
Watchtower Commentary on Revelation: Part II

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The common denominator in the Watch Tower Society's approach to interpreting the book of Revelation has been themselves. Whatever proves to be the current time frame set forth they weave their own experiences and viewpoint into the narrative. In this way a scriptural face has been given to virtually everything they have ever done and said. An example can be seen in their interpretation of who or what constitutes the two witnesses who prophesy a thousand two hundred and sixty days dressed in sackcloth at Rev. 11:3. According to *The Finished Mystery (1917)* the days were converted into years and the sackcloth condition represented the Bible being held "under the sackcloth of dead languages" from 539 A.D. to 1799 A.D. The "two witnesses were the Old and New Testaments." page 171.

By 1930 when the next commentary appeared their viewpoint and time frame had been dramatically changed. Therefore their interpretation of this same verse was also dramatically changed. The "two witnesses" no longer represented the Bible but themselves as the "Elijah Class" and the days were no longer representing years but were now viewed as a literal forty-two months (Nov.7,1914 to May 7, 1918). The prophesying in sackcloth was now said to symbolize "reproach .and mourning when applied to God's people." Concerning this condition they said: "All of the Lord's people looked forward to 1914 with joyful expectation. When .. that time came ~nd passed there was much disappointment, chagrin and mourning, and the Lord's people were greatly in reproach. They were ridiculed by the clergy and their allies in particular, and pointed to with scorn, because they had said so much about 1914, and what would come to pass, and their 'prophecies' had not been fulfilled." -*Light, Vol.1*, page 194.

The above confession (one of the few honest appraisals of failed prophecies to be found in Watchtower literature) was presented in the setting of an elaborate apologetic. The reader is led to believe that the experiences of the Watch Tower Society and its supporters were all orchestrated by God and Christ. One of the most obvious contradictions that needed to be addressed was the matter of the "' Gentile Times" ending in October, 1914. As the end of these times was to mark the end of human government there was an apparent problem. Why were human governments still in power following October, 1914? Didn't the fact of

their continuing existence demonstrate that the "Gentile Times" hadn't ended? The *Light* book attempted to resolve these questions while still holding to its basic premise that 1914 did mark the end of the those times. After discussing the matter of prophesying in sackcloth the book quotes from *The Watch Tower*, November 1, 1914 ("Making Ready for the Reign of Righteousness"). They introduce this quotation which runs for several pages by saying:

"What is there said is well illustrated by putting on sackcloth in an effort to comfort the mourning ones. A few excerpts are taken from that article to show its tenor and to show the real attitude of the Elijah-John-the-Baptist class. These quotations are not for criticism, of course, but to show how the Lord foreknew and foretold what was to come to pass, and how he doubtless caused his angels to direct the preparation of exactly what was published. Excerpts from that article in *The Watch Tower* follow: 'It may be that many of the Lord's people were expecting more than they should have looked for to occur with the opening of the Jewish year 1915 [end of 1914].'"-*Light*, VoU, page 195.

You'll note that the blame for looking for "more than they should have," was laid at the feet of the Watch Tower readers-not the Watch Tower leaders. This has been a recurring theme in Watch Tower apologetics. It is not so much that the Society erred but, rather, that the readers misunderstood what was being said. In this way responsibility was shifted from the Society to their followers. I recall a similar tactic following the 1975 disappointment. The July 15, 1976 *Watchtower* had two study articles that addressed themselves to the matter of looking to dates: "Keeping a Balanced View of Time" and "A Solid Basis for Confidence". The first article considered the impossibility of fixing dates because we never have all of the data necessary. Among other things the article said there was no way we could determine with any degree of accuracy how long the time was between Adam's creation and that of Eve when the sixth creative day was to end and the seventh day begin. They summed up their argument this way:

"What, then, does this mean? Simply this: That these. factors, and the possibilities for which they allow, prevent us from saying with any positiveness how much time elapsed between Adam's creation and that of the first woman. We do not know whether it

was a brief time such as a month or a few months, a year or even more. But whatever time elapsed would have to be added to the time that has passed since Adam's creation in order for us to know how far along we are within God's seventh 'day,' his grand day of rest." -*The Watchtower*, July 15, 1976, page 437.

What was so remarkable about this article was that it presented excellent reasons for not looking to a specific year for the start of the millennial reign of Christ. The problem was that it followed a decade of writing in *The Watchtower* that pointed to 1975 as the *probable year* that it would begin! They had argued that the time between Adam's creation and that of Eve was probably only a matter of weeks or months-not years. Their Bible Dictionary, *Aid to Bible Understanding*, published in 1969 goes so far as to indicate that Eve was created in the same calendar year as Adam. The Bible says that Adam was 130 years old when he became the father of Seth. (Gen.5:3) The *Aid to Bible Understanding* says concerning this: "At the age of 130 another son was born to her. Eve called his name Seth." -page 538. This would make Eve the same age as Adam! The latest Bible dictionary published by the Society, *Insight on the Scriptures* (published in 1988), avoids saying how old Eve was when Seth was born. But in the pre-1975 period they argued strongly for only a few months, at most, as separating their creation.

The second study article: "A Solid Basis for Confidence", continued in this same vein-using the Bible to discredit the idea of looking to a date. In neither article was the year 1975 even mentioned. This was a shrewd omission. While the initial readers of that *Watchtower* would have that year clearly fixed in mind when considering this material; those reading the same material ten years later would not necessarily connect up what was being said with any particular year. In this way the article could later be cited as demonstrating how the Society has always discouraged looking to a specific date! One almost has to admire their pragmatism. After demonstrating why it was wrong to look to any specific time for the start of the millennium they offered the following "counsel" for those who had looked to a date -1975, under their influence and may have neglected other interests and responsibilities due to that expectation:

"We may be forgetting that, when the 'day' comes, it will not change the principle that Christians must at all times take care of all their responsibilities. If anyone has been disappointed through not following this line of

thought, he should now concentrate on adjusting his viewpoint, seeing that it was not the word of God *that failed or deceived him and brought disap-pointment, but that his own understanding was based on wrong premises.* " -page 441. (italics added)

Had these two articles been written *before 1975* they would have been very helpful because they did present a more balanced view of matters. But presenting them after years of fueling speculation over the date 1975 made it nothing more than a self-serving apologetic. It insulted the very ones who had so enthusiastically embraced the Society's many arguments and speculative ideas that strongly favored 1975 as the year that would see the start of the millennium. Rather than accept responsibility in this matter, repent and ask forgiveness for misleading millions of people they simply blamed the victims. I recall the anger I felt as I sat in the Kingdom Hall when these articles were being studied. I couldn't believe how willing the brothers were to take the 'beating' for the Society's error. Some were so eager to exonerate the organization that it became difficult to get anyone to even admit that the Society had said *anything* about 1975. This, too, has been the historical pattern. While the Watch Tower leadership has orchestrated numerous false prophecies and provided the tons of literature to propagate these errors, it has been the fellowship itself that has enabled them to survive this God-dishonoring practice. It is not just the Society that has buried these errors or denied their seriousness, the rank-and-file Witness is all too eager to join in the conspiracy.

I have often pondered that strange phenomenon.

Why were the brothers so willing to take the blame when it was so blatantly obvious that all of the speculative argumentation came directly from the Watch Tower Society? Anyone familiar with the Witness mentality knows that individual speculation is not allowed. There would be no way a grass-roots speculation of this nature to have developed within the controlled-thinking culture of the Witnesses. I have since concluded that it was less painful for them to take the blame than to deal with the more painful reality that the Society had once again misled and disappointed its followers over a date. The reality that the Watch Tower movement has never been right about any of their time feature speculations would undermine everything they claim about themselves. That reality was much too costly for most to accept. For my own part it only served to lessen my respect for the Society and also realize that the Witnesses had never advanced

spiritually since the days of Pastor Russell. They were still following men and depending on an organization to keep them right with God. And, if need be, they were willing to lie to themselves for those men. In effect, they seemed to be saying: "My religion, right or wrong". The experience, shocking as it was, reinforced my own determination to listen to God rather than men.

I had never found their arguments regarding 1975 scripturally sound in the first place. I had many times, prior to 1975, cautioned the brothers against looking to that year. This made me appear as one lacking faith in the eyes of many. It seemed to me that the Society was simply manipulating the scriptures in its many arguments to make those scriptures fit a preconceived belief. It was not a matter of reading out of the Bible but, rather, reading into the Bible—something that began with Russell and has never changed. When the Society failed to take responsibility I realized that its nature had not changed from the past; when the brothers were willing to share in the misinformation and cover-up I realized that the fellowship had not changed in its mentality either. It was the same old thing that had been repeated time and time again. It is true that the Society made a half-hearted apology in *The Watchtower*, March 15, 1980 about their role in the 1975 speculation but it was a classic "Too little, too late," sort of thing. Even so they were forced to acknowledge that regarding the year 1975 and the start of the millennial reign of Jesus Christ that there were responsible: "statements published that implied that such realization of hopes by that year was more of a probability than a mere possibility. It is to be regretted that these latter statements apparently overshadowed the cautionary ones and contributed to a buildup of the expectation already initiated." -*The Watchtower*, March 15, 1980, page 17.

When the third commentary on Revelation appeared in the 1960s the "sackcloth" condition of the "two witnesses" of Revelation 11:3 was changed again. This time the sackcloth represented the mournful message these two witnesses delivered between 1914-1918. The starting date of the 42 months was changed from Nov. 7, 1914 to October 4/5, 1914. The terminus date became March 27, 1918 instead of May 7, 1918. In this new interpretation of the verse they now said: "being dressed in sackcloth may not refer to private, personal mourning because of disappointment of one's hopes and aspirations. Rather it may refer to the nature of the prophecy that 'my two witnesses' prophesy. They are gloomy prophets, prophets with a

gloomy message for others, and not concerned about their personal affairs ... to prophesy in sackcloth for a thousand two hundred and sixty days might well signify that during this period of time they proclaimed a gloomy, mournful message for the nations." -*Then is Finished the Mystery of God*, pages 264,265

The current commentary on Revelation offers a similar explanation: "Sackcloth was associated with the mournful messages of doom and grief that God's prophets had to proclaim ... The sackcloth worn by the two witnesses appears to indicate their humble endurance in announcing Jehovah's judgments. They were witnesses proclaiming his day of vengeance that would bring mourning also to the nations." -*Revelation Its Grand Climax At Hand!*, page 164.

Those reading the above interpretation by the Society are led to believe that a truthful judgment message was being preached during this time (1914-18). Nothing could be further from the truth. *The Finished Mystery* published during this period predicted the violent end of the churches and church-goers in the spring of 1918 and the absolute overthrow of all human government in 1920. (see *TCR #47*) They were also preaching that the "Elijah class" (the remnant of the 144,000) would be taken to heaven in the spring of 1918. So part of the message was happily proclaiming their exaltation in 1918 while the other part proclaimed the destructive end of others. The only problem was that it wasn't true! How can it be said that they were acting as his prophet at this time when what they were prophesying was untrue? (Deut.18:21,22) At the time they were still adhering to the 1799 date as the start of the "Time of the End" and Christ's invisible return as having occurred in 1784. Despite this the current book says: "They preached [1914-1918] a 'sackcloth' message concerning Jehovah's judgment of Christendom and the world. The fact that they were symbolized by two witnesses confirms to us that their message was accurate and well founded." -*Ibid*, page 164. To write such a statement in 1988 in the light of history and the document (*The Finished Mystery*) praised shows an utter disregard for truth. It also shows a disregard for the God of Truth.

The interpretations presented in the current book represent a continuation of their organizational mind-set. It appears to me that they have approached the book of Revelation with the thought of "how can we write ourselves into this script?" They display an ingenuity in doing so. Consider, for example, their comments on Revelation 8: 1 which reads: "And when

he opened the seventh seal, a silence occurred in heaven for about a half hour. "

"Can we determine when this happened? Yes, we can, by examining the context, together with historical developments early in the Lord's day. (Revelation 1: 10) During 1918 and 1919, events on earth harmonized remarkably with the scenario described at Rev.8: 1-4. For 40 years before 1914, the Bible Students-as Jehovah's Witnesses were then called -had been announcing boldly that the times of the gentiles would end in that year. The distressful events of 1914 proved them correct. (Luke 21 :24, King James Version; Matthew 24:3,7,8) But many of them also believed that in 1914 they would be taken from this earth to their heavenly inheritance. That did not happen. Instead, during the first world war, they endured a time of severe persecution ... The sincere Christians of the John class were perplexed. What did God want them to do next ... During this difficult period, the fervent prayers of the John class were ascending, as though in the smoke of a large quantity of incense. And their prayers were being heard." -*Ibid*, pages 130,131.

It is as though God was orchestrating every mood and action of those associated with the Watch Tower Society. In fact this is the very thing that *Revelation Its Grand Climax At Hand!* is attempting to prove. If this were really so it would make Jehovah God responsible for their errors. If God was (is) dealing with them as closely as they argue he was (is) why didn't they have their facts straight? If Jehovah was really using this tiny group in some dramatic way why didn't he simply reveal the truth to them? What was gained by the false prophesying? Was God honored? Would it serve in any way to establish credibility toward this obscure group? It is straining credulity to suggest that at the very time they were predicting that 1925 would see the resurrection of the ancient Hebrew prophets, the anointed class would go to heaven and the earthly phase of Christ's kingdom rule would begin-all false-that they would, at the same time, be fulfilling the symbolism presented in Revelation chapters 8-10. In these chapters angels blow a series of trumpets (7) each of which is followed by devastating effects for the earth and mankind. Concerning the first angel's trumpet blast we are told:

"And the first one blew his trumpet. And there occurred a hail and fire mingled with blood, and it was hurled to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees was burned up, and all the green vegetation was burned up. "-Rev.8:7 This

trumpet blast and those that followed it were all heard on earth. How? The new book says: "In line with there being a sequence of trumpet blasts, special resolutions were featured at seven conventions from 1922 to 1928." -page 133. On the following page they elaborate further: "How is this judgment message delivered? Generally, not by the world's news media, which are part of the world and often reproachful of God's' "slave.'" (Matthew 24:45) It was proclaimed in a notable way at the second historic gathering of God's people at Cedar Point, Ohio, September 10, 1922. These unanimously and enthusiastically adopted a resolution entitled: 'A Challenge to World Leaders.'" In outspoken terms, it put the modern-day symbolic earth on notice, as follows: 'We therefore call upon the nations of earth, their rulers and leaders, and upon all the clergymen of all the denominational churches of earth, their followers and allies, big business and big politicians, to bring forth their proof in justification of the position taken by them that they can establish peace and prosperity on earth and bring happiness to the people; and their failing in this, we call upon them to give ear to the testimony that we offer a witnesses for the Lord, and then let them say whether or not our testimony is true.'" -*Revelation Its Grand Climax At Hand!*, page 134.

According to Society records there were about 10,000 Bible Students at that international convention. (see *Light*, V 01.1, page 106) Keep in mind that the book *Millions Now Living Will Never Die* (1920) was pointing to the year 1925 as the marked year for all things to climax. With that in mind note what the resolution presented at Cedar Point, Ohio further stated:

"Therefore we bring to the peoples of earth God's message of good tidings contained in the Bible, his Word of Truth, and we publish to them his message of peace and everlasting salvation, to wit, that the King of glory, the deliverer of man, is invisibly present and has begun his reign; that the old world, under the control of Satan, has ended and soon will be broken in pieces, to make way for the everlasting kingdom of righteousness now being set up, and that millions of people now [1922] living on earth, if obedient to the laws of that righteous kingdom, will continue to live and never die; and we call upon all nations, peoples, kindreds and tongues who love righteousness and hate iniquity to recognize and freely acknowledge that Jehovah is the only true God and that his beloved Son Christ Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of lords." -*Light*, Vol. 1,page 111.

Angels are said to have been behind this resolution and its contents. Are there now millions of people that were alive back there in 1922 presently associated with Jehovah's Witnesses and have they the hope of never dying? That was "God's message of good tidings" Rutherford was expounding. None of the things forecasted for 1925 took place! Yet the Society presents these things as though some dramatic, angelic directed, earth-shaking message was being delivered. How the conventions of 1922-1927 fulfilled the trumpet blasts is set forth in the last three interpretive efforts published by the Watch Tower Society as well as the 1975 *Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses*. On page 146, Albert Schroeder, a current member of the governing body is quoted as saying: "It was thought that then [1925] the remnant of Christ's anointed followers would go to heaven to be part of the Kingdom and that the faithful men of old, such as Abraham, David and others, would be resurrected as princes to take over the government of the earth as part of God's kingdom." -1975 *Yearbook*. Why was it thought that 1925 would witness all these things? Because that was what was preached for years preceding 1925. About the disappointments surrounding 1925 we are told:

"The year 1925 came and went. Jesus' anointed followers were still on earth as a class. The faithful men of old times-Abraham, David and others-had not been resurrected to become princes in the earth. (Ps.45: 16) So, as Anna MacDonald recalls: '1925 was a sad year for many brothers. Some of them were stumbled; their hopes were dashed. They had hoped to see some of the 'ancient worthies' [men of old like Abraham] resurrected. Instead of its being considered a 'probability,' they read into it that it was a 'certainty,' and some prepared for their own loved ones with expectancy of their resurrection. I personally received a letter from the sister who brought me the truth. She advised me that she had done wrong in what she had told me ... [But] I was appreciative of my liberation from Babylon. Where else could one go? I had learned to know and love Jehovah.'" -1975 *Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses*, page 146.

Sound familiar? You'll note that the fault for the shattered expectations were not laid at the feet of the Watch Tower Society-the religious agency that published millions of pieces of literature promising these things and presenting their thoughts as coming from Jehovah. (see *TCR* # 9) No, the fault rested with those poor souls who put their trust in those men claiming to act as God's prophet. At any time, prior to 1925, to have questioned those promises and predictions would

have been viewed as a disrespectful lack of faith. Such a questioning one or doubting one would have been looked upon with disdain. Anna MacDonald, quoted above, may have viewed herself as liberated from "Babylon" but the facts show that she was not liberated from religious delusion, credulity and error. She had to know that the Society preached dogmatism regarding 1925 and what that year would bring. For her to say that such was presented only as a "probability" is simply untrue. Keep in mind that 1925 was only 11 years away from 1914 when another major Watch Tower prophecy went unfulfilled. Between those two dates were the failed predictions of 1918 and 1920 set forth in *The Finished Mystery*. How much proof would one have to have to realize that this organization was not speaking for Jehovah?

It reminds me of a statement made by an elder in response to a number of objections raised regarding the Society's credibility as God's channel of communication. At one point during the conversation he said:

"People believe what they want to believe." His words were directed at me, the one raising the objections. He was implying that if I had a problem with accepting the Society as Jehovah's channel it was because I wanted to. I believe his judgment of me at the time was wrong. It wasn't that I didn't want to believe it. The problem was that there was too much evidence against it to believe it. I have come to the conclusion that Jehovah's Witnesses, as a whole, simply want to believe that the Watch Tower Society is God's channel of communication to men on earth. No amount of evidence to the contrary will shake their confidence in this matter. And they are more than willing to judge those who question the Society as wicked and follow the Watch Tower directive not to read anything critical of the organization. Why? Because it enables them to perpetuate their own self-delusion. In my opinion the motive behind this kind of thinking is not so much faith as it is fear. They have invested too much and stand to lose too much by allowing a fair investigation -one the Society could never win. It reminds me of the person who fears that he or she has cancer but will not go to a doctor to find out for sure. Even though a visit to the doctor might result in their finding out they are not cancerous they will not go because of the fear that it might be so. They simply are not prepared to face it. They might even become angry at a friend or family member if such ones urged them to go to the doctor. I think it is much that way with most of the

. Witnesses. They fear to read anything critical of the Society because it is not just the Society that is at risk. Their whole foundation of faith is at risk! Few, find the moral courage to run that risk.

There is no end to the Society's ingenuity to make the Apocalypse fit their organizational perspective. A further example of this can be found in their interpretation of the "two myriads of myriads" of cavalry (200,000,000) mentioned at Rev.9:16. This huge number, they say, represents the "John class" (page 150) How are they able to fit the minuscule number into such a large prophetic and symbolic number? While acknowledging that the number of the "John class" is now fewer than 10,000 (the latest Memorial report showed that 8,685 identified themselves of this class) they have no difficulty in adding to this number to fulfill the symbolism. They simply add the several million members of the "great crowd" to the smaller number. The book puts it this way:

"To become myriads even in a symbolic sense, would they not need reinforcements? That is what they have needed, and by Jehovah's undeserved kindness, that is what they have received! From where have these come?" There follows this question a brief history of how the Society created this class of believers from 1935 onward. They argue that this growing class of believers share in the cavalry charge symbolically described. About this they say: "The great crowd has continued to declare its unqualified unity with the John class in pouring out the plagues on Christendom. In

1988 this great crowd made up more than 99.7 percent of the work force that Jehovah is using in the field." - *Revelation Its Grand Climax At Hand!*, page 152.

There simply is no end to the way the Bible can be molded to fit a particular worldview. The Society is not alone in this but they demonstrate a remarkable skill in this regard. They continue to hold to the 1914 generation time frame within which all of the prophecies of the Apocalypse must be fulfilled. They seem unwilling to admit that they have already run out of time in this regard. They continue to forecast the destruction of "Babylon the Great" by the nations led by the United Nations. (page 258) This, too, must come within the "generation".

In reading the various commentaries on the book of Revelation it becomes apparent that a wide range of interpretations are made possible. For my own part, I view the book as relevant for all generations of Christians and not just a few thousand at the end of the age. The Apocalypse helps us to further appreciate God's majesty and power. The certain success of all his grand promises for the Church of Jesus Christ are assured and set forth in symbolic beauty. The end of all enemies to truth and righteousness are seen to fall in humiliating dishonor and defeat. This is the ultimate message of this book and this is what I think we should look for in the reading of it. If it enriches our hope, faith and love then it serves a worthwhile service to the struggling members of the body of Christ. □