

# THE ADVENTIST CHURCH AND THE CHRISTIAN WORLD

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**Seventh-day Adventists see their role as a unique and indispensable part of Christianity.**

**T**he Seventh-day Adventist Church is a movement within the Christian world calling Christian communities to a return to the spirit of the Reformation, proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world in an apocalyptic context at the close of the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan, and pointing humankind to the return of the Lord. It is their main task throughout the world to lead people to Christ as Savior and Lord. In pursuing their mission, Adventists do not place themselves outside the brotherhood of the Christian communities but in the

midst of them, encouraging them to remain loyal to their Lord.

Adventists believe that the Reformation of the 16th century came into being under the guidance of the Lord, as an attempt to reform His church. The reformers, particularly Martin Luther, were used by God to lift up the powerful banner of the gospel of justification by faith, which had been cast to the ground by Catholicism. At that time, many

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other biblical truths were re-established under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The proclamation of *sola gratia* and *sola Scriptura* provided the Reformers with the indispensable tools needed to reform the church.

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From their very beginnings, Adventists believed that they were raised up to restore biblical truth. Very often the pioneers of the church used the experience of Elijah and the prophets of Baal to illustrate their own experience or mission. In a time of apostasy, Eli-

jah called God’s people to reformation, and he himself restored the altar of the Lord (1 Kings 18). They also found a parallel to their own task in the description of God’s intentions for those who returned from Babylon after the exile in 539 B.C. The Lord said to the post-exilic community in Jerusalem: “Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in” (Isa. 58:12, NRSV).

In this work the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* was and continues to be taken very seriously in Adventist thinking and theology. Through the study of the Scriptures they found, particularly in the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, a description of God’s intentions for His church at the end time and for the role of the Adventist movement within Christianity and the world at large.

## The End-Time People of God

In order to comprehend properly the role of the Adventist Church in the Christian world, it is necessary to understand their interpretation of Revelation 12–14. This is only a brief summary. Revelation 12 describes the conflict between Christ and Satan. Chapter 13 describes the historical instruments used by the dragon to persecute the people of God. It sums up the dragon’s attack against the church (vss. 1-10), paralleling 12:6, 13-16, and develops 12:17, the attack against the remnant (13:11-18). Revelation 14:1-5 is a description of the remnant gathered with the Lamb on Mount Zion, protected from the power of the dragon. In 14:6-12 John provides a description of the process followed by God to gather the remnant and to prepare them for the return of the Lord, which is described in the rest of the chapter (14:14-20).

*The Woman, the Child, and the Dragon.* In Adventist thinking, the woman clothed with the sun in 12:1 and 2 represents the people of God. The birth of the child is the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament in the incarnation, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of our Lord. The dragon is Satan, who attempts to destroy the Savior who overcomes the dragon and is exalted to the throne of God.

The dragon turns against the Christian Church, God’s instrument

on Earth for the proclamation of the gospel. The church is persecuted for 1260 days, and goes, so to speak, underground. At the end of the prophetic period, only a remnant of the church is left, and it becomes the focus of attack of the dragon. The historicist method of interpretation finds in that chapter a summary of the history of the Christian Church. Even in the use of this method of prophetic interpretation, Adventists are dependent on other Christian interpreters, including the Reformers.

The persecution of the Christian Church was first brought about by pagan Rome and later by the apostasy of the church. Adventists recognize that it is no longer popular to speak about the apostasy of the church, but they take seriously the fact that Paul predicted it. To the Ephesians he said: “I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves” (Acts 20:29, 30, NKJV).

In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul makes clear that the apostasy was not going to be limited to the church in Ephesus. In fact he provides a chronology for it. In verse 3, he clearly calls it “the rebellion” (NIV), “the apostasy” (NASB) and associates it with the “temple of God” (vs. 4), and

indicates that it takes place before the return of the Lord. According to Paul, the manifestation of this phenomenon was not yet a reality in his days because of the presence of a restraining power (2:6). The post-apostolic Church Fathers commonly identified the restraining force as “the civil order of the Roman Empire.”<sup>1</sup> The apostasy would develop after the fall of the Roman Empire.

During the Middle Ages, the church united itself with the civil government and used force to impose its dogma, persecuting those who rejected the traditions of the church. This age of persecution is described by Daniel as taking place for “a time and times and half a time” (7:25, NKJV), or 1260 days (360 + 720 + 180 = 1260). This is the same time period during which, according to Revelation 12, the church hid itself.

Together with many other Christian interpreters, Adventists have taken the 1260 days to be symbolic of years, employing the year-day principle, extending from 538 to 1798. This is a period characterized by apostasy and persecution. It is toward the end of this prophetic period that God raised up the Reformation to bring His church back to biblical truth.

The Reformation was in many ways a great success for the Lord. A process of restoration of truth was

initiated, made necessary because of the many false teachings that had been introduced in the church. God raised up individuals like Wycliffe, Huss, Jerome, and Martin Luther.

“The Reformation uncovered long-forgotten truths. Justification by faith, the great principle of the gospel, was rediscovered, as was a new appreciation for the once-for-all atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and its all-sufficient mediatorial priesthood. Many unbiblical teachings, such as prayers for the dead, veneration of saints and relics, celebration of the mass, worship of Mary, purgatory, penance, holy water, celibacy of the priesthood, the rosary, the inquisition, transubstantiation, extreme unction, and dependence upon tradition, were repudiated and abandoned.”<sup>2</sup>

Sad to say, the Reformation movement soon came to an end. More biblical truth needed to be restored, but the successors of the great Reformers felt comfortable with the truth their predecessors recovered and did not pursue a complete restoration. Religion slipped toward a formality. But God’s true people had not been destroyed by the dragon. At the end of the prophetic period of 1260 days, a “remnant” of the seed of the woman still remained (Rev. 12:17, KJV). This remnant have a very important mission to fulfill before the return of the Lord.

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### The Remnant in Scripture

In dialogue with non-Adventist scholars, Adventist scholars have conducted careful studies of the remnant concept in the Bible. In the Scriptures, the terminology as well as the concept of the remnant is applied to three types of people. First, it designates a *historical* remnant formed by those who survived crisis; second, a *faithful* remnant who are true to their faith relationship with the Lord; and third, the *eschatological* remnant formed by the faithful who go through the apocalyptic woes and inherit the kingdom.

The remnant concept “has a long history reaching from the fall to the eschatological return of Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> In the Flood narrative, Noah and his family are the historical remnant who survived the disaster and are a faithful remnant to the Lord (Gen. 6:8, 9; 7:1, 23). One of the best examples of a faithful remnant in

the historical books is found in the encounter between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Immediately after his victory over the prophets of Baal, Elijah concluded that he was the only one who remained faithful to the Lord. God informed Him that 7,000 Israelites had remained loyal to Him (1 Kings 16:30–19:18). In Ezra 9:8 and 9, the historical remnant consists of those who return from the exile, while in Nehemiah 1:2 and 3, they are those who were not exiled.

The concept of the remnant is prominent in the prophetic books. Not all of Israel belonged to the remnant, only those who survived the Assyrian attack; this is a historical remnant. The faithful remnant are called “the remnant of Joseph” (5:15, KJV). Isaiah associates the concept with the ideas of judgment, salvation, and holiness. After judgment, only a small remnant is left (6:11-

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13). The remnant of faith seem to be represented by the prophet, his sons, and his disciples (8:16-18). In the second part of Isaiah, salvation is proclaimed to all the remnant of the house of Israel; that is to say, to the faithful remnant (46:3). They will be part of the eschatological remnant that will include the remnant of the nations (45:20).

Micah describes the remnant as dispersed among the nations, and the Lord as the one who will gather them (5:7; 2:12). Joel mentions a faithful remnant who are able to stand firm during the Day of the Lord (2:32), and Zephaniah describes a small remnant who find refuge in Yahweh (3:12, 13). Several times Jeremiah mentions a historical remnant (e.g., 6:9, 29, 30; 21:8-10). There are also references to God's gracious work of gathering the remnant and giving them a new covenant and a new heart (31:7-9, 31-34; Eze. 11:16-21).

In the prophetic books, the es-

chatological remnant do not include every Israelite but only the faithful ones within Israel and the survivors or remnant from the nations (Zech. 14:16). The one who gathers the remnant is the Lord Himself. In Daniel the eschatological remnant receive the Messianic kingdom (7:21-27).

In the New Testament, the concept of the remnant surfaces in the preaching of John the Baptist inviting the people to be part of a penitent remnant (Matt. 3:1-12). The preaching of Jesus was an invitation to the people to join Him and the new community of faith He was establishing. Those who accepted the invitation could be designated a faithful remnant. But even that remnant would be sifted to become the eschatological remnant (13:24-30).

According to Paul, the Jews who accepted Christ are the true remnant of God, the faithful remnant of Israel (Rom. 11:5). But the new remnant are larger than that small

group. They are “the new community of faith [the Church], made up of all who have faith in Christ (10:4, 9-13), and includes Gentiles as well as Jews (9:24; 10:12).”<sup>4</sup> Finally, in the Book of Revelation, there are references to a faithful remnant in the churches of Thyatira and Sardis (2:19; 3:2, 4). The remnant mentioned in 12:17 are the faithful end-time people of God who retain their faith in the Lord in spite of the attacks of the dragon.

#### Marks of the End-Time Remnant

Who are the faithful remnant mentioned in Revelation 12:17? Based on the characteristics of this remnant, Adventists have claimed to be the remnant of God. They are described as keeping the commandments of God, having the testimony of Jesus, and having the faith of Jesus (14:12).

- Keep the Commandments of God. Adventists understand that the term *commandments* in 12:17; 14:12 refers to the Ten Commandments. In fact, the conflict that the church confronts in the Book of Revelation is directly associated with the first part of the Decalogue, which defines one's responsibility to God. The fundamental issue seems to be related to the proper object of worship. Humans are confronted with the options of worshiping the dragon, the beast, and the image of the beast—or God the Creator and the Lamb as 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 on Earth its inhabitants are invited to worship the Creator (14:7). There is only one God who deserves the loyalty of the nations of the Earth (15:4).

*Second Commandment:* Idolatry is condemned in Revelation together with the worship of the image of the beast. Humans receive God's judgment for “worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk” (Rev. 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 they are also rejected by God (14:9, 10; 16:2).

*Third Commandment:* The forces of evil open their mouths “He opened his mouth 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). These actions are considered to be open acts of rebellion against God.

*Fourth Commandment:* There appears to be an allusion to the Sabbath commandment in 14:7, perhaps even a partial quote from Exo-

dus 20:11: “worship Him *who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water*” (NKJV, italics supplied). This quote is significant because Revelation never quotes the Old Testament, although there are many allusions to it. In the Decalogue, the only commandment that identifies Yahweh with respect to the world is the Sabbath commandment. He is the Creator.

John appears to be describing 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 the one of the commitment of the individual to God and the Lamb or to the evil powers. It is an attack against the very foundation of God’s revealed will. The eschatological remnant are loyal to the will of God as revealed in a special way in the Ten Commandments.

• Have the Testimony of Jesus. The phrase “the testimony of Jesus” is a little more difficult to understand. In Revelation 19:10 it is in parallelism with the phrase “spirit of prophecy.” Revelation 21:9 associates it with the gift of prophecy. Based on that evidence, Adventists have historically taken the “testimony of Jesus” to mean that within the end-time remnant, there would be a manifestation of the gift of prophecy or of the spiritual gifts in general. This found expression in a special

way in the prophetic ministry of Ellen G. White in the church.

Interestingly, Ellen G. White in her writings presents a much broader understanding of the phrase “the testimony of Jesus.” In fact, she never interprets the manifestation of the gift of prophecy in her life as a fulfillment of Revelation 12:17. For her, the “testimony of Jesus” is what He revealed to us through the prophets, through His teachings while on Earth, and through the apostles. Fundamentally, it is God’s revealed will in His Word. She puts the emphasis on the content of that testimony, the truths that are revealed there, on the gospel and on our witnessing to it. For her, the remnant is characterized by faithfulness to the message of the Scriptures.

• Keep the Faith of Jesus. “The faith of Jesus” is mentioned in Revelation 14:17 in conjunction with the phrase “keep the commandments of God.” Traditionally Adventists have interpreted this phrase as designating all the teachings of Jesus. In this case, one of the marks of the remnant would be that they proclaim and believe what Jesus taught and believed (the gospel). But with the emphasis on justification by faith during and after 1888, Adventists found in the “faith of Jesus” a reference to justification by faith (Rom. 3:22). It is the faith that we put in Christ’s saving power that justifies us. The clause “those who keep the

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commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” was interpreted, then, in terms of law and gospel, works of love and saving faith.

The combination of these important truths would be one of the marks of the remnant. Although Adventists believe that the marks of the remnant apply in a specific way to their experience, they hold that there are many other true Christians in the world. They believe that “the universal church is composed of all who truly believe in Christ.”<sup>5</sup> It could be asked, “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.”<sup>6</sup>

The following statement is representative of their position: “Among earth’s inhabitants, scattered in every land, there 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.”<sup>7</sup>

Adventists recognize that the remnant are larger than their historical manifestation in the Adventist Church. For them to conclude that they are the only ones faithful to the Lord would be tantamount to repeating Elijah’s mistake, who thought that everybody else except he had apostatized.

“When Elijah complained that he stood alone in his service for God, the answer that came from heaven was, ‘I have reserved to Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’ Men are at best poor judges of the advancement made by the Gospel, of the influence



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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.”<sup>8</sup>

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.”<sup>9</sup>

The remnant are indeed larger than their historical manifestation in the Adventist Church as God's remnant. There is an invisible dimension to the remnant that transcends their 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 Savior and Lord, to the law of God, and to the Scriptures. Adventists see themselves as instruments of God in gathering the faith-

ful, eschatological remnant of God before the return of the Lord.

*The Mission of the Remnant.* The mission of the remnant is described in Revelation 14:6-12 under the symbol of three angels flying through the heavens, proclaiming three messages closely related to one another. The purpose is to gather God's remnant scattered throughout the world. The proclamation of the three angels' messages takes place before the second coming of Christ (14:13-20) and is universal in scope, i.e., it is addressed to both Christians and non-Christians. The basic issue in that proclamation is the one of a commitment to Christ that expresses itself in the exclusive worship of God.

• Message of the First Angel. This angel proclaims the “eternal gospel” in the context of end-time events. This is the good news of salvation through Christ on account of God's grace. It is eternal because it is

always relevant and unchangeable. In the apostolic church, acceptance of the gospel meant worshipping the true God and rejecting idolatry (Acts 14:15; 20:24). 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 to recognize His sovereignty and lordship over them. Interestingly, in the Bible, the fear of God and obedience to His law seem to go together (Lev. 19:14, 32; Deut. 13:11; 17:13). To glorify God is to exalt Him, to recognize Him as the most important person in the universe. The dragon and its instruments 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 because the dragon itself and its instruments are going 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.

• The Message of the Second

Angel: The Fall of Babylon. This angel announces the fall of Babylon and the reasons for its fall. There is here a typological connection between ancient Babylon and the end-time Babylon. In the Old Testament, Babylon was the archenemy of God and His people, and in Revelation it 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 (Revelation 17). In Revelation one finds a faithful woman (12:1, 2) and an unfaithful woman (17:1-4).

In the Old Testament, the symbol of an unfaithful wife designates apostate Israel (Isa. 1:21; Jer. 3:1-3, 8, 9; Eze. 16:15-34; Hosea 2:2, 4). It would appear that in Jeremiah and Ezekiel the figure of Jezebel is used as a model to depict 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 (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 has as its background the great 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. 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 the term *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 its 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. Adventists believe that it is their responsibility to call the attention of the Christian world to this coming tragedy and to restore the truth that was cast to the ground.

• The Message of the Third Angel: The Mark of the Beast. This message is a warning against worshipping the beast and the image of the beast, 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. 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. The mark of the beast and the fall of Babylon take place together, and it would be at that time that Sunday observance and the mark of the beast will be closely associated. This will take place when religious leaders begin to use civil authority to impose religious ideas and practices and to persecute those who do not submit to their beliefs and demands.

Adventists recognize, however, that the mark of the beast is obviously

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more than the observance of Sunday. In Revelation 13:17 it is further defined as the name of the beast. The 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.

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, NKJV). Adventists have defined this seal very narrowly in terms of Sabbath observance, 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 they reflect in their lives the saving power of God and 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."<sup>10</sup> 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 (12:17; 14:6-12). The Sabbath in particular will be the litmus test; one's relationship to it will disclose his[/her] basic relationship to God and His law. Thus, while the nonobservance of the Sabbath or

Sunday-observance is not the 'mark' per se just now, both are integral to its end-time enforcement. The Sabbath, anciently the 'sign' of the people of God (Exod 31:13; Ezek 20:20), will again come to the fore to show the world those who put God first."<sup>11</sup>

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, ushering the redeemed ones 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 Savior and Lord. Adventists' insistence on a return to the spirit of the Reformation and the restoration of truth has the purpose of redressing the process of apostasy in order for the people of God to avoid being deceived by the dragon and its associates and be ready for the coming of the Lord by relying exclusively on His saving power.

Hence, the urgency of our mission to the world. □

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<sup>3</sup> Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea From Genesis to Isaiah* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1972), p. 132.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .*, *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> *The Great Controversy*, p. 383.

<sup>7</sup> *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 188, 189.

<sup>8</sup> *Signs of the Times* (Nov. 23, 1904), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 970.

<sup>11</sup> William G. Johnsson, "The Saints' End-Time Victory over the Forces of Evil," in *Symposium in Revelation—Book II*, Frank B. Holbrook, ed. (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), p. 30.

