

1-1-2004

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Recommended Citation

Rodriguez, Angel M. (2004) "A Coded Message to the End-Time Church," *Perspective Digest*: Vol. 9 : No. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol9/iss1/7>

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A CODED MESSAGE TO THE END-TIME CHURCH

**It sounds like fantasy, with an enormous red dragon,
a great serpent, and a war in the cosmos;
but, says a theologian, it is not.**

The 12th chapter of Revelation is filled with imagery alien to the modern ear—unless, of course, that ear is tuned to fantasy—such as the Lord of the Rings, for example. There is a pregnant woman clothed with the Sun, and the Moon is under her feet. An enormous red dragon with seven heads and 10 horns sweeps a third of the stars out of the sky! Then there's a war in the cosmos and a serpent, called the devil, who tries to mislead humankind and get them all on his side. He gets thrown down to the Earth,

where he pursues the pregnant woman and tries to assassinate her, but the Earth helps her to escape. Then the dragon, filled with rage, vows to go to war against her offspring, the only ones left who are still faithful to God. They are called the "remnant," and identified as those who keep the commandments of God and are faithful to the "testimony of Jesus."

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It does indeed sound like fantasy, but it is really a coded message from God to his last-day church. There is more—22 chapters all told—the totality of which is called “the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place” (chapter one). In the last issue of Perspective Digest, theologian Angel Rodriguez revealed the identifying marks of God’s faithful church. In this article, he addresses the identity of the “remnant” and reveals the characteristics that so enrage the dragon.

Repairers of the Breach

Who are the faithful remnant hidden under the symbols of Revelation 12? Based on their characteristics, Seventh-day Adventists have identified themselves with that group. Like Martin Luther, they understand themselves to be instruments of God in the restoration of biblical truth. Their mission, they have concluded, is forecast in that of the ancient Hebrews who returned from Babylon after the exile, in 538 B.C.:

“Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings” (Isa. 58:12, NIV).

Included in this group, however, are a larger remnant—the many of God’s children now outside the

Adventist Church who will not bow their knees to Baal (Rom. 11:4, NIV), and who hold communion with God.

In addition to the identifying marks set forth in the past issue, three identifying characteristics mark this end-time people. According to Revelation 14:12:

1. THEY KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD

The term *commandments* in Revelation 12:17 and 14:12 refers to the Ten Commandments. In fact, the Book of Revelation associates the crisis that the end-time church will face with the first part of the Decalogue, which defines one’s responsibility to God. The issue: Who is to be worshiped? The dragon, the beast, and the image of the beast on one hand, or on the other, God—also referred to as the Creator, the Lamb, and the Redeemer. Notice the following references or allusions in Revelation to the first four commandments of the Decalogue:

First Commandment: John is called to worship God (19:10). In the heavenly liturgy, God and the Lamb are the only and exclusive objects of worship (4:10; 19:4), and earthlings are invited to worship the Creator (14:7-11). Only God deserves the loyalty of the nations of the Earth (15:4).

Second Commandment: Idolatry is condemned, together with wor-

ship of the image of the beast. Humans receive God's judgment for "worshipping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk" (9:20, NIV). Unfortunately, humans are willing to worship the dragon, the beast, and the image of the beast instead of the true God (13:4, 8, 12, 15); consequently, God rejects them (14:9-10; 16:2).

Third Commandment: The forces of evil open their mouths "to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place" (13:6, NIV). Unrepentant sinners "cursed the name of God" (16:9, NIV; cf. 16:11, 21). These actions are considered to be open acts of rebellion against God.

Fourth Commandment: Revelation 14:7 appears to allude to the Sabbath commandment with a partial quote from Exodus 20:11: "Worship him who *made the heavens, the earth, the sea* and the springs of water." This quote is significant because the Book of Revelation never quotes the Old Testament, although there are many allusions to it.¹ In the Decalogue, the only commandment that identifies God with respect to the world is the Sabbath commandment. He is the Creator.

John appears to describe the attack of the evil forces as a rejection of the first part of the Decalogue. Little emphasis is placed on the other commandments because in

Revelation, the fundamental issue is commitment to God and the Lamb or to the evil powers. Disobedience constitutes an attack against the very foundation of God's revealed will. The eschatological remnant is loyal to the will of God as revealed in a special way in the Ten Commandments. Further,

2. THEY HAVE THE TESTIMONY OF JESUS

The phrase "the testimony of Jesus" is a little more difficult to understand. In Revelation 19:10 it parallels the phrase "spirit of prophecy," which Revelation 21:9 associates with the gift of prophecy. Based on that evidence, Adventists have long believed the "testimony of Jesus" to mean that within the end-time remnant there would be a manifestation of prophecy as well as of the spiritual gifts in general. The gift of prophecy found expression in a special way in the ministry of Ellen G. White.

White herself presents a broader understanding of the phrase "the testimony of Jesus."² She never interprets her manifestation of the gift of prophecy as a fulfillment of Revelation 12:17. For her, the "testimony of Jesus" is what he revealed through the prophets, through Christ's teachings while on Earth, and through the apostles. Fundamentally, it is God's will revealed in his Word. She emphasizes the necessity of our wit-

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nessing to the truths revealed there. Thus, the remnant are characterized by faithfulness to the message of the Scriptures. Also,

3. THEY KEEP THE FAITH OF JESUS

Revelation 14:12 emphasizes the “faith of Jesus” in conjunction with the phrase “keep the commandments of God.” One of the marks of the remnant, then, is their proclamation of all the beliefs and teachings of Jesus—the gospel. During and after 1888, Adventists discerned in the “faith of Jesus” a reference to justification by faith (cf. Rom. 3:22).³ It is the faith we put in Christ’s saving power that justifies us freely. The Adventist pioneers interpreted “those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” in terms of works of love and saving faith, further marks of the remnant. Though Adventists believe that the marks of the remnant apply in a specific way to their experience, they hold that there are many other sincere Christians in the world.

They believe that “the universal church is composed of all who truly believe in Christ . . .”⁴ In fact, the early Adventists went on record: “In what religious bodies are the greater part of the followers of Christ now to be found? Without doubt, in the various churches professing the Protestant faith.”⁵ They added:

“Among earth’s inhabitants, scattered in every land, are those who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Like the stars of heaven, which appear only at night, these faithful ones will shine forth when darkness covers the earth and gross darkness the people. In heathen Africa, in the Catholic lands of Europe and of South America, in China, in India, in the islands of the sea, and in all the dark corners of the earth, God has in reserve a firmament of chosen ones that will yet shine forth amidst the darkness, revealing clearly to an apostate world the transforming power of obedience to His law.”⁶

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would be tantamount to repeating the mistake of Elijah, who thought that everyone except him had apostatized. When he complained that he stood alone in his service for God, Heaven answered: "I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to Baal.' Humans are at best poor judges of the advancement made by the gospel, of the influence that it has on souls who, perhaps, have never heard the preaching of an ordained minister. All through the world, the Lord has His chosen ones."⁷

Such individuals can be and should be considered "a remnant" who trust in the Word of God; they can be further defined as those who in every place "hold communion with God."⁸

The remnant is indeed larger than its historical manifestation in the Adventist Church. There is an invisible dimension to the remnant that transcends its historical and visible expression. But at the close of

the history of sin, when the human race will be polarized, God's full and faithful remnant will be clearly distinguished from the rest of humanity. They will remain loyal to Christ as Saviour and Lord, to the law of God and to the Scriptures. Adventists see themselves as instruments of God in gathering the faithful, eschatological remnant of God before the return of the Lord.

The Message of the Angels

The mission of the remnant is described further in Revelation 14:6-14 under the symbol of three angels flying through the heavens proclaiming three closely related messages. Their purpose is to gather God's remnant scattered throughout the world. The three angels' messages are proclaimed just before the second coming of Christ (14:13-20). They are universal in scope—that is, they are addressed to both Christians and non-Christians, and call for their commitment to the exclusive worship of God.⁹

A. The Message of the First Angel

This angel proclaims the “eternal gospel”—the good news of salvation through Christ on account of God’s grace—in the context of end-time events. It is eternal because it is always relevant and unchangeable. In the apostolic church, acceptance of the gospel meant worshiping the true God and rejecting idolatry (see Acts 14:15). The call to fear God and give glory to him takes place within the frame of reference of the gospel. When confronted by God, humans are to fear him, to humble themselves and recognize his sovereignty and lordship over them. In the Bible, the fear of God and obedience to his law seem to go together (cf. Lev. 19:14, 32; Deut. 13:11; 17:13). To glorify God is to exalt him, to recognize him as the most important being in the universe. The dragon and its followers are not to be feared or glorified by humanity.

One of the motivations for this appeal of the gospel is that the hour of God’s judgment has come. The history of salvation is coming to an end, and God’s eschatological judgment is reaching its consummation. Therefore, the human race should not accept the authority of the dragon, who, along with his followers, is to experience God’s executive judgment. The proper response of those who accept the gospel is to worship only the Creator of heaven and Earth. The Sabbath commandment is a weekly reminder of the

important biblical truth that God is indeed our Creator.

B. The Message of the Second Angel

This angel announces the fall of Babylon and the reasons for its fall. There is here a typological connection between ancient Babylon and end-time Babylon. In the Old Testament, Babylon was the archenemy of God and his people. In Revelation, Babylon represents God’s eschatological archenemy. It is represented under the symbol of a city in order to emphasize its political power. But it is also represented under the symbol of a woman who is a prostitute (Rev. 17). Revelation stars a faithful woman (12:1-2) and an unfaithful woman (17:1-4).

In the Old Testament, the symbol of an unfaithful wife is used to designate apostate Israel (Eze. 16:15-34; Jer. 3:1-3, 8, 9; Isa. 1:21; Hosea 2:2, 4). It would appear that in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Jezebel is a model of the unfaithful people of God (e.g., Jer. 4:30). This woman introduced a false system of worship in Israel and killed those who feared the Lord (cf. 1 Kings 18, 19). The symbolism of Jezebel as an instrument of apostasy and persecution is used in the Book of Revelation. It is through the activities of Jezebel that a false system of worship was introduced in the church of Thyatira (Rev. 2:20).

It appears that the prostitute Babylon, mentioned in Revelation

17-19, is a close relative of the Jezebel of the Old Testament, who persecuted and killed the people of God (17:4, 6; 18:7). The apostasy predicted by Paul is described in Revelation under the symbolism of Babylon, the harlot. In the same way that a false religious system was established in Israel, so a false system entered the Christian Church.

Adventists believe that this apostasy, which began during the Middle Ages, will continue to the end, when it reaches universal dimensions. Only God's remnant will resist it. The application of the term *Babylon* to the Church of Rome is something Adventists have in common with the Reformers.¹⁰ According to Revelation 17:5, it is said that the harlot Babylon is a "mother." Because of this, Adventists believe that the title could be rightly applied to others. Adventists watch with interest and great concern what is happening in the Protestant world with its tendency to reject the principle of *sola Scriptura*. Since the Reformation, many Protestants have come to reject some of the fundamental teachings of the Reformers and question others. Rejection of truth leads to apostasy. Although Babylon symbolizes all apostate religious organizations and their leadership, it especially designates the culmination of an eschatological process of apostasy in the Christian world. Then the beast and his image will form an alliance that unites religious

and civil powers, culminating in the crisis described in Revelation 13:15-17. It is at that future time that the fall of Babylon will be final.¹¹ Adventists believe that it is their responsibility to call the attention of the Christian world to this upcoming tragedy and to restore the truth that was cast to the ground.

C. The Message of the Third Angel

This message is a warning against worshiping the beast, its image, and against receiving the mark of the beast. In strong terms and vivid images, it announces the final defeat of the evil powers and of those loyal to them.

Adventists have historically identified the mark of the beast with the end-time universal enforcement of Sunday observance in the Christian world.¹² They do not believe that Sunday observance today constitutes the mark of the beast or that those who are Sunday keepers have the mark of the beast.¹³ The mark of the beast and the fall of Babylon take place together, and it is at that time that Sunday observance and the mark of the beast will be closely associated. This union of evil will take place when religious leaders begin to use civil authority to impose religious concepts and practices and to persecute those who do not submit to their beliefs and demands.

However, Adventists recognize that the mark of the beast is more

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than the observance of Sunday. In Revelation 13:17, it is further defined as the name of the beast. A name in the Bible is an expression of the character of its bearer, therefore to have the name/mark of the beast is to be totally identified with its purpose, intentions, and message.¹⁴

The people of God, on the other hand, will have the end-time seal of God on their foreheads (Rev. 7:3), which is further defined as the name of the Lamb and the name of the Father “written on their foreheads” (14:1). Adventists have defined this seal very narrowly in terms of Sabbath observance,¹⁵ recognizing at the same time that it includes much more. Having the name of the Lamb and the Father does not mean simply that the remnant belong to God but also that their lives reflect the saving power of God and they are firmly established in their loyalty to him. “As wax takes the impression of the seal, so the soul is to take the impression of the Spirit of God and retain the image of Christ.”¹⁶ The profession of faith in Christ would then express itself in

complete loyalty and commitment to Christ in the midst of great opposition from evil powers.

One could conclude that the “mark,” then, centers in loyalty. It is the counterpart of the “seal of God” in chapter 7. In the final events of planet Earth, as the entire human race is divided into just two camps, one group will give allegiance to the sea monster and the other, despite all opposition, will remain loyal to God. The “mark” and the “seal,” respectively, identify all people.

In that final crisis, the commandments of God will emerge as a standard of loyalty (Rev. 12:17; 14:6-12). The Sabbath in particular will be the litmus test; one’s relationship to it will disclose his or her basic relationship to God and his law. Thus, though non-observance of the Sabbath—or Sunday observance—is not the “mark” per se, both are integral to its end-time enforcement. The Sabbath, anciently the “sign” of the people of God (Ex. 31:13; Eze. 20:20), will again be the sign of those who put God first.

Rodriguez: A Coded Message to the End-Time Church

Adventists are persuaded that the history of salvation is approaching its consummation, and that soon the human race will be fully incorporated into the harmony of the visible kingdom of God. The conflict between good and evil will be resolved once and for all as the redeemed are ushered into eternity. It is this glorious hope that inspires the remnant to remain faithful to the Lord and to call the human race to accept Christ as Saviour and Lord. The Adventist insistence on a return to the spirit of the Reformation and the restoration of truth has a purpose: to re-emphasize the historical and spiritual process of apostasy so that God's people may avoid being deceived by the dragon and its cohorts. Those ready for the coming of the Lord must rely exclusively on his saving power. Hence, the urgency of this final mission to the world. □

Notes and References

¹ See Jon Paulien, *What the Bible Says About the End-Time* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn, 1994), p. 125.

² See Angel Manuel Rodríguez, "The 'Testimony of Jesus Christ' in the Writings of Ellen G. White" (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 1997), unpublished.

³ It is obvious that the phrase "faith of Jesus" is being interpreted here in terms of the Pauline understanding of "faith." The question is whether this is appropriate. It is generally accepted that Paul and John use *pistis* in different ways, or at least with different emphasis. In the case of John, faith is "oriented less toward the soteriological significance of Jesus' death

and resurrection than to the fact that God has revealed himself as the power of love (3:16; 1 John 4:8, 10 16)" (G. Barth, "Pistis faith, trust; faithfulness" (*Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds. [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993], p. 96).

Nevertheless, as Rudolf Bultmann pointed out, there is an inner unity between the Johannine concept of faith and the Pauline concept. "For Paul, too, faith is a surrender of one's own power, of the righteousness achieved in one's own strength" (Bultmann, "Pisteuo," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Friedrich, ed. [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1968] 6: 225).

Rudolf Schnackenburg comments: "Paul opposes faith to the 'works of the law' as the one way of salvation, demonstrated by free redemption in grace through the blood of Jesus. But this antithesis is echoed at most once in John (cf. 6:29 with 28), and in its place, faith is positively presented as the one answer of man which is in keeping with the eschatological revelation and can lead to salvation. These differences spring from theological perspectives and historical conditions. . . . It is enough to note that Paul and John accord the same theological importance to faith, which shows that they are in accord as to the nature of the Christian way of salvation" (*The Gospel According to St. John* [New York: Seabury Press, 1980], Vol. 1, pp. 558, 559).

⁴ "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists," in *Seventh-day Adventist Church Yearbook 1999* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn.), p. 12.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 383.

⁶ _____, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 188, 189.

⁷ _____, "They Shall Be Mine, Saith the Lord of Hosts," *Signs of the Times* (Nov. 23, 1904).

⁸ *Ibid.* The full statement says: "The world is preparing for the last great conflict, nations raising against nation. The vast majority of

human beings are taking their stand against God. But in every age the Lord Jesus has had His witnesses,—a remnant who trusted in the Word of God. And to-day, in every place, there are those who hold communion with God. A vital undercurrent of influence is leading them to the light, and when the question comes to them, 'Who is on the Lord's side?' they will take their position for Him. Their characters have been moulded after the divine similitude, because they have read and practiced the teachings of His Word." In this statement, the term *remnant* is used to refer to those who hold communion with God outside the Adventist Church.

Because of this broad understanding of the true people of God, Adventist ministers are encouraged to interact with non-Adventist ministers: "Our ministers should seek to come near to the ministers of other denominations. Pray for and with these men, for whom Christ is interceding. A solemn responsibility is theirs. As Christ's messengers we should manifest a deep, earnest interest in these shepherds of the flock" (Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948], Vol. 6, p. 78).

⁹ This has been carefully developed by Robert Badenas, "Vraie et fausse adoration dans les messages des trois anges (Apoc. 14:6-13)," in *Etudes sur l'Apocalypse: Signification des messages des trois anges aujourd'hui* (France: Institut Adventiste du Salève, 1988), 1: 144-167.

¹⁰ See LeRoy Edwin Froom, *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Volume 2, pages 531 and 787. The earliest application of the symbol of Babylon to the Roman Catholic Church is found in the writings of the 12th-century Waldenses and Albigenses. This was also taught by Luther, William Tyndale, Bishop Ridley, John Knox, and others. The same position was assumed by post-Reformation men like King James I, Joseph Mede, Sir Isaac Newton, John Wesley, and many others (see *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrines* [Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1952], pp. 198, 199).

¹¹ Ellen G. White summarizes this idea:

"Revelation 18 points to the time when, as a result of rejecting the threefold warning of Revelation 14:6-12, the church will have fully reached the condition foretold by the second angel, and the people of God still in Babylon will be called upon to separate from her communion" (*Great Controversy*, p. 390).

¹² The most recent Adventist discussion of the mark of the beast is the one by C. Mervyn Maxwell, "The Mark of the Beast," in *Symposium in Revelation—Book II*, pp. 41-66, but see also Richard Lehmann, "Le sceau de Dieu et la marque de la bête," in *Etudes sur l'Apocalypse* 1: 187-198.

¹³ Adventists believe that "Sundaykeeping is not yet the mark of the beast" (*The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, "Ellen G. White Comments on Revelation," p. 977), and that "no one has yet received the mark of the beast" (Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 234).

¹⁴ See Lehmann, "Le sceau," p. 198.

¹⁵ Adventists found support for this position in the fact that the Sabbath is called in the Bible a sign of God's creative and sanctifying power (Ex. 31:31, 17; Eze. 20: 12, 20). The commandment itself "appears as a sign or seal of ownership and authority. God is identified as the Creator (Ex. 20:11; 31:17), distinguishing Him from the other gods, and the sphere of ownership and authority is identified as 'heaven and earth' (chaps. 31:17; 20:11; Gen. 2:1-3). These are ancient constituents of the seal, namely the identity of the owner and the sphere of ownership and authority" (Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Sabbath in the Pentateuch," in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, Kenneth A. Strand, ed. [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1982], p. 34).

¹⁶ "Ellen G. White Comments on Revelation," in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Vol. 7, p. 970. In another place, she adds that "it is not any seal or mark that can be seen, but a settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually, so they cannot be moved" ("Ellen G. White Comments on Ezekiel," in *ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 1161).