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THE REAL STORY

One of the major American television networks recently ran a short series they called "Revelations." I did not see this series. It ran on Wednesday nights at a time when I was on the way home from gathering with others to read the original true story, and not to watch the fictional teleplay. I did see enough of it, and read enough about it, to know that like many movies it had no similarity to the book on which it claimed to be based. I first knew there was something wrong when the producer said it was based on the biblical book of "Revelations." While the whole Bible is truly a book of revelations, he was referring to the final book of the Bible, whose title (keeping in mind that the names of the books are added by men) is the "Revelation" in the singular.

My second clue was that I didn't see any ancient Romans in the previews. One of the first rules of interpreting prophecy is, if a prophet sets a time for his prophecy to come true then there is no reason to expect it to occur at any other time. When Moses told Pharaoh that the plague of hail would come "tomorrow about this time," (Ex 9:18) there is no reason to suppose that this plague of hail will come in 2006. One may say that the plague of hail that came the following day was the one he was predicting. In like manner, when God tells John (Rev 1:1) that these are things that are "soon to come to pass" there is no reason to believe that it will take over two thousand years for the events to happen. Admittedly, to God "one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day." (2 Pet 3:8) However, when he speaks to man, he speaks in terms man understands. When he tells John something will happen soon, then one can reasonably expect to see Roman soldiers in the vicinity of the events.

Clue three that this fictional play had nothing to do with the book of the Revelation was that one of the main characters was called "The Antichrist." Whenever anyone talks about "THE" Antichrist (with the definite article and the capital "A") he shows that he is not talking about the Bible. I say again, *any time* anyone talks about "The Antichrist" he is not talking about anything from the Bible. In fact, he is showing his ignorance of the Bible. Never once does the book of the Revelation mention Antichrist or antichrist. Granted, the term is unique to John's writings. He never uses it in the Revelation,

though. Further, he says there is no such thing as "the" antichrist. He certainly doesn't predict a future coming of antichrist. Instead he says there are many antichrists, and that they existed even in his own time. . "And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world." (1 John 4:3) "Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time." (1 John 2:18) If anyone is waiting for the antichrist to come, they are about nineteen hundred years too late.

The fourth clue that this work was only loosely based on the book it purported to represent is its selective use of symbols. The book of the Revelation is primarily, if not exclusively, symbolic. Granted, as far as I know this show did not include a literal ten-headed dragon. On the other hand, it did include natural disasters that, in the book, were symbolic of spiritual conflicts. The Revelation is about spiritual things, using symbols in spiritual ways. Choosing which symbols to take literally and which to take figuratively betrays an agenda not based on understanding the book.

These arguments and others can also be used against certain books or series of books. They may be good fiction. They are bad theology. Does this mean people should not view these movies or read these books? Certainly not. When one chooses to view such material, though, he should keep in mind that it has nothing to do with what the Bible says. Read it or view it as one would any other fiction. Just don't fall for the propaganda that it is closely based on the real story.

CONTENTS

The Real Story	1
A Logic of Salvation	2
The Trailblazer	4

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A LOGIC OF SALVATION

Logic is not everybody's favorite subject. Some people just don't think logically. Others don't like logic because it shows them they are wrong. Still others just have trouble following a logically constructed argument. Peter may have been among the latter when he said, "As also in all [Paul's] epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood." (2 Pet 3:16) Some people, therefore, may want to stop reading right now. What follows may not be easy to understand (although I hope to make it easy). There are some who will just refuse to follow the logic, because it brings them to a conclusion they are not willing to accept. For some people, baptism is not a comfortable subject.

Who will be saved?

The first important thing that must be answered is who will be saved from sin. There are three possibilities, only one of which can be correct. If we can show that two choices are impossible, the third must be correct.

The first possibility, and the most popular with some people, is that God will save everyone. Surely a loving God will not let anyone go to hell. Everyone will be punished, but everyone will go to a place where they

Love and justice both demand that God must have a means of choosing who is saved.

can work off their punishment and eventually get to heaven. The problem with this premise is that God says it is just wrong. "And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal." (Matt 25:46) "The rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments ... And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence." (Lk 16:22-23, 26)

Choice two is that nobody will be saved. None of us want to face the possibility of this choice, except those who believe that the soul is annihilated after death. One argument against this is Jesus on the cross. If nobody can be saved, then Jesus died for no reason. But there are also scriptural arguments against this idea. The same passages that showed that not

everybody would be saved also show that some will be. "Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented." (Lk 16:25) "Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." (Matt 25:34)

If it is false that everyone will be saved, and it is false that nobody will be saved, that leaves only one possible option. Some people will be saved and others will not. This option, however, leads to other questions.

If only some people will be saved, either God has a mechanism for determining who will be or he has no way of determining that. In short, either God picks people arbitrarily or he saves based on specific criteria. If God has no means of choosing who is saved, but picks whomever he chooses even before they are born (as is taught by Islam), then none of us have reason for hope. Worse yet, it means that God violates his own attributes. "God is love." (1 Jn 4:8) "And there is no God else beside me; a just God and a Saviour." (Isa 45:21) (We will have to leave it to another time to discuss how God can be loving, and just, and a savior all at once.) Love and justice both demand that God must have a means of choosing who is saved and who is not, and that such a means be known to man. If God is, as Peter says, "not willing that any perish," (2 Pet 3:9) then he would be a strange God indeed to violate his own desires for not apparent reason. Therefore, God must have a way of determining who is saved and who is not.

How does God choose?

If it has been shown that God must have a way to choose who has their sins forgiven and who does not, then there are, again, three possibilities, only one of which can be correct. One option is that man can save himself without any help from God. The opposite extreme is that God does everything, and man has no part in his salvation at all. The third option is that both God and man play some part in a man's salvation.

What if man can save himself? God has given man certain commands. The problem is that man does not keep God's law. That is where sin comes in. Everybody sins. "And so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." (Rom 5:12) If the problem is that we have all sinned, how can we save ourselves? Even if it were possible that a person could decide, after having sinned once, never to sin again, how would that take away the first sin? The fact of sin itself is what makes us lost. One sin alone is sufficient to require a savior. How then could

a man possibly save himself? To be lost means he has already sinned. To save himself he would have to live his entire life without sin. Having sinned, however, prevents him from living without having sinned. Therefore, man can not save himself. And if he could, then God wasted the life of his only begotten son for no reason. On the other hand, “without the shedding of blood there is no remission.” (Heb 9:22) The only way man could save himself would be through the shedding of his own blood. God wants living people to follow him. What sort of bride would a church be that consisted entirely of people who had committed suicide to gain forgiveness? John describes the bride of Christ in glorious terms (Rev 21), not as a rotting corpse.

The more popular concept among some is that God has everything to do with salvation, and man has nothing to do. This, though, is another form of the idea that God saves whomever he will, based on no criteria. If God saves without man doing anything, then why will God not save everyone? Logically, if one can prove an exception to a premise, the premise must be false. If there is any passage that says man has any part in his own salvation, then it becomes clear that God does not do everything himself. There is at least one such passage. “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” (Php 2:12) In a way this is actually a relief. It means that God is not purely arbitrary. It also shows that God doesn’t require us to do something totally unnecessary. That is, I have never understood why people who believe that man has no part in his own salvation take the effort to preach. Jesus told his followers, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” (Matt 28:19-20) If man has no part in his own salvation, then preaching is useless. Why preach to someone who God is not going to save anyway; and why preach to someone he is going to save?

So man has some part to play in his own salvation. How much? One could illustrate the possibilities on a line. God (G) is at one end, and Man (M) is at the other end. Salvation (S) comes somewhere in between. The scale might look like this.



This version shows that God has most to do with salvation, and man very little. I believe it to be the most accurate representation, although the S should almost overlap the M. If so, what is it that man does? Clearly he can’t save himself by his good works. But he must do something to receive the grace of God. Actually, man’s part can be called miniscule. God provided the blood sacrifice. God grants the forgiveness. Man’s part can be phrased simply as accepting God’s grace, or dying to sin, or changing allegiances. Not much at all. But man must act to accept God’s grace.

Fallacies

Logicians talk a lot about fallacies. A fallacy is any assumption or proposition that can be proven wrong. If a conclusion is based on a false assumption, the conclusion is logically false. If a conclusion is clearly false, then the propositions or the assumptions must have been false. You can’t take a wrong road to a right answer.

One such fallacy is the assumption that there are many roads to salvation. If someone wants to believe that baptism is essential to forgiveness of sins, that is fine. But that doesn’t mean that someone who believes that Islam or Scientology can’t get to heaven their way. If the Bible is correct, and if Jesus is who he claims to be, then the assumption is patently false. “Jesus said to him, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except through me.” (Jn 14:6) “Neither is there salvation in any other [than Jesus]: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) The assumption fails from the start.

Many who claim to believe that God does everything, and for man to do anything is salvation by

If man has no part in his own salvation, why do we preach?

works rather than by grace, act more like they believe that man has a part. They will say that you are saved entirely by God’s grace, but you have to pray for that grace. This is admitting that man has to perform an act (some would prefer the word “work”) before God will save you. They will argue until they run out of breath that what God has said in the Bible is man’s part in salvation is a works salvation. At the same time, they argue that the work they require man to do is not a work at all. This ends up with a logical fallacy. Man must pray to receive God’s grace. God’s grace does not require any action on man’s part to be saved. Therefore, prayer must not be an action. (They don’t explain what it is if not an action.) The conclusion becomes so clearly false that the assumptions on which it is based must also be false.

Immersion in water, which the Bible clearly states is essential for forgiveness of sins, is no more nor less a work than prayer is. It is the God-approved means by which man accepts God’s grace. It is the burial of the old man and the resurrection to a free life in Christ (Rom 6). It is the logical conclusion. If God says immersion is that point at which one presents himself in sacrifice to God, then Paul calls it “our logical service.” (Rom 12:1)

THE TRAILBLAZER

Most of us have known trailblazers in our time. Those are the people who “boldly go where no man has gone before.” They step out and lead, without looking back to see if anyone is following. They take risks so others won’t have to. Sometimes they have a goal, at other times just a dream.

If they are going to blaze a trail, then they have to mark it for those who will follow. Sometimes they mark it just so they can find their own way back. Two trailblazers immediately come to my mind. The first is Daniel Boone. He is perhaps the one person most responsible for the spread of white settlers into the interior of what is now the United States. He found a trail west and marked it so that anyone could follow. Generally, Daniel Boone would leave a mark to follow. Often it was painted on a rock. Many times he marked the trail by cutting a large piece of bark from a tree trunk. This would leave the inner wood showing, in a white blaze. As I heard it growing up, this is how the word trailblazer originated. Anyone following Mr. Boone’s path even years later could know they were on the right path.

The other trailblazer I think of met a less glorious fate than Daniel Boone. I don’t know his last name. The fairy tale just calls him Hansel. He and his sister decided to blaze a trail into a deep forest. Even though his father, according to some versions of the story, was a woodcutter, he did not use tools to mark his trail. Instead he used breadcrumbs. Granted, he did not intend for anyone to follow him, but hoped to use them to find his way back if necessary. Unfortunately, birds and beasts eat breadcrumbs. When they did so, Hansel lost his way. As a result he spent some time in a cage and was almost Sunday dinner.

There are two other trailblazers. One of them leads us down the path using breadcrumbs of sin. Pretty soon we have lost our way. Then Satan puts us in a cage and fattens us up for roasting. The trouble is, he is smarter than the witch in “Hansel and Gretl.” He won’t be tricked into taking our place in the oven. The oven was built for him, (Matt 25:41) but we may accompany him into it.

The other trailblazer leads us on a path to a glorious place. Like Daniel Boone, he has blazed the trail so that people can follow him many years later. Jesus promised that he would blaze a trail. Not only that, he said he would be the trail he blazed.

In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life. (Jn 14:2,4-6)

The Greek language doesn’t have a word equivalent to trailblazer. They do, though, have a word for the same concept. Since a trailblazer is a pioneer, one who goes somewhere before anyone else, the Greek equivalent might be the word “forerunner.” This is the word the writer of Hebrews uses to describe Jesus. “Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.” (Heb 6:19-20)

That just leaves a question for you. Do you want to follow a Hansel, or a Daniel Boone?

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