

Revelation

George Smith

It was during a Sunday school class full of my fellow high school students when I made my first free-thought religious decision.

Miz Beatitude Wilman was getting heavy into the story about Samson and Delilah when, without thinking, I exclaimed: “Revelations is just plain dumb and ought to be torn out of every Bible they is. And that includes the St. James version.”

Now, I was what English teachers pleasantly called “a reader.” My recognition came in the sense of, “You know, he’s a mean, little sonofagun, but . . . he IS a reader.” I would read practically anything that had words printed in it or on it.

In addition to reading the ingredients on Mom’s lotions and feminine hygiene products, I read the Bible more than most folks, except preachers, one can suppose. By the time I was twelve, I had read the Bible cover to cover – twice. One was to win an award at the Baptist version of Bible Olympics in a conclave known as the Royal Ambassadors; the other was because I wanted to see if what I read the first time made sense with a second reading.

The Royal Ambassadors youth group was a requirement of small-town Baptist churches, being there was not much to do and going to church meeting and memorizing Bible verses kept a whole passel of us from going to kid prison.

I didn’t read just the sexy part about he-ing and she-ing and murders and bloody battles. Proverbs, Psalms, and Song of Solomon had nice phrasing on occasion and were the only Old Testament books I gave a whit about. I took particular pleasure in finding

discrepancies between various New Testament chapters, i.e., the burning bush scene as told by two different disciples, and the Last Supper seating arrangement mix-up in Matthew and Mark, which could have easily been eliminated with name cards.

I read Revelations one summer and was so shocked, I read the sucker again. Without a doubt, that chapter was a biblical afterthought. In my mind, it was the Scary Clown chapter of what was otherwise a pretty good book. After the second scan-through, I thought: Why? Why is it in the Bible, and if it's got to be there, why isn't it in the Old Testament? That's were most of the faith's worry-wart words found a home.

And so, based on the Revelations stories, I made my declaration with conviction that morning at Sunday school.

Miz Beatitude Wilman stopped talking about Samson's shorn locks and looked at me. If "chagrin" could be a face, she had it.

"Wha-what?"

I repeated the statement word for word, adding, "Who ever wrote it is a dadgum, slap-dab idiot and if it's got to stay in, then it needs to be moved up a couple of hundred pages somewhere south of Deuteronomy."

Miz Willman gave a squeak, a sound akin to a mouse that got caught under a rocking chair runner. "Why, why, why . . . that's blasphemy!" She said the word like a cuss word, but I couldn't quickly conjure up a single good cuss word that had three syllables. Most of the good ones jumped from one syllable to four.

Being 15 and on a patented rant, I bowed up. "When's the last time you read it? I read it this week and it makes no sense for it to be in the New Testament. It should be tossed out or moved up there with the Old Testament where the hell and firestone is."

Without saying another word, she streaked out of the room.

“Why’d you go and say that for?” Titus Mitchell asked. “She was just getting to the good Samson and Delilah part, where she comes in and ‘lays’ with him. That’s my favorite part.”

“Have you read Revelations?”

He shook his head.

“Then shut up!”

He squeaked and slapped hand muffs over his ears. The entire class leaned back from me. Telling someone to shut up in church was expected to draw a vengeful lightning bolt.

I was trying to explain my position to my mortified classmates – “If you read it, you’ll see what I’m talking about. Revelations is a dumb, dumb book.” Not getting turned into a fried crispy critter with my attitude and pronouncements emboldened me.

The teacher charged through the door, pulling the preacher in her wake, using his tie as a come-along. Reverend Josiah Ben Beecham didn’t look happy. He didn’t look particularly mad either. He looked like he wanted to be anywhere else but in that Sunday school room.

Miz Willman’s face was red, her neck and forehead veins pounded, saliva dripped from the right side of her mouth. She pointed an arthritic pointer finger at the space between my eyes and screeched: “Tell Reverend Beecham what you said! Telllllll himmmmm!”

All the other kids were looking for an escape route in case she exploded.

“What did I say? I just mentioned casually that Revelations is not my favorite book of the Bible and that, in my opinion, it could easily be a part of the Old Testament.”

Her red face flushed purple. “Liar! Blasphemer!” she screamed, propelling a wad of gooey spit on my new pants. She turned on the reverend. “Well?” Except it wasn’t a normal “Well?” This “well” came with four syllables: “We-aa-ll-ll?”

The preacher wrinkled his face up like he smelled a dead rat under the pulpit. He pointed at me and crooked a finger. “Get up and come with me.”

He turned to Miz Willman. “Beatitude, let me handle this. I know exactly what to do,” he said, while looking like he didn’t have a clue.

I thought he was going to take me to his office and beat the living devil right out of me. He could, you know. Preachers and school principals could beat just about anybody but girls in the days before beatings were outlawed for some strange reason or another. Instead he led me out the side door of the church, and around back to his car, a 1956 Ford Fairlaine. Black and white with contrasting fender skirts, it had curb feelers and a miniature fuzzy, purple-and-gold Bible hanging from the rearview mirror.

Motioning me to go to the passenger’s side, he got in, cranked up the car he called “Leviticus” and drove out of the grass parking lot.

Oh, God! I thought. He’s taking me to Avery Lake and going to drown me and make up a story about how I died during a baptizing practice!

He reached under his seat and I grabbed the door handle, ready to throw myself from the car if he came out with a gun, knife, or tire iron. When it emerged from the shadowy floorboard area, his hand held a partially crushed pack of Pall Malls. “Punch in the lighter, will ya?” he asked off-handily as he popped one cigarette out with a practiced

twirly-wrist maneuver. He popped it in his mouth, retrieved the ready lighter, lit the cigarette, inhaled deeply, held the smoke deep in his lungs, and exhaled a bilious cloud of blue-gray smoke. It hung on the ceiling like a cloudy apocalypse.

Two blocks later he turned onto Highway 82. “Revelations is not my favorite book of the Bible either. I agree with you about it being stuck in the Old Testament or altogether rejected.”

He said other stuff about how the Bible must be taken in its entirety and how for everything there is a season blah-blah-blah and how some people get comfort from parts of Revelations although he personally didn’t understand that. But by that time I had quit listening.

I remember the important part: The preacher agreed with me.

I didn’t expect him to proclaim that fact from the pulpit. Then, or ever.

And, he did not disappoint me.

He drove back to the church, drove around back and parked. As I started to get out, he put his hand on my shoulder. “Please try to not get on Miz Willman’s single nerve. She might have a heart attack and before she died, I’ll have to listen to her talk about God saving a seat for her on the Train to Heaven. If you promise not to upset her I won’t preach a single sermon on the evils of premarital sex for a whole year.”

Reverend Beecham should’ve been in sales.