

Armageddon at the Door

Jon Paulien

Chapter Twelve

Final Reflections on Armageddon

The War Against Al Qaeda and the Battle of Armageddon

Are the events since September 11 some sort of dress rehearsal for the end of time? It certainly seems so to me. This is the first time in all of history when the mainstream political and religious bodies in the world are completely united in a common cause against an international, underground movement that is united by a common faith. While Europe in the Middle Ages was a powerful union of church and state, the islamic world provided a significant counter to papal ambitions at that time. Today there is no nation or combination of nations that is able to fully counter the political and economic agenda of the United States. There is one single superpower and every other nation has to take that super power into account in every political and economic decision.

Many nations, like Russia, China, India and most governments in the Middle East, would like to find ways to counter American power, but they have been unable to do so. At the time of the Iraqi invasion, France sought to use the European Union as a counterweight against the

American position, but the majority of European nations did not go along. A combination of Russia, China and India would be significant, but competing self-interests seems likely to prevent such a counterweight. While nationalism and ethnic centrism are stronger than ever, there is an underlying reality that we are closer to a single world system than ever before in history.

And this single world system is threatened, not by a nation or a combination of nations, but by a small, international collection of individuals, bound together by religious ideology, hiding in “the rocks and the mountains” and in chaotic cities like Baghdad, Kandahar, Jakarta and even London and Madrid! This sounds very much like the scenario laid out in the Battle of Armageddon. Worldwide religious and political unity against a scattered spiritual group from every nation, tribe, language and people! Don’t get me wrong. I am not suggesting that al Qaeda is the end-time remnant of Revelation! But the echoes of Revelation in the current world situation are remarkable and bear watching as we approach the end of the history. Let me briefly outline a few scenarios of how the war on terror could prove to be the earliest stages of the battle of Armageddon.

1) From Chaos to Tyranny

The war in Iraq has clarified one thing. It is a lot easier to create chaos than it is to create peace and security. In a context where people are willing to blow themselves up in order to destabilize society for everyone else, it is very hard to create and maintain security. And it is too easy to harm the innocent in the process of protecting them, which exacerbates the chaos.

Chaos tends to breed more chaos. Over time, as people become more and more frustrated by the violence and disorder around them, they become nostalgic for the “good old days” when strong dictators like Saddam Hussein and Josef Stalin made sure the “bad guys” left the average citizen alone.

The Great Controversy seems to support just such a scenario. Ellen White projects a situation in which worldwide chaos leads to a drive for security and strong government. One of the measures for restoring order is a renewed commitment to Sunday observance. Those who keep the Sabbath stand out in their opposition. In spite of their loyalty to divine law and order, they are perceived as enemies of earthly law and order, supporters of the very chaos that society now seeks to avoid. They are denounced as in rebellion against legitimately constituted authority (GC 592). People feel they it would be better to eliminate the dissenters than allow society to fall back into chaos (GC 615).

It is not hard to imagine the cry for peace and security being combined with a nostalgia for the religious traditions of the past. People sense that one of the reasons for the chaos is the lack of God’s favor. People come to believe that a worldwide religion taking up the best of all the religions can bring the human race back into God’s favor. In the context of islamic terrorism the scenario of Revelation and *Great Controversy* becomes quite believable.

2) A Rebirth of Institutional Ecumenism

Adventists have always feared the kinds of ecumenical attempts associated with the World Council of Churches in Geneva. There skilled negotiators from the mainstream

protestant denominations around the world explore ways in which these denominations can gain deeper respect for each other and the things they have in common. While the Roman Catholic church is not direct member of the Council, it has observer status and often participates in substantive talks.

While such institutional efforts had quite a bit of traction a hundred years ago, there is the sense that traditional ecumenical efforts have fallen on hard times. They have been affected by the general breakdown of civil discourse around the world. But the scenario of Revelation suggests that ecumenical efforts like the World Council of Churches will somehow become center stage again. In the next wave, however, non-Christian religions will also play a significant role, so the past is only a small foretaste of the massive, worldwide institutional unity that Revelation projects for the final events of earth's history. We have probably not heard the last regarding traditional forms of ecumenical unification.

3) The Role of Post-Modernism

Readers may wonder if a worldwide confederacy of institutional religion is impossible in the light of developing post-modernism. In post-modern thought religion is marginalized in favor of a more diffused kind of spirituality. Religion is seen as the cause of wars and strife and the call goes out to worship God in ways that minimize differences.

But while post-modernism may seem to portend the death of institutional religion, there is one aspect of post-modernism that could lead to an end-time religious confederacy. It is the criticism of strong religious convictions. In post-modernism, anything goes as long as one

does not hold one's faith with strong convictions that can make others uncomfortable. The power and conviction with which the end-time gospel goes out to the world could trigger a post-modern reaction. It is felt that many of the world's problems are caused by people with strong convictions. In a crisis it may seem that the saints have to be eliminated in order for the world to reach the spiritual harmony that appeals to the post-modern consciousness. Post-modernism tends to be tolerant of anything except that which is perceived as intolerant.

The end-time religious confederacy will certainly have to be very tolerant of differences. On the one hand, it will seem an "anything goes" kind of spirituality. On the other hand, the proclamation of the true gospel will be so threatening that its "intolerance" will stand in clear contrast with the major world religions. Lesson learned in the war on terror could be applied against anyone who resists the worldwide religious confederacy for whatever reasons.

Post-modernism, therefore, is not the barrier to the end-time scenario of Revelation that it seems at first glance. If the concept of post-modernism is new or unclear to you, see my analysis of how it affects Adventist faith in a new book that should be published at roughly the same time as this one (from Pacific Press).

4) The Islamic Side of Adventism

Related to this is role of Islam, particularly fundamentalist Islam in today's world. Most Adventists I know have the general western perception of Islam as a hateful and corrupt religion that perverts the truth of Scripture. On the other hand is the testimony of a muslim doctor I have met. He says, "Muslims know that Seventh-day Adventism is the closest to Islam

of all the other religions.” Muslims may *know* this but to Adventists this may seem like quite a stretch.

But it should be no surprise to any Adventist who has spent time among Muslims in the Middle East. I have never spent an hour with a Muslim in the Middle East without the question, “If you are from America, how come you are not a Christian?” When I asked why they thought I was a Muslim rather than a Christian, I made an important discovery. In their minds the defining marks of a Christian are; 1) drinking alcohol, 2) eating pork, 3) dressing immodestly, 4) following the Pope, 5) idolizing America and Hollywood, 6) lax in obedience to God.

I came to realize that on all the practical issues that define a Muslim from his or her Christian counterparts in the Middle East, Adventists track with Muslims rather than Christians. And once I accepted that the label “Christian” was a gross misrepresentation of who I was in the Middle East, I had no further barriers in engaging Muslims on spiritual themes. In fact, the Adventist context may be the ideal place where Muslims, Christians and Jews can find common ground as we approach the end of the world.

Now imagine with me a scenario in which the current world situation rapidly moves toward the confederacies of Armageddon. Imagine (and I know this is hard) that one or more of the jihadist leaders becomes convicted by the claims of Jesus and announces a unilateral truce. They point out that Allah is all-powerful and does not need human intervention to accomplish His purpose for the world. It is true faith that will bring about the triumph of Islam, not bombs, hatred and anger. Imagine also that this conviction becomes associated with the work of the biblical remnant.

Almost overnight, there would be a million new jihadist suspects in North America, and millions more around the world! Overnight the searchlights of “homeland security” in every nation could be turned on those who keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus. Overnight, the situation portrayed in the book *Great Controversy* could be set in motion. God’s faithful people would become the object of international scorn and calumny. Intelligence agencies and police forces around the world, goaded on by religious entities that feel threatened by this spiritual movement, would move into action against the faithful people of God.

Sound far-fetched? Not if it is compatible with the scenario painted by inspiration in Bible prophecy. We have studied those parts of Revelation which clearly describe the last days of earth’s history and the events leading up to them. We have explored the meaning of the word “Armageddon” and how it is used in the context of Revelation 12-18. We have come to realize that in the end the entire world will find itself at war with a scattered, international movement of kindred spirits, seeking God’s will and ways rather than those of the world. This end-time movement will be broader than we may have realized. The very breadth of the movement will one day prove to be a threat to the great and powerful of this world.

5) The Role of America in Prophecy

Adventist study of Revelation early on focused on the identification of the United States with the land beast of Revelation 13. Particular attention was paid to idea that the land beast has lamblike features when it first appears but comes to speak as a dragon (Rev 13:11). In other

words, America comes on the historical scene as a relatively positive power, a haven for the oppressed, particularly the religious minorities of Europe. Unlike most nations, whose political position is governed by corporate self-interest, America arose with a corporate vision of its responsibility to feed the hungry, help the weak, and rescue the oppressed. When America went to war, it was for a just and noble cause, not out of corporate selfishness.

By God's design, America's geographical location is fairly unique. It is sheltered by oceans on the east and on the west. It is so rich in natural resources that, until the last fifty years (the need for foreign oil), America was self-sufficient in most raw materials. Its abundance of rich farmland means that wars need not be fought for basic survival needs such as food. From the mid-nineteenth century on, the only nations that border the United States, Canada and Mexico, have not been hostile and are, in any case, relatively weak militarily. (The recent bout of insecurity regarding the border with Mexico is a relatively new thing for the United States) The last invasion of the "lower 48 states" was during the War of 1812, unless you count the brief foray into New Mexico by Pancho Villa in 1917. America's borders have not been a major concern for some time until recently.

The United States, therefore, has been blessed with the luxury of living without significant threat to its existence from potentially hostile neighbors. Because of its abundant natural resources, it has not needed to be an aggressor power like Japan, dependent for its survival on imports of food and raw materials. Japan has to be obsessed with the good or bad intentions of its neighbors (including the United States), as there are so many ways that the country's survival can be threatened from outside. The United States has had few such

concerns until very recently.

Compare the United States with China, for example, a country of similar physical size. China has always felt itself under threat from hostile neighbors. There is the great bear of Russia to the north. There are the unpredictable tribes of Central Asia. There is India to the southwest and Vietnam to the south (China has fought brief wars with both since World War II). To the east are Korea, Japan and Taiwan. Wars have been fought with all three in the last hundred years. And then there is the unlimited reach of the United States navy to worry about. So the Chinese must be constantly thinking of their own political and economic self-interest. The very survival of its people demands it.

Take Turkey as another example. Historically Turkey has many economic interests in the Balkans, but has tangled often with Greece in the process (most recently in 1974). It has many interests in the Caucasus, but faces the ethnic and religious hostility of Armenia. To the east is Iran and to the south Syria and Iraq. An increasing threat to the east are the Kurds, a unique people-group that has no nation of its own but is in the majority in several provinces of Turkey, Iran and Iraq. While Turkey has become a relatively prosperous country, it feels continually under threat from the military, ethnic and economic potential of its neighbors.

As the examples from China and Turkey suggest, most nations are naturally driven to a political stance of corporate selfishness. When people feel cornered, they defend themselves vigorously. Their full attention is on their own needs and interests. America was no different at the time of its founding. It was threatened by native peoples nearby and by European powers such as Britain, France and, for a time, Spain. But by the mid-nineteenth century, America felt

secure from outside threat and began to develop the sense of “manifest destiny,” that it had been placed on the earth to be a blessing to the world. It was not to operate from selfish ambition. Freeing the slaves was, to some degree, motivated by the desire to be a nation that was not tainted by the kind of selfish ambition that is so characteristic in traditional geopolitics.

But all of that began to go by the wayside with World War II. Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor shattered the sense of security that had once been complete. The Cold War also made it clear that in today’s world, a nation does not have to be near to be threatening. America came to realize that its security and even its survival depended to a large degree on events in the Eurasian land mass (from Great Britain to Singapore). The population and resources of Eurasia are so great that any power that can completely control the Eurasian landmass will rule the world. So the continuing worldwide reach of the American navy and air force is not an accident. Contented isolation is no longer an American option. It is very much in the national interest of the United States to act in ways that keep the nations of Eurasia divided.

This has transformed the United States from a benevolent power that intercedes in world affairs to protect the weak to one that aggressively acts to ensure its own interests. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was perceived as a major turning point in the minds of many. Whatever motives of rescuing the Shiites or the Kurds there might have been, the overwhelming purpose of the invasion was America’s own political self-interest. In the eyes of the world America is now perceived more as a neighborhood bully (dragon?) than as an understanding partner.

And there is no turning back. Al Qaeda and its allies will not go away quietly. The threat of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of terrorists is an ongoing threat. In order to

ensure its own survival America must act as an empire, intruding into the affairs of its neighbors around the world in the hunt for those who desire to harm her. It does not matter if a Democrat or a Republican is president. The geopolitical realities of today's world cannot be ignored. The same President Carter who sought to slow down the development of the "dragon," set in motion events that led ultimately to the invasion of Iraq. America now speaks as a dragon. A major aspect of the stage is set for the events of the end.

Conspiracy Theories

I suppose I should not try to write on this topic without saying a word about various conspiracy theories afloat in regard to September 11. It is widely held in places like the Middle East and South America that the events of September 11 were orchestrated by the Bush administration to compel the American people to go along with Bush's dream of American empire. It is suggested that Osama bin Laden was either a willing accomplice in this action or that al Qaeda's involvement was fabricated to justify the actions against the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

The film documentary *Loose Change* sought to make the case that the towers of the World Trade Center were not brought down by the exploding aircraft but by a controlled demolition that collapsed the floors of the towers inwardly. The most convincing of these theories was outlined by a retired professor from Claremont called David Griffin. The

documentation and argumentation of the book is downright brilliant.¹ Yet I just don't buy it.

It is conceivable that in a tightly controlled dictatorship, such as that of Saddam Hussein, brutal and self-serving actions on a massive scale could be done and no one would hold the leadership accountable. But in a nation like America, with a fractious and divided free press, with a powerful opposition party, with an internet that exposes everything from the details of Paris Hilton's intimate life to what Condoleezza Rice had for breakfast, it is hard to imagine anyone thinking they could get away with such a plot, much less actually doing carrying it out.

For me the decisive problem with the conspiracy theories is the great difficulty of keeping secrets in an internet world. For Osama bin Laden to pull off September 11 only required a few dozen operatives and a few million dollars. To pull off the kind of thing the conspiracy theories suggest would have required a massive operation, with hundreds, perhaps thousands of people each playing their part and then keeping silence about it for the rest of their lives. In my humble opinion that just wouldn't happen in today's world. Merely setting the charges for a controlled demolition of the World Trade Center (during a fire drill) would have required hundreds of skilled, but ordinary workers who would have no compelling reason to keep silent about their actions in a world where almost everyone longs for a moment of fame.

Why is it that no one at the center of American government or media believes any of the conspiracy theories? The Clintons, Gores and Obama's of this world would have every

¹David Ray Griffin, *Christian Faith and the Truth Behind 9/11: A Call to Reflection and Action* (Philadelphia: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2006).

reason to expose the plot if they believed such a thing had occurred. They are more than convinced that President Bush has acted in a perverse way, yet they place no stock in the conspiracy theories regarding September 11. Why is there no credible historian or media outlet exploring the possibility? Conspiracy theories always make the most sense to those who are not at the center of events. They are not aware of the holes in their evidence and the flaws in their logic. And those who are at the center may know these flaws but don't consider the theories worthy of response.

Some will think me a fool for taking this position. So be it. I have to be honest with the evidence I know. Criticism is the price of putting one's opinions onto the public stage. I have outlined an analysis of events that makes sense to me at the beginning of this book. History will one day be the judge.

Having said this, however, I still want to make one thing clear. Even if the Bush administration has not stooped as low as Griffin and others suggest, the natural consequence of American actions over the last fifty years is moving toward empire and away from the Bible-based sense of responsibility to make the whole world a better place. It doesn't require questionable conspiracy theories to see that American is speaking more and more "like a dragon."

What concerns me most from a spiritual perspective is that chasing after conspiracy theories can distract us from the real conspiracy that Revelation brings out into the open. It is the great satanic deception at the end of time. Behind the actions of presidents and prime ministers there is a more universal battle going on. Christ and Satan are battling for the control

of the whole universe as well as this earth. Satan's grand conspiracy is the primary focus of this book. The political and military details are illustrations of how the larger conspiracy could work out. It is well to be as detailed as Scripture in laying out the events foretold in prophecy. It is dangerous, however, to be more detailed than Scripture is. When we mingle our own hopes and dreams with the prophecies of Scripture, we can lose sight of where the text actually wants to take us. The primary purpose of prophecy is not to satisfy our curiosity about the future, but to teach us how to live today.

How to Live Today

There are several places in the Battle of Armageddon narrative where the hideous creatures and the ugly events take the back stage for a moment and a glimpse of more personal truth appears. As we have seen, one of these places is Rev 16:15, NIV: "Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed." This text, coming right in the middle of the one place in the Bible where Armageddon is actually named, echos many New Testament passages about personal preparation for the return of Jesus and the events of the End.

Another such text is Rev 17:14: "These will make war with the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings— and those with him are called and chosen and faithful." (Author's translation) In this text the great war at the end engages an army of people whose primary purpose is not to destroy others with weapons, but to be faithful to their calling and election by God. This is a very different kind of battle from the ones

that nations and insurgent operations still fight today. As I have said before, the Battle of Armageddon is a battle for the mind. It is also a battle for the heart. It is a call to heart-felt allegiance to the Lamb that was slain (Rev 5:9-10, 12; 13:8).

There is one further text in Revelation 16 and 17 whose spiritual implications have not yet been noted. “The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.” Rev 17:18, NIV. We have seen how this verse underlines in plain language the role that Babylon plays in the final conflict over against the political powers of the world. Babylon’s riding of the beast is a symbolic way of saying that Babylon “rules over the kings of the earth.”

But there is an interesting twist on this global perspective in verse 18. The concept of Babylon is not limited in this text to just end-time Babylon. Through the “great city,” Babylon symbolizes, to a degree, all the satanic powers that have ever ruled on the earth. In the Greek, the phrase translated “that rules over” is a present participle. The present participle is one of the most continuous expressions possible in the Greek. It means that, in a sense, “Babylon” is a principle that constantly rules over the kings of the earth. It lies behind all the political powers that have ever tried to coerce and/or deceive people.

This reminds us that the great battle at the end of history is a battle that is fought more at a personal level than in the movements of great armies and political powers. The principle of Babylon is self-centered religion. That principle tempts us all. Whenever we are tempted to put self ahead of others in our spiritual work, we are, on a small scale, taking the wrong side in the cosmic conflict. Whenever we try to coerce the minds of others to our own spiritual viewpoint, we are taking the wrong side in our personal conflict. For me personally, the most dangerous

Babylon of all is the one that lurks in my own heart.

This personal view (which seems to be the primary focus of *The Great Controversy*, by Ellen White) is not in contradiction to the global view that occupies such a large part of the Book of Revelation. It would not be wise to turn Revelation into just another treatise on salvation and personal godliness. On the other hand, it is possible to become so focused on global events that we sidetrack ourselves from the crucial work of preparing our own hearts for the conflict. We allow ourselves to become distracted by speculations and time setting, and thus avoid the decisive spiritual work that is our first task. So a book like this would not be complete unless some consideration were given to the personal, spiritual side of the material we have covered. The purpose of prophecy is to motivate right living today. To do the right thing, we need to first understand what the right thing is and then be motivated to do it. A spiritual understanding of prophecy is a powerful motivator to right action.

1) God Will Make Things Right

The first spiritual lesson I would like to underline is the idea that God will make things right in the End no matter how much opposition He may face. In the Book of Revelation it becomes clear that He is well able to orchestrate events and work around human choices in order to serve His ultimate purpose. Even when things seem totally out of control from our own perspective, God is still in control. He can use the confederacies of His opponents to ultimately destroy them. He can use the deceptions of the Enemy to provoke faith among the faithless. While the process may be confusing and uncertain at times, the outcome is not in doubt! God

wins! And those who have aligned themselves with God win when He wins!

Let me personalize this truth. As I write these words, I must confess that I'm a little worried these days. I live in a house that's completely paid for and there is also some income from an apartment on the lower floor. If something were to happen to me, my wife could probably survive quite well on less than a thousand dollars a month, if she had to. But there is a problem with this secure picture. My house is in southwestern Michigan, where housing is relatively cheap. But I've just accepted the position of Dean of the School of Religion at Loma Linda University in Southern California. Our comfortable Michigan home will barely provide a down payment on a similar house in Southern California. And while Loma Linda is being very fair with us in light of this reality, the change has introduced a large element of risk for us financially. We will need a huge mortgage in order to get by. It is as if our family was starting financially all over again.

This situation has reinforced for me the reason that I worry. I don't worry a whole lot about the past. It's over and I can't do anything about it (I respect the fact that some readers, on account of abuse or trauma, may find the past a lot harder to shake). I also don't worry too much about the present. God has been good to me and my family, and I've learned to trust that He will take care of us from day to day. When I worry, it is because I don't know the future. I find it harder to trust in God when I don't have immediate evidence of how things will turn out. For me, worry is grounded in my inability to know the future.

The core message of the Battle of Armageddon is that God is in control, even when things seem out of control. But this truth is not just a past or a present reality in my life.

According to Revelation, not only was God in control of the past, not only is God in control of the present, God is also in control of the future. And if He is in control of the future of the nations, then He is also in control of my future. I can trust my home, my family and my job to His care.

I guess that's what I love about the Book of Revelation. With all of its weirdness and challenging symbols there is an underlying sense of confidence that God can be trusted in everything, even in the future. I'm not sure that any other Bible book (except perhaps Daniel) is nearly so effective in making this point. To ignore these apocalyptic books is to miss the blessing that comes from knowing that God is in control. As my family makes this major move in response to His leading, I can trust Him to manage the risk.

2) Unmasking Evil

A critical point that the Book of Revelation makes is a warning against the attractions of evil. Paul says that Satan sometimes presents himself as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14). While he has no love for the things of God, no love for purity and goodness, Satan is the greatest actor of all time. He is well able to present himself in whatever form will accomplish his purpose with any particular individual. So while he sometimes seeks to control people with frightening displays (as is parodied in the many "fun houses" that spring up around the Halloween season in the United States), he more often seeks to show evil as a beautiful and beneficial thing.

This is quite evident in the movie industry for example. Adultery, murder and even theft are portrayed as good things provided they are done with the "right" motives (according to the

needs and concerns of the script). Subtly the viewer is led to consider unrighteous actions as admirable. And make no mistake about it, the perpetrators of such actions are invariably good looking, portrayed as attractive in both physical form and in personality. The actor may not even be that good looking in real life, but the magic of makeup and camera angles heals all, and the viewer is led to see evil in a positive light, without even realizing that he or she has been subtly influenced in that direction.

The Book of Revelation pulls the mask off of such charades. Behind the faces of the beautiful people who act wickedly are seen the hideous countenances of vicious meat-eating beasts. Instead of a loving, sculpted form, these creatures are mis-shapen, with abnormal quantities of heads and strange amalgams of features (Rev 13:2; 9:7-9, 17-19). The Book of Revelation is, in many ways, an ugly book, for it does not gloss over evil, but presents its darkest side in the full light of day (see Rev 17:16, for example). In real life evil is presented as an attractive option and it is a real and present danger that honest people of God will be drawn away from their faithfulness by misperceptions of spiritual reality. Therefore, Revelation jolts our perceptions with R-rated force to get our attention and prevent us from slipping down the slope into pleasant (seemingly) addictions. Sin may seem to be fun, but it is guaranteed to ruin one's tomorrows. Revelation jolts us into reality. Behind every attractive sin is a demonic force, ready to make the most of one's lapse (Rev 16:13-14).

This is a message I need to hear every day. If the Book of Revelation did not exist we would not have as clear a perception of reality as we do. Every day I am faced with choices that seem innocuous, thoughts that go neither here nor there, attractive temptations that "will do

no harm,” or so it would seem. As I surf the internet there are many directions that may seem neutral at first, but quickly bring one in contact with options that are attractive yet destructive. When I’m shopping I notice opportunities to depart from the “list” and waste money on that which will not make my life better in the long term. As I drive down the road there are billboards that call me to “let go” of my mind and wander into places God doesn’t want me to go. Today’s world affords so many subtle and attractive options that at best distract us from our mission and at worst burden us with horrible addictions.

The plain reality is that in today’s world I need a slap in the face every day, a reminder that things are not always what they seem, that the wages of sin is truly death, not only for all time, but, in a spiritual sense, already in this life. Unless I am constantly plugged into a higher reality, I will easily be shifted in directions that I would regret one day. The Battle of Armageddon is truly a battle for the mind. It is a battle that we must fight every day. It is a battle that for us has already begun. The terrible consequences of attractive sins are things that we must never forget, and Revelation is a powerful reminder of those truths.

3) The Need for Discernment

The Book of Revelation makes it clear that as we face the terrible deceptions and other challenges of the End-time, the only safe place will be a clear knowledge of the gospel and of the prophecies that give us advance intelligence about the challenges we will face. The deceptions of the End are of such severity that the only way to survive them is with clear discernment based on a comprehensive knowledge of God’s will as outlined in the Scriptures.

God has called the Seventh-day Adventist Church to be a people of prophecy, a people who have been trained to discern the signs of the times and to apply the Word of God to every situation in life. We have been called to warn the world that at the end of time things will not be as they seem. There will be no safety in mere human discernment, neither will there be safety in science or any other application of the five senses. The deceptions of the End will be of such a nature that the only safeguard will be total reliance on the clear teachings of God's Word. But in order to obey the Word of God we need to know the Word. And we cannot afford to know it second hand, through the teachings of others (like myself), however dedicated they may be. For our own personal safety we need to know the teachings of the Word for ourselves.

This suggests a couple of courses of action that we need to take as we approach the final events. A) First of all, clear-minded discernment is one of the chief qualities of God's end-time people. But in order to exercise clear-minded discernment, we need to study the Bible as we've never studied it before. We need to pray as we have never prayed before. We need to stand for truth like a rock yet exercise a considerable amount of self-distrust regarding our opinions. If the only way out of the deception dilemma is a clear knowledge of God's word, we will want our study to be as accurate and as safe as possible. That means studying in groups whenever possible since groups are more intelligent than an individual person. It means employing broad reading of the Scriptures along with a focus on the relatively clear texts rather than the unclear ones. For a great deal more detail on the above methodology, see *The Deep Things of God*, chapter 4, which elaborate on these safeguards to Bible study.

B) Clear-minded discernment is also the product of good physical and mental health.

When we practice the eight natural remedies we are enhancing our ability to grasp spiritual truths. Physical exercise, lots of fresh air, good nutrition, proper amounts of rest at the right times, these are principles that enhance the mind's ability to clearly discern the meaning of the Scriptures and the difference between truth and error. Not only that, the very study of the scriptures themselves is another way to stretch the mind and increase its capacity to understand spiritual truth. In addition, psychological health is an under-emphasized health principle. Many of the weird and aberrant positions people take on spiritual matters are the result of unhealthy psychological and emotional dynamics. As people deal with their own personal demons they become better able to discern the real demons that lurk in the spiritual realm.

4) The Role of Obedience

No matter how you read the apocalyptic portions of Revelation, the key and ultimate issue is: Who is God and on which side of the final crisis can He be found (I refer here particularly to the End-time Mount Carmel experience of Rev 13:13-14 and 16:16). The deceptions will be severe and even the elect of God will tremble at their severity (Matt 24:24). So it is imperative that God's Word provide His End-time people with some markers or indicators by which they can detect the workings of the true God from the deceptions of the counterfeit.

The primary indicator by which the saints can be differentiated from the religious confederacy is obedience to the Ten Commandments, with particular emphasis on the first

four. Since the enemies of God and His people at the end will, no doubt, observe some or many of the commandments, the truly faithful will be distinguished by their observance of ALL the commandments of God, including the Sabbath. The enemies of God's people, in other words, will be noticeable by their selective disregard of one or more of the Ten Commandments.

In this context, the allusion to the fourth commandment in Rev 14:7 is very significant. It identifies one commandment in particular which will be disregarded by the unholy trinity and by those from all nations that adhere to the unholy trinity. This underlines the end-time importance of faithful and continual observance of God's commandments, including the often neglected fourth. This observance of the commandments is not the basis for salvation, but is the grateful response of those who have overcome (Rev 12:11) and have "washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev 7:15-17, cf. the interesting textual options in a modern translation of Rev 22:14). The people of God throughout history have responded to His mighty acts by rehearsing those acts through word, festival, obedience and ethical behavior. Thus, a natural response to the mighty act of God at the cross is obedience to all of His requirements, including the seemingly arbitrary one of a specific day of rest and worship.

5) Grounded in the Word

Don't be too quick to trust your senses or your opinions. It is not difficult to put Bible texts together in such a way as to lead to an erroneous conclusion. I know that it is natural to trust what your eyes see, your ears hear and your hands handle. And most of the time our senses offer a fairly accurate rendition of the reality that lies around us. But we can all recall

times when we completely misinterpreted reality on the basis of our perceptions. And at the end of time the wave of deception unleashed by End-time Babylon will render the five senses unreliable indeed. At that time we will be able to trust our senses only to the extent that they reflect what is accurately taught in the scriptures.

It is imperative as we approach the End, therefore, that we seek to go more deeply into God's Word. There are many distractions today, and many good excuses for not taking extra time for God's Word. But in the light of what we have learned about the Battle of Armageddon, Bible study and prayer needed to be higher priorities than ever before. If you are not sure how to study the Bible to dig out its challenging features, get hold of a copy of the first book in this series, *The Deep Things of God: An Insider's Guide to the Book of Revelation*. It contains a complete plan of study for the Book of Revelation along with important safeguards to prevent unwitting misinterpretation. Trust me, if you will invest 20-50 hours of study along the lines suggested in *Deep Things* (over a month or more of course) you will discover amazing things and you will find deep Bible study to be one of the most exciting and deeply fulfillment activities you have ever tried. I highly recommend the process.

6) *The Secret Things Belong to God*

It is intuitive to assume that if God took the trouble to reveal Himself in Scripture, every detail should be understandable, given enough research and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But neither Scripture nor reality seem to support that intuition. In Deuteronomy 29:29 the Bible says: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to

us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” This text clearly distinguishes between things that we can know and things that only God can know.

That these “secret things” include some parts of the Bible is well-illustrated in the Appendix to this book. Significant portions of Scripture have resisted all attempts at a full understanding and Revelation 17 does not seem to be an exception. While there are aspects of the chapter that seem reasonably clear, there is much that defies our best efforts. Why would God put things in the Bible that we cannot grasp, in spite of diligent effort?

I remember a time when I was on the radio with Mervyn Maxwell, a Seminary colleague and fellow student of Revelation. The subject of discussion was the seven trumpets. As I spoke about the difficulty of finding one’s way through the trumpets, he turned to me and said, “Why would God put things in the Bible that we can’t understand?” I was floored for an instant (being on the radio can do that to you), not knowing what to say. Then an idea came into my mind that seemed compelling at the time (it satisfied Maxwell and me at least) and still makes sense to me today.

I responded, “To keep us coming back to the Bible. Reading the Bible is as essential to us spiritually as food is essential to our bodies. We must ‘eat’ the Word every day to survive spiritually. But if we could come to the place where we had figured out all there was to know about the Bible, we wouldn’t feel we needed to study it any more. We would ‘lose a taste for it.’ God has placed many difficult things in the Bible, so we would be motivated to keep coming back, keep learning, keep growing in our understanding. It is curiosity about what we don’t know that motivates us to keep feeding ourselves and growing in the Lord.”

The difficult texts of the Bible are fruitful tools in God's hands that keep us coming back for more. So a certain amount of curiosity about the problem texts of the Bible and about the future is healthy. But we must not allow the difficult texts of the Bible to so fascinate us that we miss the clear teachings that are critical to our salvation.

Whenever I present to Adventist audiences overseas, I am fascinated by how much the audience questions at the end are focused on these difficult texts. No matter where I go people are fascinated with questions about the 144,000, the seven heads of the beast and similar details. I wish there were more questions about faith and salvation. I wish there were more questions about how to get along within the family and how to become a better person. It almost seems that fascination with the details of prophecy can be a way of avoiding the most vital issues of everyday life.

I will never forget the time a man stood up and asked about Deuteronomy 29:29. He said, "The Bible teaches us that the secret things belong to God. What are those secret things?"

How would you answer such a question? I responded simply, "I don't know, that's why they are called secret things!" Was that an unscholarly answer? I don't think so. A true scholar will always come upon questions he or she cannot answer. And certainly the secret things of God, and a few verses in Revelation, no doubt, fall into that category. A mature Adventist is one who is able to rejoice in the things that are clear in Scripture and to be content that some things may always be unclear.

It is appropriate at this point, I think, to remind you of the fourth chapter of the previous book in this series (see *The Deep Things of God*, 79-92). There I shared five

“safeguards” for the study of the Bible. They are like five keys to a lifelong relationship with the Bible. If your Bible study is pursued along these five lines you are not likely to go far wrong. I list the five keys briefly here, but would encourage you to go back to that chapter for the details.

1) Approach the Bible with much prayer for the Spirit’s guidance and a distrust in your own understanding up to that point.

2) Use the original languages or a variety of translations in your native language.

3) Spend the majority of your time in the clear texts of the Bible.

4) Spend the majority of your time reading the Bible, rather searching with a concordance or a computer program.

5) Listen much to the criticism of your peers.

For Adventists, a sixth principle is to apply the five principles also to the writings of Ellen White. As is the case with the Bible, many have missed her central messages by speculative studies based on selected statements. When we consistently approach the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy along these lines, we will find them life-changing powers in our lives. The “secret things” provide a flavor that keeps us coming back, but they must never become the center of our focus. There is great power in the things that are clear.

Conclusion

I find myself awed by the amazing picture of truth that can be found in the chapters of Revelation that focus on the Battle of Armageddon. The decades-long process that led up to the writing of this book was a deep privilege. I feel challenged to put God first in my life as never

before. I want to have clear discernment as I approach the future. And my deepest desire is that all those who read this book will find in it something that sustains them in the challenges that lie ahead.

The best news of all is that the End of the Bible is not an “abyss of meaninglessness,” administered by random fate through an asteroid or a madman with a doomsday machine. History does not end with a hopeless and terrified whimper, it ends with a Person, a Person that can be known and appreciated now, and is capable of taking care of those who love Him then (Rev 14:13). The Bible pictures the end of the world as a series of terrifying events, but these events are in the control of One who cares deeply for the human race, One who loves the human race so much that He was willing to die for it (Rev 5:5-12). When He comes He will overcome the oppressors and bring justice and peace to all who are with Him, the “called, and chosen, and faithful” (Rev 19:11-21; 17:14). He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev 19:16).