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Revisiting the Sabbath in the Book of Revelation

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One of the most widespread teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is that the central issue in the final crisis of earth's history has to do with the Sabbath command of the Decalogue. Adventists believe that the inhabitants of the world will one day have to choose between worship of the true God on His Sabbath day and worship of a false god on another day.

But this teaching is increasingly coming under attack, both inside and outside the church. For one thing, many Adventists have noticed that the term "Sabbath" nowhere occurs in the Book of Revelation. Many have, therefore, come to wonder whether Adventist teaching is based on the Bible or whether it is only sustainable on the basis of assertion and/or the writings of Ellen White. Furthermore, the Sabbath-Sunday issue itself seems to have little relevance to people in today's world. If you ask average people on the street whether Saturday or Sunday is the right day to worship, they are likely to reply, "You Christians fight over nonsense like that? Why should one bother going to church at all?"

In such a negative environment toward an Adventist teaching, it is helpful to revisit the issue of the Sabbath in the Book of Revelation. Is there an exegetical basis for the assertion that the Sabbath is the central issue in the final crisis of earth's history? Does the author of Revelation point us in the direction of the Sabbath in the final crisis or have Adventists read their position, without justification, back into the Biblical text?

The Language of Allusion

In order to answer this question it is necessary to understand a basic characteristic of the Book of Revelation. Revelation is filled with the language, ideas, places, and people of the Old Testament. Although it is a New Testament

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book, the basic language structure of the Book of Revelation builds on the experiences of God's people as recorded in the Old Testament. Many people, therefore, fail to fully grasp the message of Revelation because they do not take seriously the Old Testament nature of its language.

But those who seek to understand the Old Testament roots of Revelation quickly run into a major problem. The Book of Revelation never *quotes* the Old Testament, it only *alludes* to it with a word here, a phrase there, a name somewhere else. Although it is essential to notice the Old Testament references within the Book of Revelation, it can be quite difficult to know exactly when the author of Revelation intends to allude to the Old Testament. Careful strategies need to be employed to ensure that the interpreter of Revelation draws out the actual meaning of the text rather than imposing some external meaning onto the text.

I wrote my own doctoral dissertation on the seven trumpets of Revelation. Few subjects could possibly be more challenging. I quickly discovered that I would make little headway in the trumpets without a consistent and biblical strategy for determining the Old Testament roots of the passage. Let me share that strategy with you in a nutshell first, and then I will illustrate it at some length.

A Strategy for Evaluating Allusions

First, use Bible margins, commentaries, concordances, and lists of allusions (such as the lists in the back of the standard Greek texts by Nestle-Aland) to develop a list of potential allusions to the Old Testament that these various sources believe occur in a given passage of Revelation. This list is not to be accepted uncritically, but must be carefully evaluated.

Second, place the selected passage of Revelation side-by-side with the various Old Testament passages on your list. Identify verbal, thematic, and structural parallels between Revelation and each of the Old Testament passages you are evaluating.

Third, weigh the verbal, thematic, and structural evidence to determine whether there is an allusion to the Old Testament (an intentional reference by the author to a specific context in earlier literature) or merely an echo (a possibly unintentional reference based upon the author's general knowledge of earlier literature and/or its influence on his environment).

Fourth, apply the appropriate insights to the text of Revelation. If the author is consciously alluding to the Old Testament, he may assume that the reader is familiar with that particular Old Testament text and its larger context. It would, in such a case, be essential for the interpreter to be aware of the allusion and of the impact of its context on the text of Revelation. If the author is merely echoing the Old Testament text without conscious intent, the interpreter must be careful not to import an Old Testament context that the author of Revelation did not have in mind. In other words, you can misread Revelation in two ways: by

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ignoring the role of the Old Testament in the author's language and by overplaying its impact.

Let me offer an example of how the Old Testament impacts on the interpretation of a text in Revelation. Revelation 13:1-2 contains a fascinating allusion to the Old Testament: "And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion . . ." Most scholars presume that Rev 13 is based on Dan 7, where four beasts come up out of the sea. Let's evaluate that assumption.

Daniel 7 describes four animals that come up out of the sea; a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a bizarre, non-descript monster with iron teeth and ten horns on its head. Since the leopard is depicted with four heads, this gang of four has a total of seven heads between them. They also have a total of ten horns between them. Remember the beast of Rev 13? Like the beasts of Dan 7, it comes up out of the sea. It has characteristics of a lion, a bear, and a leopard. It has seven heads and ten horns, a clear parallel to the total number of heads and horns on the four beasts of Dan 7. It seems clear, then, that Rev 13:1-2 builds on the vision of Dan 7.

Verbal, Thematic and Structural Parallels

But things are rarely this clear in Revelation. How do you make judgments about the Old Testament background of Revelation when the evidence is less clear than it is in Rev 13? You place a text in Revelation side by side with a prospective source text in the Old Testament. Carefully comparing the two, you look for three types of evidence between the two texts: verbal parallels, thematic parallels, and structural parallels.

Verbal parallels occur whenever there are two or more major words in common between a passage in Revelation and the prospective source text in the Old Testament. Minor words such as prepositions, conjunctions, and definite articles do not usually count. The more major words the two passages have in common, the more likely the author intended the reader to see the parallel and apply the significance of the Old Testament text to his or her understanding of Revelation. In our example of Rev 13 and Dan 7 the verbal parallels are sea, lion, bear, leopard, heads and horns; one of the stronger verbal parallels to the Old Testament in the entire book of Revelation.

Thematic parallels can occur between passages even though there is only one word (or even no word) in common between them. Thematic parallels involve a parallel of theme or idea, not necessarily signaled by parallel words. By themselves, thematic parallels are the weakest of the three types of evidence for a direct allusion. In Rev 13 there is a thematic parallel with Dan 7 in terms of animals representing world powers and coming out of the sea.

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Structural parallels occur where a number of words and themes are parallel between a portion of Revelation and a particular context in the Old Testament. Structural parallels to the Old Testament on a larger scale in Revelation provide strong evidence for intentional allusions in the smaller details of the text of Revelation. Examples of well-recognized structural parallels in Revelation include the use of Ezekiel in Rev 4, 7, and 17-22; the use of Daniel in Rev 5, 13, and 17; the use of Gen 3 in Rev 12; the plagues of the Exodus in the trumpets and the bowls; and the fall of ancient Babylon in Rev 16-19. In Rev 13 there are numerous and striking parallels to Dan 7, although they do not occur in exactly the same order. In both passages beasts come up out of the sea, seven heads and ten horns are involved, and reference is made to a lion, a bear, and a leopard.

In conclusion, while the author's use of the Old Testament in the Book of Revelation is often more ambiguous than we would like, careful attention to the words, themes, and structures within the Book of Revelation can bring us much closer to the author's intentions in his use of the Old Testament and, therefore, offers a clearer window into his intentions for how the book should be interpreted.

The Context of Revelation 12-14

Let's return to the issue that called forth this paper, the role of the Sabbath in the final crisis of earth's history. The foundation text on the subject of the final crisis in the Book of Revelation is Rev 12:17. There we find described a war between the dragon and the remnant, a war that is fleshed out in more detail in Rev 13 and 14. In a sense, Rev 12:17 is a summary in advance of the whole end-time crisis, and chapters 13 and 14 serve as exegesis and elaboration of the basic statement of 12:17. Revelation 13 fleshes out the dragon's war, while Rev 14 expands on the character and message of the Remnant.

The dragon pursues his war against the Remnant in chapter 13. He calls up two allies for the conflict: one comes up out of the sea, and the other comes up out of the earth. The three characters—dragon, beast from the sea, and beast from the earth—form an unholy trinity which seeks to counterfeit the work of the true trinity. The dragon counterfeits the work of God the Father, the sea beast counterfeits the work of God the Son, and the land beast counterfeits the work of the Holy Spirit. These three together attack the Remnant in the final battle.

What is the basic issue in this attack? Revelation 13 and 14 do not leave us in any doubt. (Rev 13:4, 8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11) On seven different occasions, the text of these chapters talk about worshiping the dragon, worshiping the sea beast, or worshiping the image of the beast. The issue in the final crisis of earth's history is clearly worship. In striking contrast to this seven-fold call to worship the unholy trinity or the image of the beast is the single call to worship God in these chapters (Rev 14:7). The call to "worship Him who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and the fountains of water" becomes, therefore, the central

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affirmation of this whole section of Revelation. It is perhaps the central appeal of the entire book. All the material in chapters 12-14 zeros in on this call to worship. Worship is clearly the central issue in the final crisis of earth's history.

The interesting thing is that the language of this central affirmation is based on the fourth commandment expressions in Exod 20:11. There it states, "In six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them . . ." This language is reflected in Rev 14:7: "Worship Him who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and the fountains of water." At the decisive centerpoint of Revelation's description of the final crisis is a direct allusion to Exod 20. Attention to the Sabbath command is, therefore, the ideal response to God's final call to worship, the ideal response to the beast's seven-fold call to worship the Unholy Trinity.

Revelation 14:7 and the Old Testament

Verbal Parallels. At this point sharp readers may offer an objection. How do we know that the author of Revelation consciously intended the reader to pick up an allusion to the fourth commandment at exactly this point (Rev 14:7) in his narrative? Doesn't Ps 146:6 contain exactly the same language as Exod 20? How do we know that John was quoting Exod 20 and not Ps 146? Could he not be alluding to the psalm instead, in which case no allusion to the fourth commandment would apparently be intended?

The point is well taken. Psalm 146:6 says, "The Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them. . ." This is very close, verbally, to "Him who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and the fountains of water" (Rev 14:7). In fact, in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament (a Greek translation from the Hebrew available in New Testament times) the wording of Ps 146 (listed as Ps 145 in the Septuagint) is virtually identical to that of Rev 14:7. So there are strong verbal parallels in Rev 14 to both Exod 20 and Ps 146, with a slight edge, perhaps, going to Ps 146 rather than Exod 20.

Thematic Parallels. But verbal parallels are only one type of evidence for a conscious allusion to the Old Testament in Revelation. Thematic and structural parallels are also significant. Are there thematic parallels between Rev 14:7 and Exod 20? Yes. The first four of the ten commandments (Exod 20:3-11) contain three motivations for obedience. First, there is the motivation of salvation. The preamble to the ten commandments (Exod 20:2-3) says, "I brought you out of the land of Egypt, therefore have no other gods before Me." Our obedience is to be a response to what God has done for us. Second, there is the motivation of judgment. The second commandment talks about "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation" (Exod 20:5). There are consequences for disobedience. Third, there is the motivation of creation. "Worship Him who made . . ." (Exod 20:11). I have made you, I know what is best for you. So there are three motivations to obedience in the first part of the law: salvation, judgment, and creation.

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The same three motivations occur in the context of Rev 14:7. Rev 14:6 speaks of an angel who proclaims "the everlasting gospel." Here we see the motive of salvation. In Rev 14:7 we see the motive of judgment as well. "Fear God and give Him glory, for the hour of His judgment has come." And we have already seen the motivation of creation in Rev 14:7, "Worship the one who made. . ." So Rev 14:6-7 has the same three motivations for response as the first table of the ten commandments (the godward side of the first four): salvation, judgment, and creation. And they even occur in the same order as they do in Exod 20!

Do any of these themes occur also in Ps 146? Yes. There is the theme of salvation: "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men who cannot save. . . Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob" (Ps 146:3,5). There is the theme of creation: "Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, the Maker of heaven and earth . . ." (Ps 146:5-6). There is the theme of judgment: "He upholds the cause of the oppressed" (Ps 146:7). The thematic parallels to Ps 146, therefore, are as strong as those to Exod 20, but not in exactly the same order. So in this case, we can conclude that there is strong evidence pointing to both Old Testament contexts, but there is a slight edge to Exod 20 on the grounds that the themes occur in the same order in both Rev 14 and Exod 20.

Structural Parallels. That brings us to the search for structural parallels. Let's look at the evidence in Rev 12-14. The ten commandments, of which Exod 20:11 is a part, seems to be a major structure underlying this whole section of Revelation. The Remnant are characterized, among other things, as those who "keep the commandments of God" (Rev 12:17; 14:12). But the issue here is not just any commandments of God. The central issue is focused on "worship" (Rev 13:4, 8, 12, 15; Rev 14:7, 9, 11). Worship in particular focuses attention on the first table of the commandments (the first four), those that have to do with our relationship with God.

Given this reality, it is not surprising that in Rev 13 the beasts not only counterfeit the persons of the godhead, but counterfeit each of the first four commandments of the Decalogue, as well. The first commandment says, "You shall have no other gods before me," but the sea beast takes the place of God by receiving worship of itself (Rev 13:4, 8). The second commandment warns against the worship of images, yet the land beast raises up an image to be worshiped (Rev 13:14-15). The third commandment says, "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God," but the sea beast has the names of blasphemy written all over it (Rev 13:1, 5, 6).

The fourth commandment says, "Remember the Sabbath day." Ancient covenant tablets were stamped in the center with a seal of ownership and authority. Since the ten commandments follow the form of ancient covenant tablets, they too have a seal of ownership and authority in the center: the Sabbath command. "For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the

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sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Exod 20:11).

The above statement is the only place in the ten commandments where the basis of God's authority over all creation is stated: He is the creator. This concept of a seal is important in Revelation, as well: the 144,000 are sealed on their foreheads (Rev 14:1, cf. Rev 7:3–4; Exod 31:13, 17). The unholy trinity offers a counterfeit to the seal as well: the mark of the beast (Rev 13:16–17). Thus, all four commandments in the first table of the law come under attack by the unholy trinity of Rev 13. The first table of the law is at the center of the battle between the dragon and the remnant.

This series of verbal and thematic connections between the material in this part of Revelation and passages related to the ten commandments indicates that a major structural parallel to this part of Revelation is the ten commandments, particularly the first portion relating to humanity's relationship with God. This structural evidence offers overwhelming support for the likelihood that the significant verbal parallel between Rev 14:7 and Exod 20:11 was intentional on the part of the author of Revelation. There is absolutely no similar relationship between Revelation and Ps 146.

Conclusion. The cumulative evidence is so strong that an interpreter could conclude that there is no direct allusion to the Old Testament in Revelation that is more certain than the allusion to the fourth commandment in Rev 14:7. When the author of Revelation describes God's final appeal to the human race in the context of the end-time deception, he does so in terms of a call to worship the creator in the context of the fourth commandment.

The Issue of Relevance

But even if it is biblical, does it make any sense to see the Sabbath as some kind of defining issue in the final crisis of earth's history? Why would God pick such an issue as the central focus of the end-time crisis?

At the heart of the matter is the fact that the Sabbath is an ideal way to test whether people are truly loyal to God. The Sabbath command is different from the other nine. All the others have a certain basis in reason and self-interest; after all, the principles of the second table of the law (how we are to relate to others) are the foundation of government in most countries. "Thou shalt not kill" is logical to anyone who does not wish to be killed. "Thou shalt not steal" makes sense to anyone who wants to protect his or her hard-earned possessions. Commands like this are reasonable and even appeal to a certain amount of self-interest. The same goes for the first three commandments concerning our relationship with God. If God is who He claims to be, it makes no sense to worship someone else.

The one part of the Ten Commandments that is not logical is the command to worship on Saturday rather than on some other day. Such a command is so lacking in logic and self-interest that secular people find it hard to take seriously.

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After all, no one has been able to demonstrate any logical or scientific basis for seeing any one day as more special to God than any other. The sun shines and the rain falls in the usual amounts on both Saturday and Sunday. To keep the Sabbath is to take God at His word in spite of the fact that the five senses can perceive no evidence that to do so is reasonable. The Sabbath at the end is like the tree at the beginning. The fruit of the tree of knowledge was probably both tasty and nutritious. The only reason not to eat was because God said so.

So it is with the Sabbath. The only reason to prefer Saturday over Sunday is because God said so; there is no other reason. We accept the Sabbath purely on the basis of God's Word. It is, therefore, a good test of our trust in God and His Word. We accept the Sabbath on the basis of the Word of God. We believe that the Scriptures give a reliable account of the mind and will of God. They are a trustworthy record of God's dealings in the past, and they are a reliable account of the true realities of the end-time. Because we believe the Scriptures, we trust the account of the end-time that we find there.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Book of Revelation portrays the end of the world as a time of great, worldwide deception which will overwhelm the five senses, even in the people of God. However, those who believe, accept, and obey the Word of God will not lose their way in the end-time deception.