

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 207

Revelation 4-5 with Dr. Alan Bandy

March 17, 2018

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Episode Summary

Revelation 4-5 with its vision of God's throne room and the 24 elders has long fascinated Bible students. While the heavenly throne is obvious to the scene, the actual setting often escapes attention. In accord with various divine council scenes in the Old Testament, the throne room of God is also where God holds council. Many OT council meetings are judicial in nature. A trial is held to assess loyalty to God's covenants. That trial either leads to God's vindication of the defendant or the dispensing of judgment for the guilty. In this episode we have a conversation with Dr. Alan Bandy who argued in his dissertation that Revelation 4-5 was a divine council scene informed by the covenant lawsuit motif of the Old Testament. Even further, Dr. Bandy believes that the book of Revelation as a whole is informed by the covenant lawsuit idea so that Christians and the whole world stand trial before God's heavenly council with Jesus as the presiding judge.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 207: Revelation 4 and 5 with Dr. Alan Bandy. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. How are you doing, Sir?

MH: Very good, very good. And believe it or not, we're going to do some eschatology stuff today. Shocking—it's shocking! People may want to sit down—they're driving off the road right now, like they just can't believe it.

TS: Well, Mike, it's only about the end of the world. Kind of a big deal—kind of an important topic. A lot of people are interested. It's only the end of the world, Mike!

MH: [laughs] OK. We've got to do something here sometime, so why not today?

TS: Mike, before we get started with the interview here, I just wanted to point out that Dr. Bandy's internet wasn't the greatest, so his sound quality suffered a little bit, so what might help our listeners to get through the interview is to pretend that he's a robot.

MH: [laughs] Alright, maybe that'll help. He is not a robot, but, hey, if it helps, go with it.

Well, I'm really excited to have Dr. Alan Bandy with us. Alan's specialty is the book of Revelation, so I can no longer be accused of avoiding eschatology [laughing] here on the podcast. I really wanted to have Alan on because... It'll become evident as we go through, but just to tease before I ask him to introduce himself, what he does with Revelation 4 and 5 has a relationship to the Divine Council, which is the sweet spot in my own academic interest and in a lot of the stuff that we end up talking about here on the podcast. So without further ado, Alan, could you introduce yourself to our podcast audience? Just your background and where you went to school, your degrees, where you're teaching—that sort of thing.

AB: Sure. My name is Alan Bandy and I was born and raised in the Washington, D.C., area in Maryland. I became a believer around the age of 17, delivered from kind of a... I was a punk rocker, had a Mohawk and all that. And God delivered me and called me into ministry. I went to a little Baptist Bible college in Kentucky called Clear Creek for my undergrad and then from there went to another small seminary in Memphis, TN, called Mid-America, and then from there I did my Ph.D. in New Testament at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in North Carolina. And so I've been a pastor and I've been on staff in church really since the early '90s and currently teach at Oklahoma Baptist University. I teach New Testament and Greek, and have continued to write on Revelation. I guess my interest there was piqued because of its... I think the challenge of it, you know? It's an unusual book. But I think it's a beautiful culmination of scripture. I can spend the rest of my life studying it and I don't think I'll ever exhaust it or fully master it. So that's where I am. And I have a wife and five kids here in Oklahoma with me, and we just live life and enjoy God's grace.

MH: That's great. Well, your dissertation—you did it under Kostenberger, right?

AB: That's correct, yes.

MH: Your dissertation was entitled "The Prophetic Lawsuit in the Book of Revelation: (colon—because you have to have a subtitle for dissertations [laughs]) An Analysis of the Lawsuit Motif in Revelation with Reference to the Use of the Old Testament," and that was in 2007. Now you argue (and I'm going to pull out some quotes here from little snippets of it) that "the book of Revelation exhibits a lawsuit motif in which Christians and the world stand trial before God's court with Jesus as the presiding judge." You also argue that it's not just

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Revelation 4 and 5 that is affected by what we're calling the covenant lawsuit motif. (We're going to define that in a moment.) God's throne room is God's courtroom as well. That's where his council is and where decisions are made and decrees are handed out, so on and so forth. This audience would be familiar with that, but in case we have someone new, that's what we're angling for—the throne room of God as a lawsuit, the scene of a trial, that kind of thing. You also argue that it's not just Revelation 4 and 5, but every section of the book of Revelation is somehow impacted by this motif—this lawsuit or trial kind of setting. And for those in the audience who are used to Divine Council stuff, I'm not going to read the whole quote, but I'll read just part of this so that you know that Alan is familiar with what we do. My work is Old Testament, where you basically run into the Divine Council in all sorts of places. He writes here on page 43 in his dissertation... I think you're quoting Davis' dissertation here. Davis observes:

Concerning the role of the council he observes, "An examination of the activities of the members of the divine council reveals that they fulfill several different functions, including some specific roles. They surround the head of the council as attendants (1 Kgs 22:19; Ezek 1:12-14, 20-21; Dan 7:10). They support the divine throne for the head of the council (2 Sam 22:11; Ps 18:10[11]; 80:1[2]; Ezek 1:26; 10:1). They praise and adore the head of the council (Job 38:7; Ps 29:1-2; 89:5[6]; 103:20; 148:2, 5; Isa 6:3). They are warriors who fight the battles for Yahweh (Gen 32:2; Deut 33:2; Judg 5:20; Isa 13:3-5; Joel 3[4]: 11; Zech 14:5). They participate in the council proceedings (1 Kgs 22:20; Isa 6:8) and give council (Isa 44:26). They are to promote justice among peoples (Ps 82:2-4) and serve as guardians or watchers (Dan 4:13[10], 17[14], 23[20]).

Now anyone who's hearing that knows that Alan is a scholar who takes this material seriously. We're not going to be running off into, "These are just the Jewish elders that are somehow ruling from the skies," that sort of stuff. He pays serious attention to Divine Council/divine courtroom settings in the Old Testament for his own work in Revelation 4 and 5. Of that he says two more short quotes. He says on page 45:

The heavenly court scene of Revelation 4-5, depicting a divine council session, provides the key element in the overall portrayal of divine judgment and covenant fulfillment.

And then on the next page, he adds:

The council determines the worthiness of the Lamb to redeem his righteous followers who are in covenant relationship and corporate solidarity with him.

With that as a backdrop, let's just start in Revelation 4 and 5 and start fundamentally with what is... Can you explain to the audience, what is the prophetic lawsuit—the covenant lawsuit—motif?

AB: Yeah. Well, it's interesting that the genesis of that concept for me started with a paper I wrote (a Ph.D. seminar paper) on witness terminology in the book of Revelation. And I came across a work by a scholar by the name of Allison Trites who argues that *μαρτυρέω* and all the language of witness terminology always comes from a law court. And I noticed that within the book of Revelation, witness terminology occurs quite frequently. Yet it also seems to be, for example, with Antipas in Pergamum... He calls them "my faithful witnesses who did not deny his name," so in a sense, there's a legal proceeding for the believers. So there's a sense in which they're being on trial and they're being faithful to Christ, and as a result, they're being killed.

And so initially, I just saw it in a few places. But then as I began to study it, I began to see the theme of justice is really what's driving it—that God's judgment is not arbitrary, nor is it just purely a motive. There's a basis in righteous standards of justice by which he renders his wrath upon Earth. And so within that, I coupled it with a work by Andrew Lincoln on the gospel of John called *Truth on Trial*, in which there's a large, overarching theme that is kind of a cosmic courtroom setting. So in the first three chapters with the churches, it's Jesus examining the churches, and then from 4 to 19 and 20, you have this trial of the nations in which, I believe, the judgments are incremental—designed to provoke repentance, but also to expose guilt, so that ultimately when Babylon the Great... When humanity is judged and judgment is rendered, the charge leveled against it is idolatry. So they worshipped the false gods, not the one true creator God, and they killed his people—the saints. "For the blood of the saints was found in her," that is, Babylon. And so the lawsuit motif, as I see it, drawing from Old Testament prophets using covenantal lawsuit language and imagery, is really designed to show that the judgment that's taking place is actually in a fair and just trial, and so that when he pours out his final wrath, he's right and just to do so. And so that's kind of how it all fits together. And so I see it from beginning to end, even if not every verse and chapter has something directly related to it.

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MH: It's really interesting that you have Revelation 2 toward the end and Revelation 3 toward the end—this whole idea of believers who overcome being put over the nations. In my book, *Unseen Realm* (and of course I'm certainly not alone, I'm just drawing on what other people do), the whole notion that believers are the reconstituted council. So going by your framework, which you just articulated there, you essentially have the witnesses being examined who are believers (the Church) early on, and it shifts to the nations. And when you get the end, you have the individual believers who are put over the nations. They're the ones who emerge from the trial, so to speak, vindicated. And that makes real sense with Paul when Paul talks about (1 Corinthians 6:3) "Don't you know that you're going to judge angels?" They have the right—the authority—to essentially render judgment negatively on the ones they displace—the fallen, rebellious Sons of God and all that—and that's because they've been tried. They have been tried and found wanting. That's really interesting.

AB: Yeah, and speaking of that theme of vindication... I think that's what the Resurrection and whatever the thousand year reign is. I think it is vindication so that its backgrounds play into this. I think that it's showing how Christians in the Roman Empire were not guaranteed a fair trial. There's a miscarriage of justice, if you will, in which judges are sentencing them to death. And so one of the passages I gravitate to that's kind of central is Revelation 6:9-11, with the beheaded souls before the altar, and they cry out, "How long until you avenge us—until you vindicate us, O Lord?" And so they're told, "Wait a little bit longer until the rest of your brothers and sisters are brought in." And so that the visionary, the two witnesses, and all the other what I call interludes (the 144,000 and so forth) are all depicting the Church and faithful witness to the nations. But what Revelation has is a kind of a reversal theme. So those who are judged by earthly judges will become the judges of those who judged them, kind of having that ultimate reversal and putting everything to rights that was gone wrong in the world.

MH : Yeah. So how do you see... Take us through Revelation 4 and 5, because this is the passage everybody's going to think of. You've got the 24 elders... If this is judicial context reaching back into the Old Testament, you've got not only the two or three witnesses idea, but just the elders generally—that kind of function. So what are the points of connection (or the *not* points of connection) back into the Old Testament? How do you take this and walk us through that scene in Revelation 4 and 5?

AB: Great question. Revelation 4 and 5... I spent just a lot of time there and continue to go back because I find it so foundational. So people divide Revelation up differently, but I divide it into four visions marked by the phrase "in the spirit." This phrase only occurs four times: John 1:8-9 (when he's on Patmos), then in chapter 4:1-2, he's in the spirit but he's taken to the throne room. Chapters 4-16 is then all one visionary unit. And then in chapter 17, he's in the spirit (one of the elders shows him the great harlot Babylon), and then in chapter 19, one of the elders shows him the New Jerusalem coming down as a bride. So I see four visionary units. And then the longest and most central is 4-16. So when I see chapters 4 and 5, I connect them all the way through to the end of chapter 16 so that the vantage point of John is all coming from that heavenly throne room scene (so the series of sevens and everything else stemming from that).

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So what we have then is a courtroom—a heavenly throne room—vision that extends through all of those judgments. So the introduction of the one seated on the throne in chapter 4, followed by the slain yet standing Lamb in chapter 5 who is worthy to take the scroll... All of those themes are absolutely significant: one, for establishing the worthiness of God as judge, but more importantly, of Christ. So you have this divine council scene with the thrones—the big throne and then other thrones, reminiscent of Daniel 7. And so I believe all of this is... and then, what is it, 1 Kings 19:22 or 22:19?

MH: 22:19.

AB: With Micaiah the prophet who sees the throne and the other thrones, and God's saying basically, "How am I going to cause this to happen?" And one says, "I'll do this," and another says, "I'll do that." I think that what you find in the prophets (both written prophets as well as verbal prophet or non-writing prophets) this common scene evoking that when God's going to render judgment, he gathers his council together. And that council then serves not so much as an advisory board, but those who are participants as representatives—as heavenly beings of sorts who partake in the playing out of whatever follows.

MH: Yeah, and that's typically the way I talk about it, too. God doesn't need a council. It's not like he needs help, but he likes to have his intelligent imagers participate with him in both carrying out decrees and also letting them participate in making some decisions that are in concert with that. Nobody's autonomous. It's not like you have.... Like in Daniel 4, where the Watcher says to Nebuchadnezzar, "This is by decree of the Watchers." Well that's followed a few verses later by saying, "This is by decree of the Most High." Nobody's going rogue here and deciding, "We'll tell God later and then he'll rubber-stamp it for us." [laughs] You don't have any sense of that. It's just... I like "participation." That just seems to be a good word.

AB: And look at the verbs. When God does something, it's in the passive. "It was given to them to do this. It was given." And you almost see not so much of a removal of God, but it's like God decrees, and then these beings or these other angels or these other messengers then carry out what had been decreed.

MH: "Go get it done."

AB: Exactly. And so of particular interest are the 24 thrones. So you'll find, say, in the Old Testament passages like Daniel and Kings (those are the two primary ones I would go to), there are thrones. So there's the throne of God and then there are other thrones. But in Revelation is the only place where you find a specified number: four. And then when compared with other apocalypses (Jewish apocalypses in particular), you don't... The 24 elders are unique to the book of Revelation. It's not found anywhere else. So there's been a lot of ink spilled on "Who are these 24 elders? What are they?" Because they're the only beings allowed to be seated on thrones in the presence of God. And they're usually on their faces. So they're not even seated half the time. But the way they're dressed... They're wearing white, they have crowns on their heads. So this speaks of something that's exalted, yet at the same time, Revelation's not shy about using "angels" when it's denoted an angel. So there's questions of whether or not... Different scholars will argue whether they're angels or they're saints, the 12 patriarchs, the 12 apostles, or they're astral zodiac star gods. There's a number of theories out there, but I tend to lean toward a view that doesn't

necessarily try to put a name on them. So in other words, I think they're angelic heavenly beings of some sort. But the term "elder" connects it, then, to those who are leaders in Israel—the elders at the gate, the 70 elders. There's arguments of whether or not they composed a lesser Sanhedrin of 24 or they correspond to the 24 courses of Greece in I Chronicles and II Chronicles.

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MH: Did you come across any... I don't know how I want to put this... Was there any helpful trajectory extending from Isaiah 24, specifically verse 23, when you have, "Yahweh, the Lord of hosts reigns on Mount Zion in Jerusalem his glory will be 'before his elders;" and you've got sun and moon terminology there. It's not the same thing that you get in Psalm 89, where Mullen would argue that the witness in the clouds there is a member of the council, and so on and so forth. But I'm just wondering, did you find any kind of helpful use of that, maybe, in Second Temple stuff?

AB: Yeah, you know, that's something that I'm going to have to go back and revisit, because I don't recall immediately whether or not I made that connection with Isaiah, but that would be incredibly helpful, especially with the sun and the moon and the...

MH: Yeah, because you don't... It doesn't sound like any kind of quotation, and I don't even know if it's an allusion.

AB: Yeah, that's exactly right. Most of the scholarship will focus on things that they can determine as a clear allusion or some sort of possible allusion based on the similarities. But what's interesting about that is within apocalyptic writings... So I kind of took the track from Dead Sea Scrolls and others that saw them as some sort of kind of Sanhedrin, which was really the modern equivalent of the elders of Israel—the 70. So you had your lesser Sanhedrin, which is kind of like a legal body. But within the Jewish apocalyptic literature, and even within rabbinic writings, there's this dualism. I think it's in the Talmud that they said that nobody serves on the Sanhedrin *below* unless he serves on the Sanhedrin *above*. And so the language of "below and above" is used a lot, so that what is happening say, in the temple—in the priesthood, in leadership—is then mirrored, and it's a mirror of what's happening in heaven... that there's kind of this parallel there. So that as it is below, so it is above. So that when you have at least 24 elders, wherever they are, I believe that they *represent* the saints. They're kind of like the representative body like a Sanhedrin, with legal connotations.

MH: You mentioned, the "as in heaven, so below"... Obviously in Revelation 4, you've got the constellation imagery drawn from Ezekiel 1, which takes you into the Merkava arena, which can get real crazy pretty quickly. [laughs] But that's significant, because at Qumran, the whole priesthood separates from the Jerusalem priesthood because, "Well, we want to use the mathematical calendar, not that crazy calendar you have to adjust every now and then," and then they're off doing their thing in the wilderness. They're priests without a temple, but

they're going through all the motions, but those are priests. My point is that all of that mimicking tends to get tied to "priest" language as opposed to "elder" language. So you have to wonder, is Revelation merging that? Because Revelation merges a lot of stuff.

AB: It is, yeah.

MH: Is this a merger, or should we not assume it's merging? Should we just talk about elders and not talk about the priestly stuff? That's difficult.

AB: Well, you definitely get that merging/mixing/slicing-and-dicing-and-reconstructing in Revelation, where there's never really an exact parallel. I mean, even the visions from Zechariah of the olive tree and the lampstand is changed, so it's not exactly one-to-one correspondence. So it is possible, because you do have priestly imagery ascribed to the elders in Revelation because they're functioning in a mediatory fashion. They're also guiding John through the vision. They're interceding. So there are a lot of interesting things that are leading in the worship in heaven...

MH: They wear the white garments, yeah.

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AB: They wear the garments. They also connect with the saints, though. So for example, in Revelation 19, when the saints are given white garments (which is their righteous deeds) and when believers are pictured wearing white and having crowns... And so the language of the elders seems to also reflect the language of God's people and their redeemed, glorified state, which would suggest that... This is why I call them representatives. So then the four living creatures (whom I think are also council representatives)... I think they represent the created order. So you have four, which is often used for the Earth—North, South, East, and West. But then you have the ox, and the eagle, and the man, and the lion, which really represent classes of created animals: flying animals like the eagles, domesticated animals like the ox, wild animals like the lion, and then, obviously, humans as the crowning achievement of God. So what I would argue is the four living creatures, whatever they are, are representatives of the created order. So I kind of take a read on the four living creatures and 24 elders as though as *both* the divine council as representing before the throne all of creation, and God's people specifically through the 24 elders.

MH: Hmm. How do you think... Tell us what you do with that as you move into the... You've got the repetitive cycles. I shouldn't predispose the discussion by using recapitulation language. [laughter] You've got the sequence of sevens... OK, let's put it that way—we'll predispose it the other way. You've got this seven stuff going on in Revelation 6-16—the bowls and the trumpets and whatnot. So how does Revelation 4 and 5, when viewed as this trial scene or this court scene, affect how we look at those things?

AB: Right. So I think chapter 5 becomes significant, because whatever that seventh seal scroll is... I's interesting, based out of a cache of scrolls found in a trash pile in Egypt, they found a scroll with seven seals on it. And as they broke the seals and unrolled it, they unrolled it seven times. It was blank, and on the seventh roll, there was script. And it ended up being a legal document. It ended up being a... I think a last will and testament of sorts.

MH: That's interesting.

AB: It *is* interesting. So there's a lot of speculation. What is this seven-seal scroll? My short answer is, it's the scroll of God's judgment. Some see this as kind of Jesus taking the inheritance—the rights as king. It's an enthronement scene. Whatever it is, it's an enthronement scene in which the Lamb is stepping forward and then given the right (and I think it does parallel Daniel's vision at night, where the Son of Man approaches the Ancient of Days and is given dominion over the nations)... So I think he's stepping up as judge. And then with the seals, you have the seals being broken in a consecutive manner, but it's broken down into a pattern: four and three. So there's the four horsemen and then there's three additional seals. And then the last one culminates with these shakings of heaven—these signs and wonders, if you will. The rocks and “please fall on us,”—“the wrath of the Lamb has come.” It's kind of a proleptic of the final judgment. But you would expect that with the breaking of the seals of the scroll... You would expect the contents of the scroll to be revealed, but instead of the contents of the scroll being revealed, you have seven angels with seven trumpets making announcements [laughs]—sounding forth their trumpets. So I think that the trumpets kind of recapitulate, because you're dealing with the same breakdown of four and three: four things affecting creation (so the four horsemen ravaging the earth), and with the trumpets, you have the plants and the seas being damaged, but to a greater extent. And then the seventh trump sounds and once again, you would expect something. There's a culmination—there's celebration, there's worship in heaven. The nations of this world have become the nations of our Lord and he will reign forever and ever. So there's this kind of expectation of the final judgment being realized.

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But then we get the bowls! What you get in between the bowls of chapter 16 that are filled with the wine of God's wrath, which is the actual judgment being poured out, you have this interlude of 10 and 11 of the angel—this giant angel that has the same kind of description as Christ, but yet distinct from Christ. And in his hand is a little tiny scroll, and it's tiny because his hand is so big. He's straddling earth and sea. And John eats the scroll, and he's told, “You must prophesy again against many nations and kings and peoples,” and so forth. Some then argue that the scroll that John eats is the same scroll that the Lamb had broken the seals on.

MH: So do you... Some of those things really sound... I hate to put it this way, but they sound fairly obviously like they call for recapitulation. I mean, you use

the word “recapitulation,” but I mean, it just seems that (like you said) this series of things happens to set up this expectation, and it sort of repeats again, and it happens again. So how... I don't spend a whole lot of time in Revelation, but this has me wondering, do people not just see that? I mean, if they want to see the sevens as a linear chronology, how do you get around that?

AB: Yeah, I struggle. And of all people, I think of Robert Thomas' commentary. He argues for a telescopic recapitulation and I think that's probably closest to the way I see it unfolding. So I do see the repetition, both in terms of the focus, as well as even the wording, yet you have an intensification. But I also think there's something different taking place. So I argue that they're not so much a straight “just the same thing, different perspective.” I think there's a little bit of a progression there. So it's more like instead of just circling overhead, it's kind of moving a little bit forward, and so I would argue that each of the last element contains the final. For example, the seventh seal introduces the seven trumpets. The seventh trumpet introduces the seven bowls. And that with the seven bowls, the wrath of God is complete. So I don't see it in a straight, linear, chronological reading. I do see recapitulation, but I see progression in that as well. So it seems to be moving forward, but yet the final element—the blowing of the trumpet—launches the wrath of God being realized. So people try to put this on a timeline. They try to say, “3 ½ years, it's like this.” I don't try to see it in a timeline. I don't think that the amount of years is even a focus.

MH: I noticed in your dissertation, you didn't have Clarence Larkin-esque...

[laughter]

AB: No, I... [laughter]

MH: Maybe you took those out when you bound it. [laughter]

AB: I have presented a lot of papers at different academic conferences where I take much more of a strong critique of those readings, because I don't see Revelation from beginning to end in a straight, chronological fashion. I see it more like a tapestry and you see the big picture, but then all the parts are interrelated, and...

MH: You could be looking at one thing and the linear approach makes sense there, and then you look at something else, and “Oh, I can see repetition here.” I don't know why it has to be one or the other.

AB: Well, part of this is that people want to fit it into a nice scheme where they can have it all mapped out and figure out exactly what's going to happen at what point, and I don't think Revelation really allows for that. I even think the enumeration of the sevens is seven corresponding to the seven days of creation and perfection. They are also designed to show that there's a process that's

taking place. And I argue that they're investigative judgments, because they all culminate in chapter 6 with the breaking of the seventh seal. There's no repentance. There's the wrath of the one "who sits on the throne and the Lamb has come—who can stand?" And they're hiding and calling for the rocks to crush them. Rather than turning to them, they're trying to escape it. Then with the seventh trumpet, you find this similar thing, "They did not repent from their evil works." And then when it comes to the bowls, the same thing. They curse God. They gnaw their tongues and curse God, and they refuse to repent and let go of their practices. So in a way, these judgments, I think, are designed to, in an incremental fashion, unleash the judgment of God to provoke repentance, and their lack of repentance is the final evidence that when he judges them, they deserve it.

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MH: I was just going to ask you how the witness and the lawsuit motif works in that, but you kind of just answered that. That becomes the testimony brought against... But I think for the sake of the audience, this is going to be new thinking. Because while on the one hand, somebody could be listening to this and, "Oh, yeah, I've read Revelation a few times and I can pick up what he's saying, and I remember the terms," and whatnot, but to actually frame this as intentionally laying out evidence (let's say it that way)... laying out evidence while the court watches and the judge watches—just that whole approach, it's really useful to frame what it is that's going on. And if you think about it as a court scene, not every court case operates the same way. Not all of it is straight linear chronology in terms of the presentation of evidence. Sometimes you need to do that. Other times, it's, "Well, we have this point of data, and to make the case even harder, here's this again, and let's up the ante." You give evidential points of the same kind to drive home the same point. And just to make the case airtight, you have that going on, too.

AB: And we see this even in the Old Testament, when God's bringing judgments against... And we also see the same pattern. If you read Isaiah (and this really struck me when I worked through it in Jeremiah then), you have oracles against Israel or Judah where they've sinned. They've turned after other gods. They've done wicked, and God's like, "Repent. Otherwise, I'm going to judge you." And those are often framed within a law court setting—the covenant lawsuit. But then, after you find these passages where he's speaking against his people, he then turns and says, "Now Babylon I'm going to judge because of what they've done to you. And Egypt—I'm going to do this to them." And he goes in a catalog of the nations [inaudible] Israel, and basically saying, "Because they hurt my people, and they work with their idols, I'm going to judge them." And then in Isaiah in particular, you have the oracles against Israel and Judah, the oracles against the nations, and then you have that last section of Isaiah 55-66 of "here's the new heavens and the new Earth." So I argue that there's a pattern: oracles against God's people (covenantal lawsuit), oracles against the nations (which are also framed in legal justice language), and then oracles of salvation depicting what God's deliverance and vindication will look like for his faithful people.

MH: I'm glad you mention that, because I was going to pull out the word "covenant" from covenant lawsuit and ask you, "What covenant are we talking about here?" Because you've got Christians, you've got the nations... So I'm glad you just went through that quickly, because there is a bit of a differentiation here. When it comes to the "God's people" element (let's just put it that way), can you give us a quick way to think about the covenantal aspect there? In other words, you have the New Testament... You've got the new covenant in Jesus' blood, which if you go back to Jeremiah 31, you get the covenant language. Is that what we're talking about—this loyalty to Jesus? What I'm hearing makes me think that.

AB: Yeah.

MH: Or is it something else?

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AB: Yeah, I've really struggled with this, and I've had other friends and scholars working on this as well. We've discussed it. And there's not agreement. There are some people who see this in reference to Israel, and Israel as God's covenant people and the Sinaitic covenant. And even the plagues... Greg Beale does a good job with this in his commentary where he talks about with the seals and the things that are happening—invasion of the land, and plague, and going to covenant curses of Leviticus. I believe it's Leviticus 26 where you have, "If you don't repent, I'm going to send wild beasts to attack you and the sword to come and get you and your women are not going to bear children," and all these other things. We see the same type of language of covenant consequences for being unfaithful. But I would argue that because he clearly is writing to those who are believers in Jesus—the Churches... It's a little bit novel—it hasn't picked up so I don't know if I'm just being idiosyncratic here, but I call them "new covenant communities." In other words, that in Christ, the new covenant, they are now the people who belong to Jesus marked out by the Spirit—bathed in Christ unto his death and resurrection. So it's a different focus. It's not the only one that's so much straight off involving things dealing with Israel's covenant, but what it means to be the people of God in a pagan society.

MH: You might get actually some help there by the 666, because that's "bearing the name." "They bear the mark." You take that language, and that goes right back to the Ten Commandments. It's *nasa*—bearing the name of the Lord in vain. You have the people of God there, but then you have Paul make the comment about those who name the name of Christ, "depart from iniquity." It's representation—it's imagery. So we as believers are supposed to bear the name of Christ, which means we're supposed to image Christ. And Christ was the perfect imager of God, so it takes you right back to the Covenant God anyway—the God of the Old Testament. So there's no need to split that hair. "Is it Israel or is it Christians?" No, it's the people who have chosen to align themselves with the true God, who is incarnate in Christ. It's six of one, half a dozen of the other.

AB: And you have two groups of marked people. So you have those that take the mark of the beast, and they're clearly the objects of wrath. They're clearly the ones that are unfaithful and opposed to God. But they do also have, like Jesus promises to the church at Philadelphia... The ones who are faithful—the overcomers—he will make them pillars in the New Jerusalem with the name of God written on their forehead.

MH: Mm hmm. There you go. Yeah.

AB: And then you also have the 144,000 (however one wants to interpret that), and it says, "The seal of God is on their forehead." So you seem to have these two groups of kind of tattooed people, if you will—those who belong to Yahweh or Christ and those who belong to the beast. Those who belong to the Lamb and those who belong to the beast. And the beast is really just a grotesque parody of the Lamb. So yeah, I think that's intentional to show that. So I think the messages to the churches, then, are essentially lawsuit oracles. "People, you're doing this—great. Keep it up. Be faithful, overcome, and here's your reward." But he also finds problems. "Hey, you tolerate these people. You do this. You've left your first love. Repent; otherwise, I'm going to come and deal with you. I'm going to remove your lampstand. I'm going to strike that prophetess dead. I'm going to do this. I'm going to... You're going to be found wanting when I show up. I'm standing outside of the door knocking and you're not letting me in to your fellowship." You have all kinds of... I think that's kind of the covenant lawsuit that you find in Hosea and Micah and other places in the Old Testament where God's bringing charges against his people. It's just balanced positive and negative there.

MH: Mm hmm. Tell us a little bit about the trial, the sentencing, and the judgment of Babylon. You've got Revelation 17 on in to chapter 21. How does this work with Babylon?

45:00

AB: Right. So Babylon's an interesting image. So kind of pulling out the narrative of Israel's history, Babylon is that empire that held God's people in exile. They were removed from their temple. They were oppressed. They were in exile. And you see the same imagery of... John's in exile writing to his brothers and sisters in Christ who are living under the oppression of the Roman empire. And in very real ways, they're living as strangers and aliens in their hometowns, as if they're in exile. Well, Babylon is personified as a prostitute who leads the entire nations and all the kings of the Earth astray with her fornications. And the only weapon that's listed... Well, it tells us (I think it's in chapter 18) that her cup is the blood of the saints, with which she has made the nations drunk. And so it's a parody. It's a way of saying... I would argue—Roman empire, but more broadly all of human civilization opposed to God. So I think maybe in John's day, it would have been Rome, but the thing is that he's pulling in some of Daniel's vision of the four kingdoms. Do you know what I'm talking about? The statue...

MH: Mm hmm, yeah. In Daniel.

AB: The different kingdoms. He uses the language to describe the beast the very same way, drawing from Daniel's vision of the statue. Except it's not one kingdom; it's all mixed together. You can't identify it with Greece or with the historical Babylon or Rome. It's almost like that's intentional as a way of saying it's a combination of all of these kingdoms that have oppressed God's people.

So I believe she represents the power of the kingdoms of this world in opposition—in league with the beast and the dragon. She sits atop the beast. She's riding it. And so she's leading the nations astray, seducing them with wealth and riches and intoxicating them with her ways, which ultimately results in the slaughter of God's people. And if you go back to chapter 6:9, you have these souls that have been beheaded because they were faithful to the Lamb and they cry out, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until you avenge our blood?" And I call them the star witnesses. They're the ones—the plaintiffs—in the lawsuit case. They're the ones saying to a holy, just God, "When is there going to be justice for what's happened to us?" And his answer is, "You've got to wait, because there's going to be more, but when the full number comes in, then I will bring it." And so what you have is, for example, when the bowls are poured out, the third angel pours out his bowl on the fresh waters and they turn to blood, and an angel says, "You are holy and just because you have given them blood to drink because they have the blood of the saints and the prophets were found in her. (I'm mixing some things there.) But then a voice from the altar comes and says, "Yes, holy and true!" and it comes from under the altar in heaven. So the witnesses are going, "Yes, you're giving them blood to drink because our blood was shed." And then when Babylon is judged, it said, "Give her back a double portion of the cup of what she has poured out because she has killed my people." So the number one reason why God brings such a severe judgment is because the blood of his people has been spilled out.

Now is this all of the people who have been slain from Abel all the way to whoever will be in the future martyred for Christ? I don't know. But I do think that God deals with the blood of his people and his image-bearers with seriousness, and because they shed that blood, he brings his judgment. And so the judgment Babylon is seen, I think, as an expanded commentary on the wrath of God poured out in the bowl judgments.

MH: Yeah, it wouldn't make a whole lot of sense... Going back to some earlier points about we're dealing here with the people of God (broadly speaking). Not just Old Testament Israel—not just Gentile—it's the people of God. So if that's going to be evident earlier in the book (I think it certainly is), then when you get to this point, why would you isolate the language of judgment directed at the one targeting the people of God? Why would you isolate that to "that's only Rome," because we're talking about Christians now, or "that's only Old Testament Babylon, because that's Old Testament stuff." I tend to agree with you (maybe for

50:00

a slightly different reason) that it's hard as an Old Testament person to see the term Babylon and not think of just general chaos. And the beast comes from the sea—just traditional chaos imagery that transcends both testaments. This is very familiar stuff. At the end, there's no more sea—there's no more chaos. So you can't geographically funnel that. Everything that opposes God and his people is going to fall under that label of chaos, so I tend to look at it the way you're describing it. It's comprehensive—it's not these isolated parts.

AB: The language is universalized. It's the whole Earth. All of this is stuff is happening not in one geographic location. It's not just one city that these things happen or Israel or Egypt. It has this universal language of everybody around the globe. So yeah, I think that we're dealing with kind of a final judgment in which God's delay of this is obviously... It's going to be severe and final. But I think it's ultimately the saints crying out, "How long? We've been faithful to you. We were righteous, and we were killed. This is injustice." And so that question, "How long, O Lord?" is really what they're asking and it's what's driving the message of Revelation. Kind of in a pastoral sense, Revelation is written to believers in Asia Minor who, whether or not there was a hard persecution enacted empire-wide is debated, but they were still marginalized. They still didn't have rights. They still would have suffered economically and if they [unintelligible] were working against them, they would have likely been killed, and we have evidence that some of this was happening in that time period.

MH: Mm hmm.

AB: So John's writing to these believers essentially saying, "Be faithful to Christ. Don't compromise. Don't collude with the beast by participating in the worldly things of... whether it's a guild, where they have patron deities that they would worship who are practicing their trades. He's basically saying, "Listen, be faithful to Christ, because no matter what they do to you, be faithful, because he will one day judge them for what they're doing to you. So be faithful to the point of death. He will make it right in the end."

So it really is a message prompting the people to not just be faithful to Christ but to be prepared to die—to be put to death, to face all kinds of hostility. But in that, God is not totally passive and unmoved. He will redeem them. He will vindicate them—and not just vindicate them, but put them on thrones with Christ to rule the nations. And, of course, the final image of the New Jerusalem and the city and all things made new is all part of that. They get to experience life in the age to come, where there's no more curse, there's no more death. They don't even need a temple, because God's dwelling with them. They don't need the light of the sun or the moon because his face lights up the creation. So there really is just some beautiful imagery—not just nuptial imagery of a bride city (which contrasts the harlot city), but then you also have Garden of Eden imagery in chapter 22 of the rivers with the water of life and the tree of life producing fruit for the healing of the nations. So it ends with just this glorious scene of final reward. Here is the

vindication. This is why you can be faithful now, because this is the final... This is the end of your story.

MH: Yeah, it is. I want to hit... For this audience, I made the joke about not spending a whole lot of time in Revelation. But the last couple chapters, from an Old Testament Semitics perspective, it's the cosmic garden—is the cosmic mountain—it's what Eden should have been. It's the reason everything comes full circle. God gets what he wants in the end.

55:00 **AB:** Yes.

MH: And those who endure are the benefactors. They are participating, but are benefactors and are brought into the family, as Eden was the picture of the blended family. It's the divine and human family—humans made fit to occupy sacred space, all that stuff. It just converges at the end there.

I have one more question for you, though. How has all the time you spent doing this... In other words, for those who are listening, understand how I'm framing this question. When you spend a lot of time in the book of Revelation, not just looking at the trees and not noticing the forest... what Alan is doing here is thinking about the forest. He's thinking about how the whole book is framed and how the content is framed, in this case by the lawsuit motif—the trial motif (whatever label you want to stick on it). So how has thinking about the framework and then how the framework affects the content... When you drill down and start looking at the trees in the forest, how has that influenced your eschatology—your perspective? Has it led you to adopt one view or reject another? Or are you just... I view myself as sort of “eschatological system agnostic.” I don't really like systems. I think the systems all look beautiful until you look at where they're not beautiful [laughs], when you start noticing the problems. How has it influenced the way you think theologically/eschatologically?

AB: Well, it has had a tremendous impact on me and I think I've run the gamut of just about every view one could have. [laughter] I had the Larkin charts, and I have all of those things...

MH: But you've missed your opportunity now. Just think about this title: *The Greatest Book on Dispensational Truth: Version Two or Updated*. [laughter] Lots you could do with that. [laughter]

AB: Yeah, you know... there is. I think there's a couple of ways that it's impacted me. G.B. Caird, in his little commentary on Revelation, uses the phrase when it comes to looking at the Old Testament in certain passages... He says, “Be careful not to unweave the rainbow.” It's put together the way it is because it's intended to communicate as a whole. So if anything, I've become less certain of interpretations, where I try to find the finer details of how all these things are going to play out. So I have a couple things that I often say. One, when it comes

to the prophecies of Jesus' coming the first time—his birth in Bethlehem and his life and death and resurrection... The Old Testament clearly pointed to all of that, as Jesus himself would indicate, but they missed it. And it's not until after he comes and dies and rises again that they look back and go, "Oh, look, it's clear as day. That's exactly how it's supposed to happen." And I kind of argue the same thing. We see bits and pieces of the way it's going to unfold but we don't have a clear picture. And some people think they do.

MH: I would say it's intentionally fragmented.

AB: I think it is.

MH: For different reasons—for a variety of reasons. But yeah, that's my answer: it's going to work the same the second time around. I don't know what to call that. [laughs]

AB: We're all going to go, "Oh. Yeah. That makes perfect sense. That's the way it was going to... [laughs] It's "hindsight is 20/20" is the way I view it. But the other side of that is this: eschatology is not a detached fortune cookie of this crystal ball of how things are all going to unfold in the future. Eschatology is not about the future, it's about the now in light of the future. And with the prophets, the prophets gave messages of even future hope and judgment as a means to prompt action in the present. So Revelation is the only book of the Bible that promises a blessing for reading it. But it says repeatedly, especially in the beginning chapter—first chapter and last chapter, "Blessed is the one who obeys the words of this prophecy." So I was once speaking to a group of pastors, and I said, "If Revelation is nothing but a blueprint of the future events, like CNN for the future, if that's all it is, how do you obey that?"

MH: [laughs] Yeah.

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AB: And they were kind of stumped. "What do you mean? Well, you obey it by witnessing for Jesus." But that's not what it's saying. There's messages of "repent," of "be faithful," of "guild up your life," [laughs]—Of a number of things it's telling them to do. "Repent of sin and let go of these things and avoid idolatry." And so, I think that when I read Revelation, I used to see it as, "What's going to happen in the future?" and now I see it as, "How do I need to live now? How do need to hear this message for my life now?"

So yes, there's a future expectation—there's a future hope. He will come back, literally and physically, I believe. And he will establish a new heaven and a new Earth and make it all right. But the focus is not on the details of timelines. The focus is on because of that, this is how you then should act. This is how you live so that you can be a participant in the final vindication.

So for me, I see much more, and also the emphasis on worship. There are seven distinct scenes of worship. Chapters 4 and 5 are the first. And so you have these scenes of worship, and I think that's something that's intended for the Church. What they're doing in heaven currently is what we should be doing here now. So you see a lot more, not just in terms of unpacking future events, but this is what this means for me now. I can have confidence and encouragement now. I can worship God now. I can endure against all opposition (if Christianity is outlawed, if a gun is stuck to my head, if I'm in prison) because I can know that he will make it right. So for me, yes, I do have concrete ideas about how I think things will come out in the future, but I don't think that's the focus. I think it's a message to the Church for every generation in whatever situations they find themselves in.

MH: Mm hmm.

AB: So it's a bit agnostic in that sense, and I frustrate people because they can't nail me down. I'm not sure what I am. [laughs]

MH: You should just enjoy that. [laughs]

AB: So I'm definitely not dispensationalist. I'm probably the furthest thing from that. I get accused of being an amillennialist, and I'm OK with that, but that's not exactly where I am either. So I take the title "historical pre-mil" just because it's ambiguous enough that it kind of captures [MH laughs] the ideas, but I think we have a tendency to try to package everything nice and neat so we can figure it all out and make a chart of it. And scripture just doesn't always do that for us. And I'm OK living with the tension of trusting God that he will work it out in his way.

MH: I think that's a good way to end, because like you said, at the end of the day, if you have this "blessed is the one who obeys the words of this book," that should tell you that the purpose of the book is not so that you can divine everything in the book. The purpose of this is not so that you solve a puzzle. It's not about solving the puzzle. It's about, like you said, the here and now. So that's a good place to end, because I think that's a really good thought that is text-driven from the book itself, and I'm hoping for listeners that can really orient them when they think about this. So when you approach the book, don't look at it as if the goal here is to solve a puzzle. The goal here is to live a certain way in light of the circumstances that... I think it's fair to say that we don't have it as bad, but that doesn't mean we may not. Whatever the circumstances are, put yourself right in there. So thanks for spending the time with us and sharing your research and helping us think big picture when it comes to Revelation. And also here at the end, just a really good note on the whole purpose of the thing. I think that's really useful.

AB: Well, thank you. I've enjoyed it. This has been invigorating. I forgot how much I love talking about Revelation! [laughter] But yeah, it's been a blessing. I find this book... People are scared. They're either scared of it or they're

overconfident about it. [laughter] And I think some good humility for those who are overconfident, but for those who are afraid of it, they should really read it much the same way they read other letters of the New Testament—for the encouragement and instruction they give. And obey. And yeah, it's been a joy. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about these things. And your interest in the Divine Council and... It's always nice to know that there's other people that see it.

MH: Yeah, we're out here lurking. [laughter]

AB: Yeah.

MH: I shouldn't put it too much that way, because we... People want content, and fortunately, *Unseen Realm* has... People are finding it as... This is how I put it in the intro. If you read the book and you really grasp the content, this isn't like the end point. This is the beginning point, because the goal is to give you the lay of the land, where I want you to then go back and read scripture and not be able to unsee things. It's an orienting thing.

AB: Yeah.

MH: And that's the thing that this audience really gravitates toward—learning things that will orient them when they drop in at any given book and they start reading or studying, that they'll be able to see the threads. “I've seen that thread before.” And “let's go chase that down and then tie it up somewhere,” and that sort of thing. Trying to think in those terms. So I really like big picture kind of thinking, and anything that tethers the testaments together to me is worth spending time on.

AB: Yeah, absolutely.

MH: Well, thanks again.

AB: Well, my pleasure.

MH: Consider yourself... You have my permission to continue to frustrate people. [laughter] That's a badge of honor here. [laughter]

AB: Yeah, I do enjoy frustrating people that way, and they're constantly trying to figure out what it is that I believe. And I'm clear with what I believe, but they can't label it.

MH: Right.

AB: But I enjoy that.

MH: It's good for them. It really is.

AB: That's right. Well, thank you, my friend. I really do appreciate it. It's been a joy and an honor to be part of this conversation.

MH: Alright. Thanks a lot.

AB: Alright. Thank you.

TS: Well, Mike, we made it. We survived.

MH: I did, I did. We live again to put it off another year.

TS: Well, hopefully, I can get you to talk about it a little bit more than once a year. [MH laughs] But what was Dr. Bandy's book or thesis again?

MH: The thesis title was "The Prophetic Lawsuit in the Book of Revelation: An Analysis of the Lawsuit Motif in Revelation with Reference to the Use of the Old Testament." Now that has been published. I don't think the dissertation itself is freely available online, but you could always try it. Some are, occasionally you'll find one. It was published basically under the same title on Amazon, but it's an academic publisher, so it's pricey, unless you can find a used copy. You can find a used copy for about 50% off.

TS: OK, Mike, well, that wraps it up for this episode. I thoroughly enjoy the book of Revelation. I know a lot of our listeners do, too, so we appreciated you and Dr. Alan Bandy for coming on the show and talking about Revelation 4 and 5, and with that, I just want to thank everybody else for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.