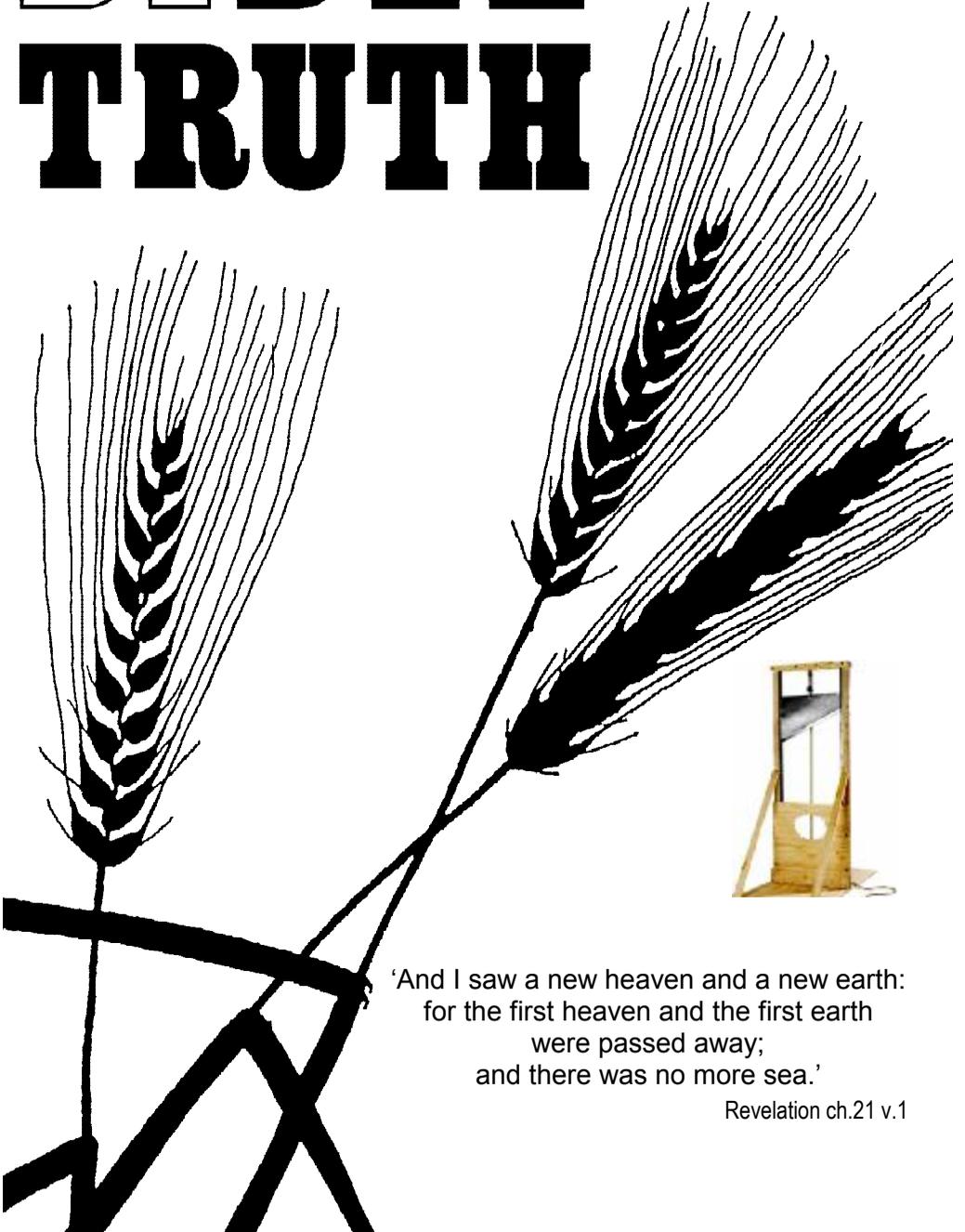


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'And I saw a new heaven and a new earth:
for the first heaven and the first earth
were passed away;
and there was no more sea.'

Revelation ch.21 v.1

Beheading

by Dr Michael D. Bennett



Beheading is a terror topic in world news today. It is not an attractive subject, but it demands attention. As usual the Bible is ahead of the curve both in recording key examples of its place in Israel's history, and in predicting its use by those persecuting God's witnesses in these end times.

Most people have been shocked and sickened by horrific reports and pictures of recent murders involving the beheading or attempted beheading of British subjects both in England and the Middle East by Islamic terrorists. On the afternoon of 22 May 2013 an off-duty soldier was brutally butchered with knives and meat cleavers as he walked in Woolwich, south-east London after a car mounted the pavement and ploughed into him. In October 2014 Islamic State released a recording of the beheading of Alan Henning, a taxi driver from Manchester, captured as he took aid to refugees in Syria. Such terror has also been used to persecute Christians living in various countries in Africa and Asia in recent years.

Beheading was a common form of execution in ancient and more recent history. In England, many perished by the axe or the sword, including Ann Boleyn, the second wife of king Henry the Eighth, in 1536. King Charles I was found guilty of treason and beheaded in 1649 in the time of Oliver Cromwell.

In France, the guillotine was used to behead former King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette in 1793, and to execute thousands of nobles in the reign of terror (1793-94) in the French Revolution. Beheading continued as the standard method of judicial execution until capital punishment was abolished in 1981. The guillotine was used in Nazi Germany for 16,500 executions in 1933-45, and by the Secret Police in East Germany in 1950-1990 for secret executions.

As capital punishment has been abolished in most countries in recent decades, many may imagine that judicial beheading has been consigned to history and is now just a thing of the past. However, this is not so, as it remains a punishment inflicted by Islamic fundamentalists in several Asian and African countries governed under Moslem Sharia law. Saudi Arabia has a criminal justice system based on a hard line and literal form of Sharia law reflecting a state-sanctioned interpretation of Islam. The death penalty can be imposed for a wide range of offences including murder, rape, witchcraft, blasphemy and false prophecy, and can be carried out by beheading with a sword. The 345 reported executions between 2007 and 2010 were all carried out by public beheading. In some Moslem countries conversion from Islam to Christianity is a capital offence whose punishment can be beheading under Sharia law.

It is interesting to note that as with so many things the Bible is up to date, as it singles out beheading as the form of execution inflicted on Christians martyred for their faith at the end of the Church era just prior to the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and His thousand year reign on earth.

‘... and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

Revelation ch. 20 v.4

Many means are commonly used to murder or execute people today - shooting, poisoning, or hanging, but significantly here in Revelation the Bible specifically mentions one uncommon in modern use. It is the one identified with reigns of terror in times past, whose practice today remains a hallmark of a particular, powerful form of militant politics and religion whose identity is suggestive of ‘the false prophet’ mentioned in Revelation chapter nineteen verse twenty.

The topic of beheading, and the wider subject of wounding the head, forms an important strand running prominently through Bible history and prophecy. The very first prophecy in Scripture concerns the age long war between Satan and God’s human servants, and it specifies Satan’s head as the target to be wounded by the woman’s seed.

‘And I will put enmity between thee [the serpent] and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.’

Genesis ch.3 v.15

Satan and all who serve him in the world, hate God, His truth, and fight against all who serve Him and witness to His truth. It follows that Satan hates Israel in general ‘... ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, that I am God’ (Isaiah ch.43 v.12), and attacks His chosen servants the prophets in particular. Unsurprisingly, Satan tries to inflict his own prophesied fate – a wounded head - on them!

So it was no accident that beheading was the means of executing the last and greatest of the prophets – John the Baptist, the cousin of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus said,

‘... Among those that are born of women [i.e. ‘the woman’s seed’] there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: ...’

Luke ch. 7 v.28

‘But when Herod's birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod. Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she would ask. And she, being before instructed of her mother, said, Give me here John Baptist's head in a charger. And the king was sorry: nevertheless for the oath's sake, and them which sat with him at meat, he commanded it to be given her. And he sent, and beheaded John in the prison. And his head was brought in a charger, and given to the damsel: and she brought it to her mother.’

Matthew ch.14 vv 6-11

Jesus escaped Herod’s sword as a baby (‘... Herod will seek the young child to destroy him’, Matthew ch.2 v.13) by fleeing to Egypt. Satan would have liked to see his own prophesied judgement inflicted on Jesus as a man, and see him beheaded too. However, that was ruled out by the form of death God decreed for His Son as sin bearer and redeemer, prophesied in His word. Certainly the scene and process of Jesus’ execution had a focus on the head. Thus, the place where he was crucified was named Golgotha, which means the place of a skull in Hebrew, and He wore a cruel crown of thorns on his head.

‘And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head ... And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull, ... they crucified him ...’

Matthew ch.27 vv 29, 33 & 35

Jesus fulfilled the prophesied experience of the woman’s seed ‘thou shalt bruise his heel’ when He was crucified.

‘... they pierced my hands and my feet’.

Psalms 22 v.16

However, another prophecy that his body remain unbroken, ruled out His suffering beheading,

‘He keepeth all his bones: not one of them is broken’.

Psalms 34 v.20

Moreover, the Passover lamb, which symbolised Christ, had to remain intact,

‘... his head with his legs, and with the purtenance thereof. ... In one house shall it be eaten; thou shalt not carry forth ought of the flesh abroad out of the house; neither shall ye break a bone thereof.’

Exodus ch.12 vv 9 & 46

unlike some other offerings which were to be beheaded. E.g. the heifer sacrificed to put away ‘guilt of innocent blood’ (see Deuteronomy ch.21 vv 4-9).

Beheading at the whim of a ruler was a real possibility in ancient times which threatened many of God’s servants. Indeed, king Jehoram (the son of wicked king Ahab and queen Jezebel) tried to behead Elisha, probably the greatest prophet God sent to the Northern House of Israel, as he had a double portion of the spirit of Elijah.

‘Then he said, God do so and more also to me, if the head of Elisha the son of Shaphat shall stand on him this day. But Elisha sat in his house, and the elders sat with him;... he said to the elders, See ye how this son of a murderer hath sent to take away mine head? ...’

2 Kings ch.6 vv 31-32

Jehoram was prevented, but God heard his foolish words, and so later the children of Ahab’s house were judged with beheading.

Beheading the sons and allies of his enemy ordered by Jehu when he replaced Jehoram and the house of Ahab, was calculated to deny inheritance, terrorise opponents and strengthen his own rule.

‘... they took the king’s sons, and slew seventy persons, and put their heads in baskets, and sent them to Jezreel ... And he said, Lay ye them in two heaps at the entering in of the gate until the morning. ... So Jehu slew all that remained of the house of Ahab in Jezreel, and all his great men, and his kinsfolks, and his priests, until he left him none remaining.’

2 Kings 10 vv 7-8 & 11

There are two notable examples in the Book of Judges of defeated leaders of Israel’s enemies losing their heads. For example, Sisera, general of the Canaanite king Jabin’s army, was killed by Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite.

‘She put her hand to the nail, and her right hand to the workmen’s hammer; and with the hammer she smote Sisera, she smote off his head, when she had pierced and stricken through his temples.’

Judges ch.5 v.26

Soon afterwards two defeated Midianite princes, captured after the famous rout of the Midianite army by Gideon and his army of 300 men, also lost their heads.

‘And they took two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb; and they slew Oreb upon the rock Oreb, and Zeeb they slew at the winepress of Zeeb, and pursued Midian and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon on the other side Jordan.’

Judges ch.7 v.25

Later, in the Books of the Kings, the long struggle between Israel and their Philistine enemies is replete with various instances of beheadings as Israel passed from government by the judges to a monarchy with rule by kings.

At the end of Eli’s life the Philistines defeated Israel and captured the ark of the covenant which they took to Ashdod and stood in the House of Dagon their god. However, Israel’s God is the LORD of Hosts, and He does not need men to protect Him. So Almighty God Himself beheaded Dagon without man’s help!

‘And the Philistines took the ark of God, and brought it from Ebenezer unto Ashdod. When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it by Dagon. ... And when they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD; and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off upon the threshold; only the stump of Dagon was left to him.’

1 Samuel ch.5 vv 1-2 & 4

Years later it was the means of executing an iconic enemy who opposed Israel. Thus, the giant Philistine champion faced a similar fate when he was beheaded by a young Israelite destined to rule God’s people as king. Goliath of Gath was a terror to king Saul and his army who all feared to face him. But David was able to confront and defeat Goliath, armed with faith in the name of the Lord.

‘... And the Philistine [Goliath] cursed David by his gods. ... Therefore David ran, and stood upon the Philistine, and took his sword, and drew it out of the sheath thereof, and slew him, and cut off his head therewith. And when the Philistines saw their champion was dead, they fled.’

1 Samuel ch.17 vv 43 & 51

King Saul was a giant among men who stood head and shoulders above other men in Israel. Sadly, his spiritual stature did not match his physical size. His sin and lack of repentance led to a downward spiral of jealousy, murderous depression, and spiritual disobedience which ended with his defeat in battle, suicide, and beheading by the Philistines.

‘And it came to pass on the morrow, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, that they found Saul and his three sons fallen in mount Gilboa. And they cut off his head, and stripped off his armour, ...’

1 Samuel ch.31 vv 8-9

‘And they put his armour in the house of their gods, and fastened his head in the temple of Dagon. ... So Saul died for his transgression which he committed against the LORD, even against the word of the LORD, which he kept not, and also for asking counsel of one that had a familiar spirit, to inquire of it;

And inquired not of the LORD: therefore he slew him and, turned the kingdom unto David the son of Jesse.’

1 Chronicles ch.10 v.10 &13-14

Saul’s son Ishbosheth succeeded him, and he reigned as king of Israel for seven years. It seems that the sins of the father were visited on the children. So Ishbosheth was also beheaded - murdered by men who hoped mistakenly that David would reward them for assassinating his Benjamite rival.

‘And the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, Rechab and Baanah, went, and came about the heat of the day to the house of Ishbosheth, who lay on a bed at noon. ... and they smote him, and slew him, and beheaded him, and took his head, and gat them away ... And they brought the head of Ishbosheth unto David to Hebron, ...’

2 Samuel ch.4 vv 5 & 7-8

There were two major rebellions against David’s rule in his old age. The first was led by his own son, Absalom. The second was led by Sheba - a Benjamite from Saul’s tribe. Both perished in unusual circumstances involving their heads. Absalom’s head was caught in an oak as he fled leaving him hanging (2 Samuel ch.18 v.9), whilst Sheba was beheaded by the men of Abel to save their besieged city from destruction by David’s army led by Joab.

‘ ... Sheba the son of Bichri by name, hath lifted up his hand against the king, even against David: deliver him only, and I will depart from the city. And the woman said unto Joab, Behold, his head shall be thrown to thee over the wall. Then the woman went unto all the people in her wisdom. And they cut off the head of Sheba the son of Bichri, and cast it out to Joab. And he blew a trumpet, and they retired from the city, every man to his tent. And Joab returned to Jerusalem unto the king.’

2 Samuel ch.20 vv 21-22

Scripture reveals a general principle, that God wounds the head of all rulers and powers which persistently oppose His plans and people. The prophesied wounding of Satan’s head is an important first example. Just as Satan himself is called the Serpent or the Dragon, so enemy nations that serve Satan are symbolised as similar beasts and have God’s judgement on Satan inflicted on their head(s).

The principle extends from God's judgement on Rahab (a name for Egypt) at the time of the Exodus, to the beastly enemies of God's people at the end of the New Testament age prophesied in the book of Revelation.

'But God shall wound the head of his enemies, and the hairy scalp of such an one as goeth on still in his trespasses.'

Psalm 68 v.21

'Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength: thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces, ...'

Psalm 74 v.13-14

'Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in the ancient days, in the generations of old. Art thou not it that hath cut Rahab [Egypt], and wounded the dragon? Art thou not it which hath dried the sea, the waters of the great deep; that hath made the depths of the sea a way for the ransomed to pass over?'

Isaiah ch.51 vv 9-10

'The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. ... The Lord at thy right hand shall strike through kings in the day of his wrath. He shall judge among the heathen, he shall fill the places with the dead bodies; he shall wound the heads over many countries.'

Psalm 110 vv 1 & 5-6

'... and the dragon gave him his power, and his seat, and great authority. And I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast.'

Revelation ch.13 vv 2-3l

Israel is not immune to punishment on her head if they disobey God. God intends Israel to be head among nations as they keep His law and fulfil their role as His witnesses that He is God. But He warned them that they would be the tail if they disobey and oppose Him (Deuteronomy ch.28 vv 13-44). Sadly, we have rebelled terribly, and now our nation (aptly described below) is in danger of a sudden judgement unless we repent of our national sins.

‘Therefore the LORD will cut off from Israel head and tail, branch and rush, in one day. The ancient and honourable, he is the head; and the prophet that teacheth lies, he is the tail. For the leaders of this people cause them to err; and they that are led of them are destroyed.’

Isaiah ch.9 vv 14-16

We pray that God will not destroy us in wrath, but see His righteous remnant; deal with us as sons (chastising us as a loving Father); and, so heal our land.

Satan wounded Christ’s heel (the woman’s seed) at Calvary, but that Satan sustained a severe head wound at Christ’s victory over death, was proven by His resurrection, ascension, and enthronement. Far from losing his head, God the Father exalted Christ to supreme headship, elevating his head, in every realm.

‘Which he [God the Father] wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church,’

Ephesians ch.1 vv 20-22

‘And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; [head of the corner].’

Ephesians ch.2 v.20

‘For in him [Christ Jesus] dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power:’

Colossians ch.2 vv 9-10

‘... We have such an high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens;’

Hebrews ch.8 v.1

‘... for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. ... and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. ... and on his head were many crowns; ... And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.’

Revelation ch.19 vv 10-12 & 16

As Christ is exalted in headship, all His servants enjoy blessings heaped on their heads, both in this world and in the next.

‘The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. ... thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.’

Psalm 23 vv 1 & 5

‘And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: ...’

Isaiah ch.35 v.10

‘Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.’

2 Timothy ch.4 v.8

(see also James ch.1 v.12 & 1 Peter ch.5 v.4)

‘Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.’

Revelation ch.2 v.10

In conclusion, we know that God has not spoken in vain. These are perilous times as days of Jacob’s Trouble and of great tribulation which must be experienced here on earth. So there will be times of testing when some will endure extreme persecution for their faith, and even beheading.

‘... and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.’

Revelation ch. 20 v.4

‘... for the time would fail me to tell of ... Samson, ... and Samuel, and of the prophets: Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, ... And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: ... (Of whom the world was not worthy:) ...’

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.'

Hebrews ch.11 vv 32-34 & 36-38, ch.12 vv 1-2

We do not know what the future holds for us as individuals: whether we will be some of those who escape the edge of the sword or counted in the sum of those others, sawn asunder and slain by the sword. Either way, we pray for grace and courage to emulate the faithful unbending witness of Israelites persecuted in ancient Babylon who refused to worship another god or bow down at the world's tune.

We live with increasing pressure to conform to this wicked world and be politically correct in a modern Babylon. May we refuse to deny our Saviour, and walk worthy to receive a crown of life.

'If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.'

Daniel ch.3 vv 17-18