

Jesus and His Second Coming in the Apocalypse

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Seventh-day Adventist confess with their name that they believe in Jesus' soon return. I would like to take a look at Revelation and ask what this book tells us about the second coming of Jesus. First, I will focus on the most important words connected to the second coming. Then I will evaluate this data.

I. Jesus' Second Coming in the Book of Revelation

There are many places in Revelation where we can find statements about Jesus' second coming and about events connected to it. If we read through the book, the following passages catch our attention:

- (1) Jesus is coming with the clouds—1:7
- (2) Jesus promises to come—2:5, 16, 25; 3:3, 11
- (3) The day of the wrath of God and the Lamb—6:14-17; 7
- (4) The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of the Lord and of His Christ—11:15-18
- (5) The harvest of the world—14:14-20
- (6) The kings from the east and Jesus' promise to come—16:12-15
- (7) The rider on the wide horse —19:11-21
- (8) Jesus promises to come (22:7, 12, 20)

This list already shows us how important this topic is in the Apocalypse.

II. Terms Related to or Referring to the Second coming

The Book of Revelation also contains a number of important words that refer to the Lord's return. Let us briefly take a look at them before we turn symbolic descriptions.

A. The Term "to Come" (*erchomai*)

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Important nouns found in other parts of the NT and referring to the second coming, such as “the coming” (*parousia*) and “the appearing” (*epiphaneia*), are not found in Revelation. However, the verb “to come” (*erchomai*) is found frequently. An investigation of this term shows that it is found in connection with God the Father, the Son, but also with heavenly and earthly beings. However, in most of the cases it refers to God and Jesus.

The following picture emerges as soon as we take a closer look at the word “to come” as it relates to Jesus and God.

1. “To Come” and Jesus

Thirteen times the coming refers to Jesus. One of these thirteen occurrences describes how the Lamb comes to God, who is seated on his throne (5:7). This happened in AD 31, when Jesus was installed as king in heaven. Twelve out of the thirteen times “to come” refers to the second coming of Jesus, and in seven of these texts Jesus himself promises to come. In the apocalyptic part of Revelation symbolic descriptions of the second coming prevail, whereas in the letter format that frames the book literal descriptions are found.

Letter Frame

A 1:7 Jesus is coming. Amen.

B 2:5 “I am coming!”
2:16 “I am coming!”
3:11 “I am coming!”

Apocalyptic Part

C 6:17 The Lamb’s wrath has come
14:15 The time to reap has come

D 16:15 “I am coming!”

C’ 19:7 The wedding of the Lamb has come

Letter Frame

B’ 22:7 “I am coming!”
22:12 “I am coming!”
22:20 “I am coming!”

A’ 22:20 “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”

(2) “To Come” and God

Interestingly enough, Revelation does not only talk about the coming of Jesus. “Coming” is also connected to the Father. Oftentimes God the Father is described with the threefold formula: “the one who was and is and is to come.” This formula occurs three times in the first couple of chapters of Revelation. Then suddenly, it is reduced to a twofold formula—Rev 11:17: ‘the one who is

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and who was.” Probably the last element is left out in this text because God will have come at that time. God the Father is also coming.

God’s nature is described in the letter frame, while his activities are announced in the apocalyptic part.

I. God’s Nature

1:4 Threefold formula—who is, was, and is to come

1:8 Threefold formula—who is, was, and is to come

4:8 Threefold formula—who was, is, and is to come

11:17 Twofold formula—who is and was

II. God’s Activities

11:18 His wrath has come

14:7 The hour of judgment has come

2. The Term “to Come” (*hēxō*)

There is another Greek word for “to come” used in the Book of Revelation, *hēxō*. We find it in Rev 2:25; 3:3 (twice); 3:9; 15:4, and 18:8. However, only twice is this term directly related to Jesus’ second coming. In both of these texts Jesus promises to come. Both texts are found in the letter frame of the book. The other texts talk about groups of humans and about the plagues that are going to come.

3. The Term “Soon /Quickly”

The adverb translated “soon” or “quickly” and the corresponding noun are found several times in the Apocalypse. We find the adverb (*tachu*) in Rev 2:26; 3:11; 11:1; 22:7, 12, 20. We find the noun (*tachei*) in Rev 1:1 and 22:6. Five times Jesus says He will come soon. (In English the noun is also translated “soon.”) The two phrases in which it occurs are almost identical in wording: “what must take place soon.”

Some suggest that the word describes the speed of the second coming, not its closeness. However, that Jesus would come at a high speed instead of coming soon would not seem to make much sense for the readers of the book. Persecuted Christians are comforted through the knowledge of a soon returning Lord. The speed with which he comes from heaven is less important. It seems best to understand that Jesus is coming soon.

4. The Term “Near”

The term “near” (*eggus*) is found in two places (1:3; 22:10) and seems to support what we have said with regard to the word “soon.” Within the letter frame the phrase “the time is near” is used. Because the Book of Revelation was most probably written after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the first part of Jesus’ end time speech in Matt 24 (also Mark 13; Luke 17 and 21, the so-

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called synoptic apocalypse) had been fulfilled. The time is indeed near, because according to Jesus' speech the only missing major event is His second coming.

III. Evaluation of the Statements Related to Jesus' Second Coming

After this brief look at the terms related to the second coming, let us move to an evaluation. We will first look at the texts in the letter frame of Revelation, then at the ones which belong to the apocalyptic part. First of all, we take an overview:

Within the Letter Frame of Revelation

Christ's Coming in the Prologue Rev 1:7; 2:5, 16, 25; 3:3, 11

Christ's Coming in the Epilogue Rev 22:7, 12, 20 (twice)

Within the Prophetic-Apocalyptic Part of Revelation

The sixth and seventh seals (6:12-8:1)

The seventh trumpet (11:15-18)

The harvest of the world (14:14-20)

The sixth and seventh Plague (16:12-21)

The marriage supper of the lamb and the rider on the white horse (19:1-21)

1. The Second Coming Within the Letter Frame of Revelation

a. The Second Coming in the Prologue

(1) In Rev 1:7

A highly important text is Rev 1:7. This is the first text in Revelation in which the second coming is clearly spoken of and Jesus is mentioned. The text belongs to a longer passage, Rev 1:5-7, which is part of the introduction of the book. This passage contains a summary statement of the entire Apocalypse. It is Revelation in a nutshell. Before moving to strange beasts, confusing numbers, and terrible disasters, this passage tells what the book is really all about. If it were not for this introduction, we would be in danger of getting lost in the symbols and frightful events depicted and losing sight of God's plan of salvation that like a golden thread runs throughout all history.

The passage Rev 1:5-7 describes Jesus' attitude toward us and His activity in favor of us. Jesus loves us (1:5). He has saved us by shedding His blood. The sin problem is solved (1:5). Jesus has set us in a new position. We are a kingdom and priests (1:6). Jesus is coming again (1:7).

This is good news! Everything is done for us. The entire plan of salvation is summarized in these words. Jesus loves us. His substitutionary death provides salvation for us. Since we have accepted His grace, we have become a kingdom and priests. Followers of Jesus are the real kings and priests on earth. But were it not for His second coming, everything would be incomplete, the final salvation would not be obtained. Jesus does not stop halfway. What he has begun, he also will bring to glorious completion. Jesus is coming again. This is what Rev 1:7 tells us.

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Rev 1:7 also teaches that Jesus' return will be visible to the entire human race. Everybody will see him. A hidden or secret coming or a coming which will be noticed only by a few is alien to the Bible. This verse ends negatively. The tribes of the earth will mourn. As wonderful as the second coming of Jesus is for His disciples, for His enemies it means judgment, whereas for God's children it is final salvation.

(2) In Rev 2-3

In the messages to the seven churches "coming" is mentioned five times, namely in the messages to five different churches. The only letters in which the words "to come" is missing are those to the best church and the worst church: Smyrna and Laodicea. Of the five times the term "coming" occurs, it is used negatively with Ephesus, Pergamum, and Sardis. These negative comings are comings for judgment.

Rev 2:5 ". . . repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent."

Rev 2:16 "Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth. . ."

Rev 3:3 ". . . repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you."

The announced judgment does not only refer to a future judgment. If these churches do not repent, the judgment is at hand.

In the messages to Thyatira and Philadelphia "to come" occurs in a positive way and clearly refers to the second coming.

Rev 2:25 "Only hold fast to what you have until I come."

Rev 3:11 "I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may take your crown . . ."

We discover from this that the expression "to come" has positive overtones, it refers to Christ's return. When "coming" is negative, it is an act of judgment which is not limited to the second coming. However, an end time component seems to be present anyway. The promises to the overcomers, which follow in each case, are associated with the end time. In Rev 2:16 the word "soon" is added, "I am coming soon," namely for judgment. Elsewhere in Revelation the expression "soon" is found in connection with the second coming. The terms "to make war," "sword," and "mouth" occur also in Rev 19:11 and 15, when Christ as the rider on the white horse wins the battle of Armageddon at his return. And coming like a thief reminds us of Rev 16:15 and similar NT passages which clearly refer to the second coming.

Thus, even the negative passages have an end time component. However, one wonders if only five of the seven messages to the churches hint at Jesus' coming. What about the other two? In the message to the church of Smyrna the promise for the overcomers assures them they will not be harmed by the second death. The second death becomes a reality only after Christ's return.

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In the message to the church of Laodicea Jesus says: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with me.” The opinions of expositors vary. Some think the text applies to the individual who opens his or her life to Jesus. Others notice a connection to the second coming or to both aspects. What are the arguments in favor of an end time interpretation of Rev 3:20?

First, the context is directed toward the end time. Obviously, the supper reflects the marriage supper of the Lamb in Rev 19:9, which will be celebrated after the second coming. Second, the narrow context is also end time oriented, as can be seen by the promise to the overcomers in 3:21. Third, since the messages to the other churches hint at Jesus’ second coming, we expect to find a similar feature in the message to the Laodiceans. Fourth, the large context of Revelation, e.g., 16:15, is filled with the concept of the Lord’s second coming. Fifth, the idea of standing at the door reminded first century Christians of the Lord’s second coming. Matt 24:33 and Mark 13:29 emphasize that Jesus is at the door: “When you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door.” In Luke 12:36 the context is the second coming. In this case we hear about knocking and opening the door. According to James 5:9 the judge is standing right at the door.

b. The Second Coming in the Epilogue

Having investigated the prologue of Revelation, we now jump to the conclusion of this book. In Rev 22:7 we read: “Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.” At the end of Revelation this message serves as an encouragement. Much will take place soon (22:6). Not all of it will be positive. But Christians live with the expectancy that Jesus will come soon. This will empower them. In the second part of this verse, Jesus points to the Word of God, in this case to the Book of Revelation. This Word of God needs to be read, heard, taken to heart, kept, and lived. We need to be grounded in this word, as we expect our Lord’s soon return.

In Rev 22:12 we read: “Behold, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work.” This message starts like the previous one; however, it is continued differently. Jesus talks about reward according to works. This reward can be final judgment or salvation. Therefore, some regard the second coming as a threat. For others it is comfort, encouragement, and hope. The next verse talks about the One who is able to lead us to the final goal.

It is interesting to hear about reward according to works. In Matt 24 and 25 Jesus’s end time speech is found. It includes several examples or parables. Each has a certain direction:

1. The fig tree—Watching
2. The days of Noah—Watching
3. The evil servant—Relating to people

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4. The ten virgins—Acting (cf. Matt 7:24-27)
5. Talents—Acting
6. Sheep and goats—Relating to people

Matthew did not mention the correct doctrine when he discussed the second coming. The right doctrine and its importance are referred to in several other passages of Scripture. But Matthew did not concentrate on it. One can become very preoccupied with doctrine. One can even fight for the correct doctrine and at the same time be blind to treating friends, colleagues, and relatives fairly and with love. It belongs to the preparation of the second coming to have a good relationship to brothers and sisters within the church and those outside the church, not just the right doctrine, as important as the latter is. This concept may be present here when we hear about a reward according to deeds.

The final confirmation comes in Rev 22:20: “The one who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” The one who testifies is the same person found in v. 18. We have to take the context into consideration. What Jesus testifies in vs. 18-19 is: Do not add anything to the book of Revelation and therefore to the Bible and do not omit any part. Thus, Jesus calls us to be extremely careful with the Word of God and to be faithful toward it. Today many Christians do not care much about God’s Word. Unfortunately, there are trends among us to follow sociology, psychology, philosophy, or any of the sciences, as well as our own inclinations and the opinions of the majority, rather than the Word of God. There is the danger of no longer letting Scripture guide us. There is the danger of no longer feeding personally upon God’s Word daily. Sometimes we do not even bring our Bibles to church or to Sabbath School. As the second coming is near, there must be a new devotion to Scripture among us, because it is there that we are most likely to meet our Lord.

Finally John as a representative of all faithful believers exclaims: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” This is the confession of the church: Maranatha—Our Lord comes; or: Come, o Lord.

2. The Second Coming in the Prophetic-Apocalyptic Part of Revelation

Now we can move on to the apocalyptic part of Revelation. We will start with the seals.

(1) The Sixth and the Seventh Seals (6:12-8:1)

Whereas the seals in general parallel the signs of the coming of the Lord, the last two seals are especially important. The sixth seal clearly has to do with the Lord’s coming. First, it describes seven phenomena in nature. Then it mentions seven groups of people. The natural phenomena are mostly the heavenly signs as we know them from Matt 24. The reaction of humankind to the last of these signs and to Christ’s return, which is associated with them, is amazing. People want to die. The day of the Lord has come, which is the day of judgment,

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as already known from the OT. They would rather be slain than have to face the Lord!

So the first part of the sixth seal is directed toward the unbelievers. The second part is introduced by the question at the very end of chapter 6: Who can stand? and is directed toward the believers. This question is answered with Rev 7. The 144,000, probably identical with the great multitude, is able to stand. Why? First, they are “sealed.” They reflect God’s thinking and His ideas. Since they distance themselves from sin (Ezek 9:4), God regards them as His property. Second, they have “come out of the great tribulation” and remained faithful to God. Third, “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.” They have accepted salvation as a gift, and they have allowed Jesus to cleanse them from sin and guilt. As a consequence they serve God in His sanctuary, live in close fellowship with God, and are cared for by Jesus the Shepherd. Whatever was negative is removed. The seventh seal refers to a silence in heaven. This may point to the final judgment and a new creation. Both depend on the second coming.

(2) The Seventh Trumpet (11:15-18)

The last trumpet is called the completion or the fulfillment of the mystery of God. When this trumpet is sounded, we hear that “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever” (11:15). Verse 18 is quite interesting. This verse summarizes the remainder of the Book of Revelation:

1. The nations were angry—12-14
2. God’s time has come:
 - a. for judging—15-18
 - b. for rewarding His people—21-22
 - c. for destroying those who destroy the earth—19-20.

“Those, who have destroyed the earth” are not people who pollute the environment. Ecology is not the issue. The expression refers to the satanic trinity forming the great harlot Babylon (19:2).

The idea of reward is again mentioned in this passage. The second coming allows for rewarding humanity with salvation or final eradication. From our modern perspective and from a first world country this may sound cruel. It is quite different when God’s people are suffering, persecuted, and killed and when God then intervenes.

(3) The Harvest of the World (14,14-20)

The next major vision in Revelation is the center of the book, the vision of the satanic trinity which ends with a double harvest. A person like a son of man comes seated on the cloud. The harvest is gathered. It is a double harvest: harvest of wheat and harvest of grapes, the gathering of the elect and the destruction

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of the wicked who had made a decision against God and who tried to annihilate God's people. Again Revelation talks about a twofold effect of Jesus' second coming.

(4) *The Sixth and the Seventh Plague (16:12-21)*

With the sixth and seventh plague the battle of Armageddon has come. Evil powers are gathered, and the waters on which the harlot Babylon is seated are drying up. The Day of the Lord has finally come. The kings from the east are coming, Jesus with His heavenly army. Babylon breaks apart and is judged. Rev 17 and 18 describe the fall of Babylon in greater detail. In the same way, Rev 19 depicts the intervention of the kings from the east.

As old Babylon in the 6th century B.C. was defeated by Cyrus, the king and anointed one from the east, so his antitype, Jesus the Lord, the real Messiah and King, will bring an end to Babylon by His second coming.

In the middle of this passage a direct word of our Lord is found—16:15: "Behold, I am coming like a thief!" In spite of all signs, Jesus' return will be surprising. The precise date of his second coming cannot be calculated. More important than all calculations is, therefore, to be constantly ready.

In *Out of Africa*, Isaac Dinesen tells this story about her Kenyan cook Kamante. One night, after midnight, [Kamante] suddenly walked into my bedroom with a hurricane-lamp in his hand, silent, as if on duty. . . He spoke to me very solemnly . . . "I think that you had better get up. I think that God is coming." When I heard this, I did get up, and asked why he thought so. He gravely led me into the dining-room which looked west, toward the hills. From the door-windows I now saw a strange phenomenon. There was a big grass-fire going on, out in the hills, and the grass was burning all the way from the hilltop to the plain; when seen from the house, it was nearly a vertical line. It did indeed look as if some gigantic figure was moving and coming toward us. I stood for some time and looked at it, with Kamante watching by my side, then I began to explain the thing to him. . . But the explanation did not seem to make much impression on him one way or the other; he clearly took his mission to have been fulfilled when he had called me. "Well yes," he said, "it may be so. But I thought that you had better get up in case it was God coming." Just in case, be ready. Just in case, be awake. People have been wrong in the past about when He would come, but make no mistake, one day He *is* coming!

Jesus pronounces a blessing on those who watch and keep their garments, who stay in the right relationship with the Lord and remain dependent on him. Watching does not mean to be frightful or to castigate oneself. It is a joyful waiting for the One whom we love and with whom we spiritually live from day to day, even if we do not see Him right now face to face.

(5) *The Marriage Supper and the Rider on the White Horse (19:1-21)*

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At the end of Rev 14 we found a twofold harvest. In Rev 19 there is a twofold meal. The redeemed are invited to the marriage supper of the lamb. The enemies of God and His people become a meal for the birds.

Jesus returns as the rider on the white horse. His heavenly army follows Him. Armageddon takes place. The evil powers are judged. God's people are liberated and are able to participate in the marriage supper. Jesus is called "the Word of God," and He fights with the sharp sword that comes out of His mouth, the divine Word. This Word is powerful and has created the earth. This Word destroys the enemies. Indeed, Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

IV. Results

After this survey of the doctrine of the second coming in the Apocalypse, we are ready to summarize the results.

1. The Manner of the Second Coming

How, according to Revelation, will Jesus return? What does the book teach us? The Apocalypse is in full accordance with Jesus' end time speech, as recorded in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke). This speech is not found in the Gospel of John, but the important elements are all present in his Apocalypse. Certainly, in Revelation symbolic language is often used, especially in the prophetic-apocalyptic part, but the results are the same. In addition, the book of Revelation fills in many details which are connected to the second coming and which are not or not as clearly found in other biblical material. Here are the results:

- (1) Jesus will come visibly for all humans.
- (2) Jesus will come with the clouds.
- (3) Jesus will come with his heavenly army.
- (4) Jesus will come soon.
- (5) Jesus will come like a thief.

2. Results of the Lord's Second Coming

The second coming of our Lord has results: (1) His return means judgment for one group; and (2) His return means longed for, final salvation and direct communion with their Lord for the other group. Both ideas are present in the term "reward."

The Second Coming brings about God's end time intervention: (1) Liberation of His people and first resurrection; (2) Judgment before, during, and after the Millennium and second resurrection; and (3) New creation.

3. Preparation

Even the question of how to prepare for this event is addressed in Revelation:

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(1) Watching and waiting, not losing the certainty of salvation and the relationship with God; not giving up faith in Jesus and His soon return in spite of all the questions that cannot be completely answered; letting our lives be determined from a clear goal.

(2) Taking God's Word seriously, studying it; not expanding on it or omitting something that we do not like; living according to this Word.

(3) Good works deriving from our faith in Jesus and from our gratitude for salvation. This includes a Christian behavior and attitude toward others and care for fellow church members and fellow human beings.

Conclusion

Revelation reports the second coming of the Lord. It quotes seven direct promises of Jesus. Jesus makes a sevenfold promise. The number seven points to the certainty and trustworthiness of Jesus' promise. It will come true. One day it will come true. One day Jesus will come, surprisingly, and soon! We are looking forward to that moment. What could be better than the return of our Lord?

Our Lord will keep his promise. Let us remember what he personally told us in Revelation:

A 2:5 I am coming
2:16 I am coming soon
3:11 I am coming soon

B 16:15 Behold, I am coming like a thief

A' 22:7 Behold, I am coming soon
22:12 Behold, I am coming soon
22:20 Yes, I am coming soon

With John we answer: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"

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