

Year of the locust: The dangerous number 17

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [June 15, 2004](#) issue

Thirty-four and 17 summers ago, when the Marty family ate dinner on our Victorian porch, we sometimes had to move back indoors because we couldn't hear ourselves speak. The cicadas, which we called "17-year locusts," were back. They are returning again this year, and have been sighted and heard as far west as Indiana. Though they have not yet afflicted us, they have raised my curiosity.

Secular scientists know much, but not nearly enough, about them. In the *New York Times* (April 4), Henry Fountain reported on Brood X, five billion of which rose from their nymphal graves 17 years ago and beset Cincinnati. Biologist Gene Kritsky says that "their whole survival strategy is based on satiating predators; . . . there's safety in numbers." Predators can't eat them all, so some of those sex-maniac, noise-making males are able to mate before they die. Kritsky records their sounds and hears some "softly intoning the word 'pharaoh.'"

Their "predator satiation" policy depends upon their prime-numbered life cycles. They throw other number-favoring predators off their trail. So thinks Glenn Webb of Vanderbilt University (*Economist*, May 8). But enough of these scientists. Let's get to the truth.

How do I know the truth? From the Bible, of course. For one thing, the Bible has a thing about the number 17. The Fourth Gospel specifies that Peter and others caught 153 fish. 153? Make a triangle of dots, with 17 in each arm. Fill it all in with dots (next triangle with 16 each, etc.). See? You'll end up with 153.

Genesis 37:2 specifies that tattler Joseph was 17 when his brothers shipped him off to Pharaoh-land, where, later, locusts were one of the ten plagues. How do we know that those locusts were the same as our cicadas? We biblical scholars know this from the records of the 17-year reign of Rehoboam (2 Chron. 12:13-15).

On the noncanonical edges of the Bible, in 1 Esdras 4:52, King Darius, a proto-Iraqi, commands that each year ten talents were to be given for burnt-offerings to be sacrificed daily. A footnote in the New English Bible says that “some witnesses add 17 before the word ‘burnt-offerings.’ And then, of course, there is the Book of Revelation, where in 9:3-7 we read that “over the earth, out of the smoke, came locusts,” disguised as horses equipped for battle, wearing golden crowns.

To some extent, cicadas/locusts have now been suppressed. Scientists tell us that the Wal-Martization of America has led to the chopping down of the trees on which these insects feed and the paving over of the earth in which they park themselves for 17 years before appearing again. Those who interpret Revelation literally know, however, that the creatures will continue to exist and that their noise will haunt those of us who are left behind when the Rapture occurs.

Biblical scholar James Barr writes of the invention of the Rapture in Scotland, England and America in the 1840s. Barr notes how literal its inventors were about books like Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation, how they changed “days” and “weeks” to “years,” and made the case that all this was part of the literal, old-time religion. He writes that this “remarkable achievement of the mythopoeic fantasy” is a feat of the imagination worthy of the English poet William Blake.

But this fantasy is taught and believed by millions as the literal truth. Unlike my harmless fantasy about the number 17, it has become dangerous. It has worked its way into American foreign policy, thanks to core constituents of the Bush administration, who believe that they will be raptured away while their critics are left behind with the locusts.