12. John’s last view of the faithful woman was in the desert. There she was rescued by the earth from the flood of water that was spewed out of the dragon’s mouth (Rev 12:15-16). When he again sees a woman out in the desert, it is the harlot Babylon! No wonder John is astonished (John 17:6)! Clearly the Babylon of Revelation 17 has a Christian face. She represents the end-time religious counterfeit of God’s faithful remnant, the seed of the woman (Rev 12:17).

The Context of Daniel 7

An additional context of the three beasts is the background in Daniel 7. When you look carefully at that vision, you realize that the four beasts of Daniel 7 total seven heads and ten horns! The connection with Daniel 7 is clearest in the beast from the sea (Rev 13:1-10). It has characteristics of the lion, the bear, the leopard and the fourth beast (cf. Rev 13:1-2). It, like the

later than the dragon in point of history.

beasts of Daniel 7, comes out of the sea (Rev 13:1, Dan 7:2). All three beasts are designed to recall the vision of Daniel 7. The prophecy of Revelation 17 is modeled, therefore, on the beasts of Daniel 7. The various heads there symbolize more than individual kings or religious leaders, they represent whole nations or empires that rule for extended periods. Thus the seven heads of Revelation 17 probably symbolize whole nations or empires rather than individuals.

Revelation 17:7-11

The passage begins innocently enough. The angel tells John that he will explain the mystery of the woman and the seven-headed, ten-horned beast that he had seen in the vision (Rev 17:7). Things quickly get confusing after that. In verse 8 the beast “was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the Abyss and go to (his) destruction.” Then the angel describes the amazement of the wicked (“those who live on the earth”) when they see the beast who “was, and is not, and will become present” (17:8).

In verse 9 the mind that has wisdom learns that the seven heads are actually seven mountains, “upon which the woman sits, and they are seven kings.” So the woman is not only sitting on a beast, but on seven mountains (which are the same as the seven heads). And these seven mountains are also seven “kings” (likely “kingdoms” as in Dan 2:36-45, the last kingdom being represented by a mountain).

In verse ten John is told that five of these heads/mountains/kings “have fallen, one is now, and the other has not yet come, but when he comes he must remain for a short time.” The crucial question of this verse is when the “now” is to be understood. Is it the time of John, as Strand and Stefanovic have suggested? Is it the time of the vision, when the woman sits on the

beast? Is it the time of the deadly wound in Rev 13:3, as Maxwell suggests? Some who have seen in these seven heads seven recent popes have suggested that the “deadly wound” was actually the wounding of John Paul II in St. Peter’s Square more than twenty years ago. But John Paul did not die on that occasion and the force of the Greek in Rev 13:3 is “wound of his death.” John Paul’s death was not connected to the wound he suffered 24 years earlier.

In verse 11 things get even more complicated. “And the beast who was and is not, the same is an eighth (head) and is one of the seven, and he will go to (his) destruction.” The word “head” is not mentioned, leaving ambiguous whether beast or head or both are intended by “eighth.” The fact that “eighth” is used connects this verse with the seven heads of 17:9-10. But it is the “beast” that is the “eighth” and the “eighth” is described in the same language as the beast itself in verse 8, “he will go to (his) destruction.” So is the eighth head the same thing as the beast? What about the other heads then? Are they “the beast” or are they separate from the beast?

The more carefully you look at the passage, therefore, the more things you find that don’t seem to hold together. The best explanation of verse 11 would seem to be that the beast exists itself in seven (or eight) consecutive phases, each of which has its own head. When John sees the beast in the vision (Rev 17:3), it is in its eighth phase. But the seven heads he sees are echoes of the seven earlier phases.²³ So while the beast appears with seven heads in the vision, the image of a seven-headed beast represents a beast that lives, dies and is resurrected seven or eight times.²⁴ Is your head spinning yet? Mine too.

²³Beale seems to have come to the same conclusion on the basis of the Greek. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 875.

²⁴Some have suggested a connection between this beast and the Hydra of ancient Greek

What We Know for Sure So Far

A few things are clear so far. 1) Revelation 17 is sandwiched between two end-time passages, the bowl/plagues of Revelation 16 and the fall of Babylon in Revelation 18. So the primary focus of the vision is on the end-time battle of Armageddon and the fall of Babylon. 2) In terms of the reality to which the symbols point, the seven heads of the beast are consecutive or sequential, they are not all on the beast at the same time. 3) The detailed description of the seven heads is part of an angelic explanation (Rev 17:7-18), it is not part of the vision proper (Rev 17:3-6).

Earlier in this book I show how the woman who sits on the beast represents worldwide religious authority in opposition to the end-time remnant. The beast itself represents the civil and secular powers of the world united in opposition to God's people and in support of prostitute Babylon. To save space I will not repeat the biblical evidence for these conclusions. The beast itself is not, therefore, to be confused with the end-time papacy, the head of worldwide religious authority. The beast represents the civil powers of the world who end up turning on Babylon and destroying her (Rev 17:16). So a fourth thing is reasonably certain. 4) The beast of Revelation 17 represents political and military power rather than religious authority.

The Time of the "Now"

A major unresolved question is exactly when these seven heads function. Are they all at

mythology. The Hydra was a nine-headed monster that was eventually destroyed by Hercules. But every time a head was chopped off, two grew in its place and the monster became more fearsome than before! So the analogy is limited.

the end of time? Or were at least five of them already in the past when John wrote his book? Or is the time of the head that “is now” somewhere in between, as Maxwell has suggested? Are there some patterns in Bible prophecy that can guide us to a solid answer to these questions? I believe there are two basic principles that need to be kept in mind.

1) *God Meets People Where They Are*

A generally accepted principle of biblical interpretation is that God meets people where they are. In other words, Scripture was given in the time, place, language, and culture of specific human beings.²⁵ The knowledge, experience, and background of the Biblical writers was respected. Paul, with his “Ph.D.,” expresses God’s revelation to him in a different way than does Peter, the fisherman. John writes in simple, clear, almost childlike Greek. On the other hand, the author of Hebrews has the most complex and literary Greek in all the New Testament with the exception of the first four verses of Luke. In Matthew, you have someone who understands the Jewish mind.²⁶ Mark, on the other hand, reaches out to the Gentile mind.²⁷ So the revelations recorded in the Bible were given in a way comprehensible to each audience.

This principle is clearly articulated in *Selected Messages, Volume 1*, 19-22:

The writers of the Bible had to express their ideas in human language. It was written by human men. These men were inspired of the Holy Spirit. . . .

The Scriptures were given to men, not in a continuous chain of unbroken utterances, but piece by piece through successive generations, as God in His providence

²⁵No Author, *Problems in Bible Translation*, Committee on Problems in Bible Translation, General Conference of SDAs (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1954), 95-96.

²⁶Matthew continually shows how the life of Jesus fulfills the Old Testament Scriptures with which the Jews were familiar (see, for example, Matt 1:22,23; 2:5,6,15,17,18). He uses Jewish terms without explanation.

²⁷Mark explains Jewish terms to his non-Jewish audience (compare, for example, Mark 14:12 with Matt 26:17).

saw **a fitting opportunity** to impress man at sundry times and divers places. . . .

The Bible, perfect as it is in its simplicity, does not answer to the great ideas of God; for infinite ideas cannot be perfectly embodied in finite vehicles of thought.²⁸

While this principle is true for the Bible in general, does it apply to the sweeping historical sequences of apocalyptic? Did God consider the language, time and place of Daniel and John when He provided the visions they record in their books? Indeed He did. Biblical apocalyptic also met God's people where they were. The book of Revelation is firmly grounded in the experience of seven churches in Asia Minor (Rev 1:11,19; 22:16). It was intended to make sense to the one who reads and those who hear (Rev 1:3).²⁹ The vision of Christ utilized the language of John's past, the Old Testament, as the primary source for its symbolism.

God meets people where they are in Daniel as well. While Adventists tend to distinguish between Nebuchadnezzar's "dream" and Daniel's "vision,"³⁰ that distinction is not made by the biblical text. The experience of the two "prophets" was the same.³¹ In Dan 2:28 (NIV) Nebuchadnezzar is told, "Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you lay on your bed are these." In Dan 7:1 (NIV) we are told, "Daniel had a dream, and visions passed

²⁸There is, perhaps, no clearer illustration of this than the ten commandments, which come directly from the mouth of God (Exod 20:1-19), yet include significant elements of the cultural milieu within which they were received (slavery, idolatry, and neighbors who possess oxen and donkeys).

²⁹The Greek construction in Rev 1:3 means to "hear with understanding." The language assumes that the original readers of the book would have understood its basic message.

³⁰Leslie Hardinge, *Jesus Is My Judge: Meditations on the Book of Daniel* (Harrisburg, PA: American Cassette Ministries Book Division, 1996), 27-28, 134; Roy Allan Anderson, *Unfolding Daniel's Prophecies* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1975), 42, 87.

³¹While William Shea does not address this wording directly, he does comment, "The mode of revelation in these two cases was the same. The recipients, however, were quite different. The dream of chapter 2 was given to a pagan king initially for his own personal benefit; the dream of Daniel 7 was given directly to the prophet Daniel to communicate to God's people." William H. Shea, *Daniel 1-7, The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier*, edited by George R.

through his mind as he was lying on his bed.” The Aramaic of Dan 7:1 is essentially identical with that of Dan 2:28.³² In both cases God chose to reveal Himself in visionary form, He was in full control of the revelation.³³

To Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2 God portrays the future world empires by means of an idol.³⁴ This makes sense in that time and place because, to the heathen king, the nations of the world were bright and shining counterparts of the gods they worshiped. For Daniel the Hebrew prophet, on the other hand, the nations of the world were like vicious, ravenous beasts who were hurting his people. So in the vision of Daniel 7 God again draws on the prophet’s knowledge and setting. This time, instead of symbolism drawn from the Babylonian world, He shapes the vision along the lines of the creation story in Genesis chapters 1 and 2.³⁵ God describes Daniel’s future in terms of a new creation.

The sequence of history in both visions is roughly the same (Dan 2:45; 7:17). The primary message of both visions is the same, God is in control of history (Dan 2:37-38; 7:26-27).

Knight (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1996), 155.

³²Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *The Book of Daniel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, The New Interpreter’s Bible, vol. 7, edited by Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 100.

³³John J. Collins notes that the “vision formula” is also found in Dan 4:13, regarding Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the great tree. John J. Collins, *Daniel with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, vol. 20, edited by Rolf Knierim and Gene M. Tucker (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 76; idem, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, Hermeneia— A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, Frank Moore Cross, general editor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 294.

³⁴I call the image an “idol” in part because of how the OT uses the term elsewhere: 2 Kings 11:18; 2 Chron 23:17; Amos 5:26, etc. But Nebuchadnezzar’s own reaction is instructive. In chapter 3 he knows exactly what to do with the “image,” set it up so people can worship it!

³⁵In both Genesis and Daniel things begin with a stormy sea (Gen 1:2; Dan 7:2). In both cases a “son of man” is given dominion over the animals.

But in his choice of imagery, God meets apocalyptic writers where they are!³⁶ There are a couple of conclusions I would like to draw from the above summary:

1) God speaks to the prophets in the context of their own time, place, and circumstances. He speaks in language they can understand and appreciate, even when He speaks in apocalyptic terms. He uses the language of the prophet's past to paint a picture of the prophet's future. God meets people where they are. In our study of Bible prophecies like Revelation 17, therefore, it is imperative that we seek to understand them in terms of the original time, place, language, and circumstances, as well as the content of the whole of Scripture. God's meaning for today will not contradict the message that He placed in the vision in the first place.

This is not to be confused with the preterist position. The preterist position argues that Daniel and Revelation offer no insight into the far future of their prophets. Apocalyptic books speak instead to the immediate situation, and that situation only. An Adventist approach, on the other hand, believes that God places in the apocalyptic visions accurate information about the far future, but that future is described in the language of the prophet's time and place. If we want to understand what God was telling John about the future, we need to first understand what John understood.

2) The purpose of apocalyptic visions is not simply to satisfy human curiosity about the future (although that may have played a role in the first instance, according to Dan 2:29). It is a

³⁶Which of the two visions reflects a perspective closest to the mind of God? I would suggest Daniel's in chapter 7. To human perspective the nations of the world are glorious things worthy of the utmost in human devotion (idolatry). While there is no critique of idolatry in Dan 2, God meets Nebuchadnezzar at his point of view to help him understand who really controls history. From God's perspective, the nations are ugly, misshapen, bizarre-looking beasts, who tear and destroy. His plans will never be fully accomplished through them. For the people of God devotion to country must always take second place to their devotion to God.

message about the character and the workings of God. God is not only communicating something about the future course of history, He is revealing Himself as the One who is in control of that history. To study apocalyptic only as a key to unlock details of the future is to miss its message about a God who seeks to be known by His people. From a Christian perspective, apocalyptic is never rightly understood unless its central focus is on the “son of man,” Jesus Christ.

2) The Difference Between Vision and Interpretation

In light of the previous section, however, distinction must be made between the time of apocalyptic visions and the time of their interpretation. In a vision, the prophet can travel anywhere in the universe and to any point of time, all the way to the end of the world. The events of the vision are not necessarily located in the prophet’s time and place. But when the vision is explained to the prophet afterward, the explanation always comes in the time, place and circumstances of the visionary.

We can clearly see this principle in Daniel 2. While the vision of the statue carries Nebuchadnezzar to end of earth’s history, the explanation of the vision by Daniel is firmly grounded in the time and place of Nebuchadnezzar. The interpretation begins with a straightforward, unambiguous assertion, “You are that head of gold (Dan 2:38).” Nebuchadnezzar is then told that the series of kingdoms that follow are “after you” (2:39) in point of time.

As was the case with Daniel 2, the apocalyptic prophecy of Dan 7 is divided into two parts; a description of the vision, in which the prophet is transported through time and space (Dan 7:2-14), and an explanation of the vision, given in the language, time and place of the

prophet (Dan 7:15-27). Even though Daniel experienced all elements of the vision, including the final events, the explanation clarifies that the vision is essentially about the future experience of Daniel's people (Dan 7:17-18, 23-27). The explanation comes for the benefit of Daniel first. It, therefore, explains things in terms of his location in the world and history, in terms he can understand.³⁷ The same pattern can be seen in Daniel 8 and Zech 4:1-14.³⁸

So whenever vision moves to interpretation, the principle of "God meets people where they are" must be applied to the explanations given. Prophets don't usually seem to understand

³⁷It could be argued that in the midst of the explanation of Dan 7:15-27 comes an addition to the vision. Dan 7:21-22 affirms, "As I watched, this horn was waging war against the saints and defeating them, until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom." This seems to be a visionary extension of verse 8 and of the judgment interlude in Dan 7:9-14. Daniel goes on to record the answer to his request for further information on the fourth beast and the Little Horn. "He gave me this explanation: 'The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different. . . .'" Thus vision and interpretation is not rigidly separated, but they must nevertheless be clearly distinguished in point of time. This seems also to be the case in Revelation 17, where the chapter begins with a short explanatory introduction (following up on the vision of the bowl-plagues— Rev 17:1-2), followed by a short vision (17:3-6a), followed by a lengthy explanation of elements of the vision, including some expansions (17:6b-18).

³⁸Klaus Koch divides Daniel 8 into "vision" (*Schauung*— 2-14) and "meaning" (*Deutung*— 15-26). Klaus Koch, "Vom Prophetischen zum apokalyptischen Visionsbericht," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism, Uppsala, August 12-17, 1979, David Hellholm, editor, (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983), 415-421.

Another Old Testament example of vision followed by interpretation is found in Zechariah 4, which has a pattern similar to Daniel 7. In Zechariah 4, however, the vision is extremely brief (Zech 4:2b-3), and is introduced by the interpreting angel (Zech 4:1-2a). The interpretation of the vision involves a lengthy back and forth dialogue between the prophet and the angel (Zech 4:1-2a, 4-14).

the revelation from visions alone.³⁹ An explanation is necessary for the revelation to be understood.⁴⁰ Since that explanation is given for the benefit of the prophet, it is based on the time, place and circumstances in which the seer lives. Present, past and future are not grounded in visionary time, but in terms of the prophet's physical location and time frame. This principle has profound implications for the interpretation of difficult apocalyptic texts like Rev 17:7-11.

Implications For the Seven Popes View

Popular views that tie the heads of Revelation 17 to specific recent popes run counter to a number of aspects of the text. First the seven heads are usually seen to begin with Pope Pius XI in 1929. Why this should be so cannot be established from the text of Revelation. Normally, as we have seen, prophetic explanations are given in the time and place of the prophet (I am not aware of a *clear* exception to this rule). That would make the sixth head the time of John, AD 95. If that is the case, seeing the seven heads as made up entirely of end-time characters is not an option.

A further problem for this view is that the seven heads are based on Daniel 7, where the heads do not represent individual kings or religious leaders, they represent major nations and/or empires.⁴¹ This is further underlined by the equation of the heads and the kings with seven

³⁹Ellen White's visions were described by her son as "flashlight pictures," something like a silent movie. Sometimes an angel came to explain aspects of the vision, at other times Ellen White had to do research in commentaries and history books to gain an understanding of what God was trying to communicate to her.

⁴⁰Susan Niditch, *The Symbolic Vision in Biblical Tradition* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 185.

⁴¹This is true also of the four heads of the leopard. These are widely recognized to represent the four divisions of Alexander's empire, three of which unquestionably survived as major nations for several hundred years. It is possible that heads may equate to specific Roman

mountains. “Mountains” in Bible prophecy (such as in Daniel 2 and Jeremiah 51) represent major kingdoms as well. So an interpretation that requires the seven heads to represent seven individual popes stretches the imagery to unrecognizable proportions.

Furthermore, there is evidence within the book of Revelation itself that the three beasts of Revelation can be equated with the sixth head (Rev 12– pagan Rome of John’s day), the seventh head (Rev 13– the papal Rome that succeeded pagan Rome), and the eighth head (Rev 17 itself– the final worldwide political unity).⁴² While not at the compelling level of “clear texts” in my mind, these connections move the weight of evidence strongly against seeing all seven heads as end-time individuals. If the final manifestation of the beast is political and military in nature, rather than religious, associating the heads of the beast with popes is not helpful to understanding. The papacy is better associated with the woman of Revelation 17 rather than with the beast.

A further peril in viewpoints such as this is that they incline those who hold them to a species of date setting. It may be “soft” date setting (in the lifetime of this pope, or the next, rather than a specific day or year), yet it places the focus, not on the spiritual message of the biblical revelation, but on the speculative issue of when Jesus will return (or other end-time events will occur). I have written at length on the dangers of date setting of all kinds in *The Millennium Bug*. The desire to know the “times and the seasons” (Acts 1:6-7) is natural for

emperors in the apocryphal book of 4 Ezra (2 Esdras in the Apocrypha). Ezra sees a vision of an eagle with 12 wings and three heads (4 Ezra 11:1 - 12:9). The eagle is a reinterpretation of the fourth beast of Daniel 7 (4 Ezra 12:10-12). Some scholars feel that the three heads of the eagle (4 Ezra 11:29-35; 12:22-30) represent Vespasian, Titus and Domitian. See D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 194.

⁴²Note the discussion under “Implications for the Maxwell/Doukhan view” below. See also Doukhan, 161-164.

human beings, but it drives us to erroneous interpretations of Scripture. It is best avoided.

Seventh-day Adventists have long believed that the papacy will play a major role in the final events of earth's history, and there is nothing in Revelation 17 that would contradict such a view. But there is no significant evidence in the chapter that the sequence of popes at the end of time is the focus of the passage. At best such a view is the sum total of a series of questionable assumptions. It cannot, therefore, offer compelling guidance to the larger body of the church. It will be convincing only to those who need it to be so.

Implications for the Maxwell/Doukhan View

The view outlined by Maxwell and detailed by Doukhan comes closer to the evidence of Revelation 17 in its larger context than the seven popes view. Since Doukhan argues this position in the most detail, I will outline his argument briefly.⁴³

Doukhan would agree with me that the seven heads of Revelation 17 are based on Revelation 13 and Daniel 7 and need to be seen as major empires or nations.⁴⁴ For Doukhan, the Daniel 7 connection becomes determinative of the beginning of the seven heads. The beast from the sea (Revelation 13) incorporates all five major entities of Daniel 7: the lion of Babylon, the bear of Persia, the leopard of Greece, the indescribable beast of Rome and the little horn that follows the fourth beast. For Doukhan this articulates the five that "have fallen." Since the list is based on Daniel 7, it must begin with the first beast of Daniel 7, which is the lion of Babylon.⁴⁵

⁴³Doukhan, 161-164.

⁴⁴Ibid., 163.

⁴⁵Ibid.

Doukhan argues in impressive fashion that the three sequences of four parts each in Rev 17:8-11 are parallel to each other.⁴⁶ These four-part sequences should be seen as four phases of the beast as it approaches its final destruction in Revelation, chapters 17-19:

⁴⁶Doukhan, 161-163.

<p>Rev 17:8 once was now is not comes up out of the Abyss goes to destruction</p>	<p>Rev 17:10 five have fallen one is other has not yet come remains a little while</p>	<p>Rev 17:11 once was now is not eighth king goes to destruction</p>
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That these three sequences are completely parallel is the key to Doukhan’s argument, but does not strike me as self-evident. For one thing, the first sequence seems to relate to the beast in its end-time phase. The second sequence relates specifically to the heads (which in Doukhan’s scheme begin in the time of Daniel). The last, as we have seen, seems to blend language related to the beast in verse 8 with language related to the head sequence in verse 10. Its primary focus seems to be on the final phase of the beast.

Doukhan argues that the time of the sixth head is the time of papal wounding, from 1798 to 1929. The seventh and eighth heads are one and the same, reflecting the resurgent papacy after 1929. Doukhan’s argument is impressive and worth careful consideration. It’s major tension with the biblical evidence, however, is in its assumption that John would be given an explanation rooted in a time frame so far into his future. The sixth head that “now is,” is best understood in terms of John’s time and place, in light of its location in the angelic explanation portion of the chapter rather than the vision proper. The evidence Doukhan draws from Revelation 13 and Daniel 7 is important, but it is not enough, I believe, to argue that the basic biblical pattern of vision and explanation should be overturned.

What Do I Think?

Obviously, what I think is ultimately not the issue, but I owe it to you, in light of years of wrestling with these texts, to at least give the position that makes the most sense to me at this point. The cornerstone to my position is the basic conviction that in revelation God meets people where they are. When God explains Himself to a prophet (whether directly or through an angel) His intention is to make things as clear as that person can handle (John 16:12). God's explanations have extended meanings beyond what the original prophet could understand, but those extended meanings will never contradict the original revelation. They will be natural extensions of what the prophet received and understood (see *Deep Things of God*, pages 33-78 for much more on this principle).

This means that the natural way to understand the “five have fallen, one is now and one is yet to come” is in terms of John's time and place. The seven heads represent a series of empires or major national movements in the course of human history. If the “one is now” is the Roman Empire of John's day (clearly portrayed in Revelation 12), what are the five empires that have fallen? I agree with Strand and Stefanovic that they would be the five great nations/empires that functioned as super power enemies of God's people throughout the Old Testament. These would be Egypt, which held the people of God in captivity for hundreds of years; Assyria, which subjugated Judah and destroyed Israel; plus the three powers mentioned in Daniel 2, 7 and 8; Babylon, Persia and Greece.

The seventh empire, future from John's day, would be the beast from the sea (Revelation 13), the great papal power that dominated the world spiritually and politically for more than a

thousand years. I understand the “eighth head” to be the beast of Revelation 17 itself, a worldwide political and military unity that is yet to occur.

This view coheres with what we have learned about the battle of Armageddon in this book. In the final days of earth’s history, a worldwide political confederacy functions in support of a worldwide religious unity (dragon, beast and false prophet– Rev 16:13-19) for a period of time (Rev 17:1-3). These two great powers seek to destroy God’s faithful remnant (Rev 12:17; 14:1; 16:15; 17:14), but they are turned aside by God’s intervention (Rev 17:17). In fury at being deceived by end-time Babylon (Rev 13:13-14; 16:13-14) the worldwide political unity turns on her and destroys her (Rev 17:16). This political unity is the eighth head, the final manifestation of the beast. It goes to its destruction (Rev 17:8, 11) in the final conflict at the second coming of Jesus itself (Rev 19:11-21).

A feature of the text I still wrestle with is the intriguing phrase, “the same is an eighth (head) and is one of the seven” (Rev 17:11). The eighth and last phase of the beast’s manifestations is, in a sense, the rebirth or reincarnation of one of the seven earlier ones. Which of the seven? Babylon? That would be supported by the name of the prostitute, but it is not the name of the beast. The Roman Empire? That would be supported by the connections with the beast of Revelation 12. Papal Rome? That would be supported by the connections with Revelation 13, and the concept of the “image of the beast” that would play a major role at the end of time (Rev 13:15). If one goes this way, I prefer the latter viewpoint, but Beale may be correct when he says that “one of the seven” simply means that the eighth is of the same

character as the seven.⁴⁷ Like those that precede it, the eighth head is evil, rules on the earth and is part of a succession of historical events.

Conclusion

Does my view explain every detail of the text? Obviously not. In spite of our best efforts Revelation 17 remains, and may always be, something of a problem text. While the above is how I make sense of this text, I am open to the possibility that I have missed some things that might prove my position inadequate in one way or the other. But those who wish to counter my view must not think that such a counter can come from a superficial reading of the text. There is much information that I have not been able to share here, but in spite of all my studies I remain in awe of the complexity of this text.

To me the safest conclusion we can make is to avoid basing a major spiritual or theological insight on the twists and turns of this fascinating vision. While none of the above views may ultimately prove correct, the evidential base for a “seven popes” view is too problematic to be taken as fact. At best it is the hopeful suggestion of some who long for Jesus to come soon. I share with them in that longing, and I respect the anticipation that drives them and also their desire to trigger revival and reform in the church. We must not forget, however, that when Jesus does in fact come, most of us will still be surprised at His timing (1 Thess 5:1-3), no matter how hard we have tried to sniff it out in advance. According to both Matthew and Ellen White, the day and the hour will only be revealed when the approaching cloud is already visible

⁴⁷Beale, 876.

to our sight!⁴⁸

Satan will use any means he can to distract us from our double mission of character development and gospel outreach. The great spiritual messages of Adventist faith are compelling in their own right. The clear, compelling message of Scripture is the everlasting gospel in the end-time context of God's final judgment (Rev 14:6-7). That message does not need an artificial boost from speculative exegesis of difficult passages.

⁴⁸Matt 24:30-31. The only "sign" of Jesus' coming explicitly given in Matthew 24 is Jesus coming with the clouds. Cf. GC 640-641.